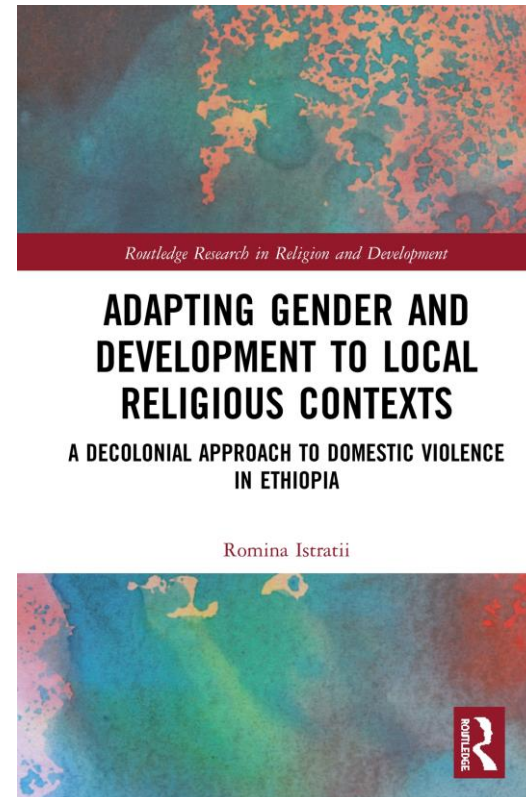


Building strong and healthy research partnerships during the PhD experience: A decolonial approach

Dr Romina Istratii, SOAS University of London

My Background

Critical international development researcher and practitioner committed to bridging international development theory with local belief and knowledge systems and lived experiences



Agenda

- Contextualising partnerships in the PhD experience
- Applying a decolonial lens to research partnerships: epistemological and structural issues
- Identifying key stakeholders during and after the PhD and understanding how to engage them with a decolonial reflexivity

Group reflection and discussion

- Where do partnerships happen in the PhD experience?
(10 minutes)

Collaborative initiatives in decolonising research for development during the PhD: My story



1st Joint PhD Symposium of the SOAS Research Students' Association (RSA) & The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR)

Decolonisation in Praxis

Thursday 07 June 2018, 10am-2pm
SOAS, Wolfson Lecture Theatre (SWLT)
Senate House, First Floor (S108)

Decolonising the academic curriculum is a salient discourse in our days in British universities. The School of Oriental and African Studies, an institution that started as a colonial project in 1916, has been steadily moving in this direction, with students increasingly requesting a re-evaluation of curricula that have favoured a single knowledge centre and portrayed a certain (western) epistemology or viewpoint of the world as normative. All this amounts to an effort to open up knowledge-making to different

Collaborative initiatives in decolonising research for development since the PhD: My story

- Initiated the Decolonising Research Initiative at SOAS (in partnership with Dr Alex Lewis) with a conversation event that brought funders, institutions and research managers to apply a decolonial lens to research structures
- Currently co-coordinating the SOAS-OXFORD Research for Development Series (with Dr Maru Mormina), which aims to change the narrative around development research and to encourage ethical, reflexive and dialogical research practices internationally
- Acting as SOAS's GCRF Project Officer, focusing on improving SOAS processes in building strong and healthy international collaborative research with partners in Asia, Africa and the Middle East

Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions

Conversation Event Report
SOAS University of London,
18th September 2019



Partnerships in the PhD experience

- Within Anglo-American tradition, emphasis is usually placed on the PhD being an independent study that you should exclusively produce.
- This takes away attention from local research partners or other personnel you most often rely on, who should be properly engaged and credited.
- The PhD programme, depending on institution, may or may not equip you to conduct independent research (in terms of ethical issues, practicalities of research, publishing skills, etc.)
- The PhD offers excellent opportunities for collaborative work, but these need to be created or discovered.
- Developing a research career after the PhD will require creativity, hard work and strong partnerships to secure research funds.
- The relationships you develop with communities, partners and other stakeholders during and as a result of the PhD will largely determine future options and directions.

Applying a decolonial lens to research practice and partnerships

Unpacking some of the colonial epistemological legacies

- When I speak of epistemology I refer to a system of criteria and standards for validating what counts as knowledge, “which is ultimately linked to worldview.” (Ladson-Billings 2005, 258).
- We need to recognise that all individuals are “epistemologically situated” (Istratii 2017, 4). Situated knowledge is knowledge that is informed by one’s belief and knowledge systems, preconceptions and theoretical assumptions.
- Historically, western epistemology has dominated and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies. International development built on the legacy of the ‘civilising mission’ (Manji and O’Coill 2002, Rist 2014)
- It is important that we understand how our research approaches are informed or limited by our situated knowledge and be reflexive and transparent about these effects and their implications.

Recognising persisting asymmetries and how you are located in these

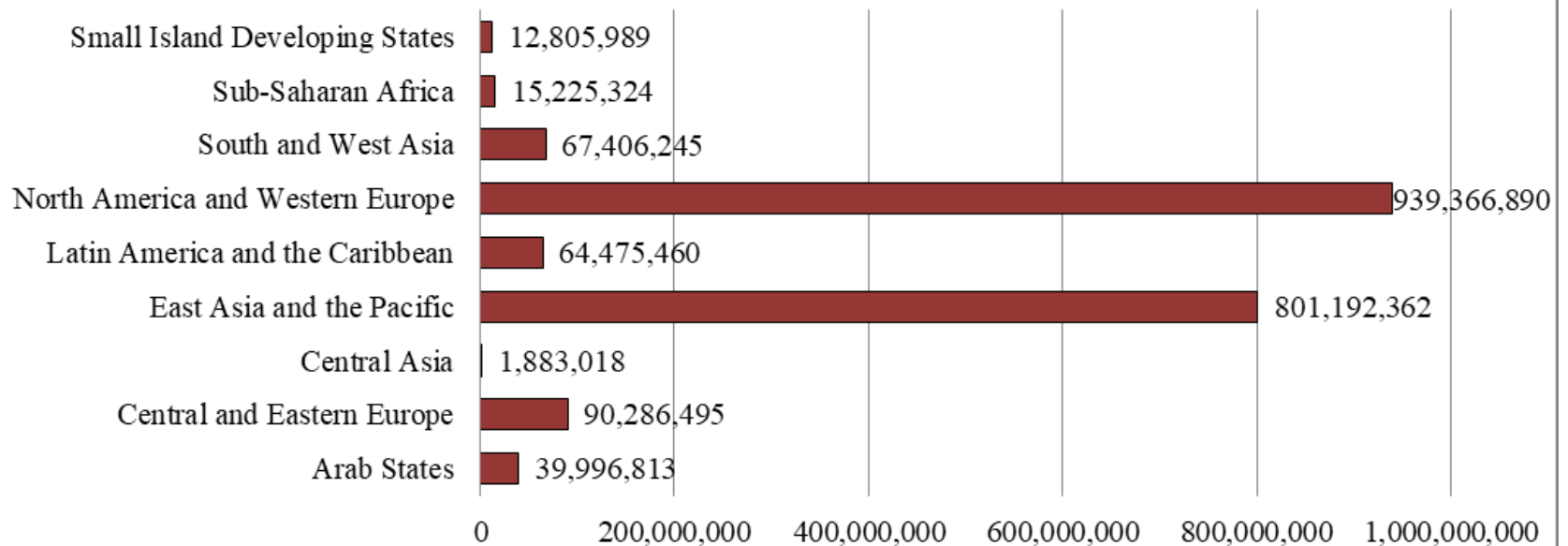
- Research partnerships defined by historical and on-going epistemological and material inequalities
- Colonial legacies that favour the epistemology and theoretical frameworks of the UK-based researchers
- Structural and material inequalities that place more bargaining power in the hands of the UK-based PIs.

Global distribution of R&D funding

Eligibility criteria and due diligence expectations

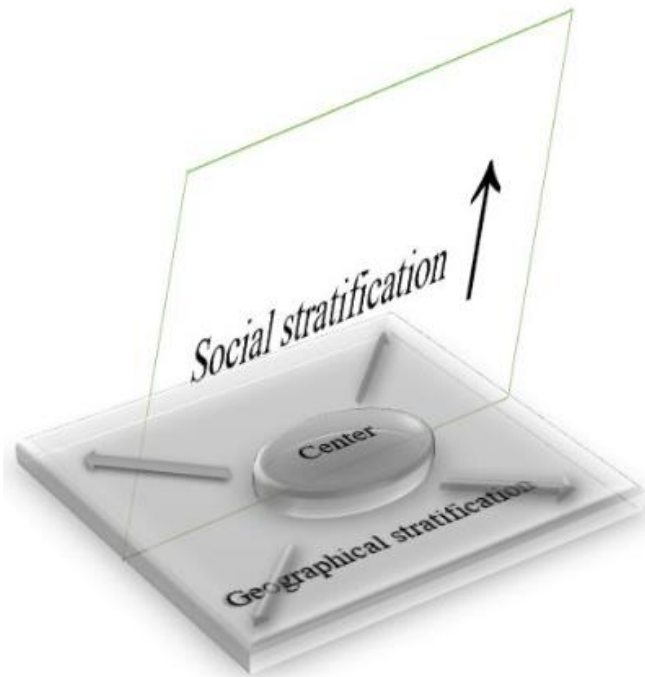
Publishing norms and research excellence standards

Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D in '000 current PPP\$, 2016



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

3-dimensional model of academic stratification



Source: Demeter (2019)

- Core-periphery structure of global academic capital
- More than 75 percent of social science articles ever published in periodicals indexed in the Web of Science’s SSCI list by North American or Western European authors. Less than 10 percent by authors in Africa, Latin-America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.
- Geographical location/language of publishing houses, peer review standards and scientometrics important contributing factors



The elusive language of equitable partnerships in research funding

- Despite an increasing attention to gender inequality, how equitable partnerships are to be achieved when teams are cross-cultural and thus imbricated in post-colonial power hierarchies and simultaneously comprised of researchers of multiple intersectional identities has not been given thoughtful consideration.
- Structural and material factors suggest that equitable partnerships are, in some aspects, unrealisable. Eligibility criteria and due diligence expectations place more decision-making power, accountability and, thus, epistemological and material benefits in the hands of the UK-based PI.
- While cross-sectoral partnerships are encouraged, there is no thorough discussion of the challenges of working across sectors (academia, NGOs, government agencies), especially in the international or LMIC context.

Systemic barriers to equitable partnerships



Source: UKRI, 'Promoting Equitable and Fair Research Partnerships', p. 8.

Consequences of research inequalities (lessons from September 2019 event at SOAS)

- Knowledge-sharing tends to be mono-directional with western European researchers setting the agenda and local researcher serving as ‘data collectors’ often without proper attribution
- Neglect of local knowledge systems, ontologies, methodologies and axiological differences (Prof. Alex Kanyimba, Namibia)
- Lack of linguistic training and cultural sensitivity and disheartenment of local collaborators
- Limited commitment to substantive capacity-building in the context of research projects endangering continuity and sustainability (Dr Mulugeta Berihu, Ethiopia)
- Local researchers constrained in their ability to publish and to have local impact due to funder or research partner data use and publishing restrictions (Dr Seira Tamang, Nepal)

Problematic conceptualisations of impact

- In development research, impact has been understood in the context of ODA-related research funding - usually not disconnected from the notion of value for money (VfM).
- The concept is predicated primarily to the idea of economic growth, which needs to be demonstrated within the timelines and according to the standards set out by the funder. Such conceptualisations and timelines for producing impact do not easily accommodate the types of intricate, long-term and multi-dimensional changes or effects sought in social scientific and humanities research or culture-sensitive development interventions.
- Impact can be understood very differently depending on the positionality of the stakeholder (western/international Lead/Organisation, LMIC researchers, LMIC communities, etc.). Whose conceptualisation of impact will prevail when funding availability and other structural parameters place more power in PIs/Leads/Organisations from HICs?

Decolonising research partnerships

- Take a contextualised approach to understanding local issues, suspending easy assumptions or explanations
- Develop dialogical, reflexive and honest partnerships during each stage of research development
- Aim for continuity in research practice as an essential element of locally-relevant impact

Discussion (10 minutes)

Why can this approach make a difference?

What challenges are there in the pandemic post-pandemic era?



TEAMWORK

A chalkboard background with the word 'TEAMWORK' written in large, bold, white chalk letters. Below the text is a drawing of two hands shaking, symbolizing agreement or partnership.

Identifying key stakeholders during and after the PhD and understanding how to engage them with a decolonial reflexivity

Stakeholder analysis: Individual reflection

- Who are the immediate stakeholders in your research currently? What other stakeholders will you need to involve or reach to in the context of your research and in order to ensure continuity?
- How do you build strong and healthy working relationships with these stakeholders?
- What are some of the key issues or concerns you need to keep in mind as you engage with each of these different stakeholders?

(15 minutes)

Who are the stakeholders in your research?

- Stakeholders include communities, research personnel, research partners, local and international specialists and leading thinkers/practitioners, local and international ‘publics’, government bureaucrats and policy-makers, private sector, sectors immediately affected by or using the research, etc.
- Research does not happen only in universities, but is undertaken by a host of other entities, including non-governmental organisations, charities, humanitarian organisations, think tanks, consultancies, research-intensive institutions and other stakeholders involved in the business of knowledge production and, more specifically, development research and practice.

The ethics of engaging with NGOs

- Non-academic actors do not always practise epistemological reflexivity or have rigorous ethical processes integrated in their practices, despite engaging with local communities almost routinely.
- Consider the ethical implications, any conflicts of interest and other limitations (along with the strengths) that this partnership might bring to your research. For example, if an NGO provides funding for your PhD, they may expect to have a say in the formulation of the research questions, the research methodology or the dissemination of the findings.
- Consider their relationship with the community of study and how they are perceived locally. The ways in which they are perceived will affect how your research participants perceive you, since you are going to be affiliated with this NGO. This will influence the kind of information that they share with you and this may bias the research in ways that you need to be considerate about

How do you engage with different stakeholders?

- With reflexivity of your epistemological situatedness and personal positionality vis-à-vis the community, partners or other stakeholders
- With openness and clarity about the objectives and methodology of the research and the roles of the different stakeholders in it
- By following ethics, safeguarding and data management protocols in a culture-sensitive way and with knowledge of context-specific legal frameworks
- With full respect for and crediting of the contribution of every research partner or other personnel, ensuring that there is mutual understanding of who will own copyright of the output

Developing long-term partnerships after the PhD

- Whether a project will achieve effective and fruitful partnerships will depend on how it is structured and how the project idea is developed – when it is developed by a single non-local PI/Lead/Organisation, local partners or research personnel brought into the project at later stages are unlikely to influence the direction of the research/project.
- Partnerships can become effective when projects are conceptualised in dialogue with researchers, communities and other involved stakeholders and when all sides have clear expectations about the project’s objectives and approach and their role in it.
- It is an imperative to take a contextualised approach to understanding local issues and to suspend easy assumptions or explanations only because the language is available. When we truly engage with communities, their conceptualisations of problems and their lived experiences, we achieve the realness factor that international development language often lacks.

Q&A session

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