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Empathy Without Borders: Decolonial Criminology, Western Scholars, and Peer Methodology

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Abstract

Critical criminologists often empathise with the oppressed groups they research, and some of them even declare they dedicate their professional activity to helping the marginalised. But empathy and its derived drive to help have shadow sides. The borders between helping and colonising, for example, can be thin. As critical criminology expands its areas of concern from class, gender, and race to include imperialism and global inequality, the question arises about how critical criminologists can help colonised groups without further colonising them. The 'burden of proof' is higher for Western critical criminologists. Criminology has colonial foundations, with some of its practitioners contributing to developing technologies of knowledge that were useful during imperialism and colonialism. Based on the data produced by a research project co-directed by Nigel South and I, which had three waves of data collection with Colombian Indigenous communities, this chapter discusses the advantages and shortcomings of peer methodology as a decolonial tool that Western scholars can implement to avoid further colonising the groups with which they empathise.

Keywords

Critical criminology, decolonial methods, decolonial theory, empathy, peer methodology, Western scholars.

Introduction

Nigel South and I sat at the end of the table pointing towards the north; our collaborators sat at the other end, pointing towards the south. There we were, one white male British professor who works at the University of Essex in England (Nigel) and one male senior researcher who works at the University of Oslo in Norway (David) facing our research team, for the first time, in Bogotá's largest public library. They were much younger than us (in their early twenties) and had lived in a world very different to ours (especially to Nigel's). Angie and Pablo belonged to the Nasa Indigenous People, Mireya to the Barí, and Tatiana to the Tikuna and the Uitoto. Their communities had been under siege ever since the colonisation of the Americas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries. Their cultures existed under the constant threat of erasure. *We* represented Western knowledge; *they* represented Indigenous consmovisions and wisdom. The six of us were to embark on a joint project to study the forces fuelling Indigenous genocide.

Nigel and I met for the first time in Oslo in 2013, and we had collaborated since then. While decolonial perspectives were not yet popular in criminology when we started our collaboration, we espoused from the beginning an interest in understanding how Western modernity defaces Indigenous cultures and the global North plunders the global South for environmental

resources. We wrote profusely about colonisation and coloniality, extractivism and plundering, power and exploitation, during the years prior to our meeting with the four Indigenous representatives. But then, when in 2018 Nigel and I sat face to face with representatives of Colombian Indigenous communities, the conundrum dawned on us: How could a Western scholar (Nigel) and a scholar based on a Western institution (David) collaborate with Indigenous Peoples from the global South without colonising them? How could we help to enlarge their voices without appropriating them? How could we contribute without patronising?

This chapter is about critical decolonial work and the peril of exploiting those we want to help. The text is born from the discomfort of wanting to help but fearing to become agents of colonisation. This chapter reflects on what Nigel and I learnt during our collaboration with Angie, Pablo, Mireya, and Tatiana. It builds on four blocks – each outlining a different angle on the debate about how critical scholars who want to help should interact with 'the oppressed'. Part one, *Empathic or colonial?* lists the ways in which scholars' effort to help can end up producing harm. Part two, *Critical criminology: from local to global inequalities*, fleshes out how the risks of harm perpetration by 'empathic' critical criminologists increases when the recepients of sympathy have historically been the victims of imperialism, colonialism, and global inequalities. Part three, *Decolonial theory: helpful or profitable?,* presents two takes on what scholarly decolonial work should be about: contesting coloniality in Western academia or fighting alongside the colonised on the ground. Part four, *Indigenous marginalisation, Western scholars, and peer methodology*, describes how Nigel and I went about trying to contribute to decolonising knowledge whilst circumventing the perils of vampiristic empathy.

Empathic or colonial?

We strive to help when we co-experience someone else's pain, when we empathise with their situation. However, as Fritz Breithaupt warns ,'while we usually assume that empathy leads to morally correct behaviour', we may do 'terrible things…because of our ability to empathise with others' (Breithaupt, 2019, p. 1). In his book *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, Breithaupt lists five mechanisms that make empathy fuel harm: it may motivate self-sacrifice; lead to social reductionism (seeing the world in black and white); enable the enjoyment of other people's pain; facilitate the constructing of a 'saviour' image at the cost of the others; and produce unhealthy attachment between the helper and the helped.

Critical criminologists often declare empathy with the oppressed, they proclaim their desire to help. Defined by Walter DeKeseredy (2011, p. 7) as 'a perspective that views the major sources of crime as the unequal class, race/ethnic, and gender relations that control our society', critical criminology 'regard[s] major structural and cultural changes within society as essential steps to reduce crime and promote social justice'. As Nigel and I explained, '"[n]ew deviancy" approaches, particularly the concepts of labelling and stigmatisation, emphasised the need for sensitivity to the situation of the powerless and marginalised' (Goyes and South, 2017b, p. 168). Indeed, pioneers Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young (1975, p. 4), declared that the unifying feature of critical criminology was that 'the adequacy of the various theoretical offerings […] is to be assessed *in practice—*that is, in terms of their utility in demasking the moral and ideological veneer of an unequal society' (italics in the original).

Moved by their sensitivity and empathy, critical criminologists often desire to transform the structures and cultures that produce injustice, and empathise with oppressed groups who they want to help. But would sensitivity and the derived craving to help put critical criminologists at risk of falling into the shadow sides of empathy? Undoubtedly, some may self-sacrifice for

the sake of helping. Others might embrace Manichaeism, neglecting the complexity of the world. Both these issues deal primarily with harm to the self. But my concern in this chapter is with the 'colonial wounds' critical criminologists may reopen to those we try to help. Three of the 'shadow sides' proposed by Breithaupt are relevant here:

Critical criminologists as profiters from others' pain: Critical criminologists might, if not directly enjoy, at least profit from the pain of others (in terms of e.g. academic progression). Niklaus, talking about sociology – but also applicable to criminology – asserts that the discipline 'has gained prosperity and eminence thanks to the blood and bones of the impoverished and oppressed' (quoted in Ander-Egg, 2003, pp. 20-21). Indeed, showing empathy has allowed criminologists to gain their 'informants' trust and get close to them. By co-experiencing others' pain from a short distance, critical criminologists can credibly write about crime, harm, and violence. The more suffering critical criminologists witness, record, analyse, and publish, the stronger and more legitimate their CVs will be.

Critical criminologists as saviours: Empathy, argues Breithaupt, may 'serve the empathiser first and foremost and not the target of empathy' (2019, p. 9). People who display empathy may become charismatic, intellectual leaders. As O'Connor and colleagues (1995, p. 532) defined them, charismatic leaders 'use their beliefs to structure information' and achieve notoriety by their firm moral hand. Charismatic leaders, however, also reach their fame 'through domination and deindividuation of others' (p. 550). Building a 'saviour' persona can give criminologists social and cultural capital among critical milieus, so they may build – sometimes even without noticing it – an image of saviours to ascend in their careers. But as Bunn, citing Shuman, says, '"empathy is a weak claim to entitlement" and raises as many problems as it does promises' (Bunn, 2023, p. 3). In short, the criminologists who dress up as saviours communicate that solutions to social problems come from individual heroes rather than from a communitarian collaboration (Goyes, 2023b; Goyes et al., 2023).

Critical criminologists as colonisers: Empathy may blur the lines between the empathiser and the receiver of empathy, creating an unhealthy dependency relationship between them. The empathiser who self arrogates the role of saviour creates a colonial relationship and subjugates the receiver of compassion. Empathisers take the right to define the 'road to salvation' through their 'superior' cognitive capacities which allows them to understand the situation of the oppressed group. Ruggiero (2013, p. 22) describes the 'innate "arrogance" in most criminology, a discipline which needs "informants", not peers, a type of social inquiry that needs to teach others in what contexts they are situated, which the others presumably ignore'. As Bunn (2023, p. 9) recently warned, '[c]riminologists should be wary of the risk of harm that can occur under the guise of giving "voice" to research participants, without sharing power'.

Using empathy as an argument, critical criminologists might be profiting from others' suffering, benefiting from their image of saviour, and even colonising the receivers of help. This is not an unknown phenomenon in international relations: Mary Bosworth (2017, p. 40) has described how, under the guise of humanitarianism, Western countries transfer their policies to Southern nations. A similar phenomenon may happen in academia, with critical criminologists using empathy as an argument to invade the lives of others, take their stories to transform them into academic commodities, and impose 'solutions' that fit criminologists' agendas but not necessarily the needs of the receivers. Help may be more aligned with the helper's desires, ego, and agenda than with the needs of the receiver of help. Empathy can be pleasurably egotistical: it gives the helper a good feeling and rewards, while the helped must live with an assistance that, at times, becomes a cage with bars of impositions.

Critical criminology: from local to global inequalities

Critical criminology, incepted in the 1970s, developed with a focus on class, gender, and race/ethnicity in the Western world (DeKeseredy, 2011). In the foundational text, Taylor, Walton and Young (Taylor et al., 1973, p. 269) wrote that critical criminology is:

> 'A theory that can explain the forms assumed by social control and deviant action in **«developed» societies** (characterised—we have argued—by the domination of a capitalist mode of production, by a division of labour involving the growth of armies of «experts»…and, currently, by the necessity to segregate out…an increasing variety of its members as being in need of control)'. (Quotation marks in the original; the bolding, which seeks to highlight that early propositions of critical criminology were only preoccupied with the Western world, is mine).

But in the early 2000s, critical criminology grew beyond its concerns with class, gender, and race/ethnicity, and incorporated an interest in global inequality, imperialism, and colonisation. Nigel South, a second-generation criminologist of the 'New Deviancy' school, played an essential role in taking critical criminology beyond its original parochial features. In 1998, in his proposition for a green criminology, South called for a critical engagement with '"new" topics of international global importance' (South, 1998, p. 226). South forefronted the global interconnections and problematised the global inequality between the North and South, for example as reflected in activities like waste dumping and extractivism.

In 2004, Coomber and South edited the book *Drug Use and Cultural Contexts 'Beyond the West': Tradition, Change and Post Colonialism*. The anthology sought to find 'contributions that reflected contexts and cultural settings often neglected in "Northern" literatures on drugs, but that greatly impacted the legacies of colonialism and the contemporary power of international […] prohibition' (South, 2023, p. 271). Coomber and South (2004) highlighted the need to redress the 'Southern criminological knowledge gap' by increasing the volume of criminological activity attuned to the realities of the global South:

> 'This book is *not* about "defending" drug use. It *is* about understanding such use, seeing 'the other side' and exploring the overlooked cultures of use that occur around the globe and that experience the malign, iatrogenic effects of the imposition of Western models of drug and crime control' (emphasis in the original).

South's contribution to raising awareness about the need for critical criminology to deal with issues of global inequality coincided with the work of others on similar projects. Biko Agozino, for example, published the landmark book 'Counter-Colonial Criminology—a Critique of Imperialist Reason' in 2003. Wayne Morrison released 'Criminology, Civilisation and the New World Order' in 2006, and Katja Franko Aas opened up the field of global criminology with the book 'Globalisation and Crime' (Aas, 2007).[1]

For all its benefits, the globalisation of critical criminology also increases the risks posed by the shadow side of empathy. Working with people oppressed not only because of their gender, class, or 'race', but also due to their ethnicity and nationality, adds a further layer to the harm critical criminologists might do out of empathy. The 'new' receivers of empathy, now in neo-colonial locations, have been made vulnerable through centuries of colonisation. Nina Friedemann (1975), for instance, warned that genocide happens not only at the hands of ill-intended actors; also well-intended outsiders might produce the erasure of cultures and peoples.

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[1] As South (2023; see also Goyes, 2019, 2023a; Goyes & South, 2017a) has noted, in the non-Anglophone world, a significant body of criminological literature has existed since the 1970s exploring the crimes and harms derived from unequal global relations.

Those outsiders, wrote Friedemann, are usually researchers who see Indigenous Peoples as 'different' and 'good' but in need of education or salvation. Well-intended outsiders may then try to help Indigenous Peoples, forcing them into an image of what outsiders think 'Indigenous Peoples' should be, not what they themselves decide to be. In this dynamic—that Friedemann called *Indigenism*—empathetic scholars dress as saviours and blur the borders between them and the receivers of 'help'. The actions of the empathisers who want to help Indigenous people become more 'civilised' and adopt the norms of Northern or Western societies, however, may lead to the slow but sure erosion and eventual destruction of the recipients of help.

How can we help others without colonising them? The question itself contains a colonial concept: 'the other'.

Decolonial theory: helpful or profitable?

In the 1992 text 'Coloniality and modernity/rationality', Peruvian intellectual Anibal Quijano proposed the term *coloniality*. Quijano explained that the fifteen-century colonisation of the Americas engendered a complex phenomenon known as 'the European rationality/modernity', and with it, the establishment of 'the universal knowledge paradigm and the ultimate form of relationship between humanity and the rest of the world' (p. 14). In later texts, Quijano explained that coloniality is the preference to consider valid only what follows the modern European way of knowledge creation (Quijano, 2000, 2007). For him, coloniality is 'the most widespread mode of global domination beyond capitalism in the contemporary era' (p. 14).

Coloniality pervades every social and individual space. It directs how people – in both colonial and colonised locations – are and behave, structuring social interactions and society's interactions with nature. Coloniality trickles down to 'framing subjectivities, education, ways of eating, health, and destroyed conviviality' (Mignolo, 2018: 108). It is 'engraved in global social structures' (Goyes, 2023c) and can be seen as the shadow side of modernity (Mignolo, 2011). Modernity, through industrial production and scientific insights, brings well-being to the lives of some. However, those heightened standards come at the cost of domination, exploitation, suffering, and despoilation of many others. Modernity and its costs are enabled by the representation of Western ways of knowing as superior—a representation that hides away the harms of modernity. The term coloniality, however, uncovers the hidden costs of Western prosperity: the erasure of other ways of living and behaving, the plundering of territories, the enslavement of people, and beyond.

Decolonising means challenging *coloniality*. Decolonial work aims 'to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity' (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). It seeks to free knowledge production by giving back the epistemological force to the sources that have been made subaltern (Santos, 2014). This implies the need to take 'seriously the epistemic force of local histories and to think theory through from the political praxis of subaltern groups' (Escobar, 2003, p. 6). Decolonising then, is to undo the actions and effects of colonialism by opposing colonial logics and going beyond them (Goyes, 2018). Decolonial work makes the experiences and knowledge of those made subalterns more visible; it shows how these worldviews and knowledge are valid alternatives to the way of living imposed by coloniality (Santos, 2009). Decolonial work, therefore, seeks to achieve epistemological justice and dismantle (neo)colonialism, or the legacies and continuities of colonisation. Decoloniality is, in sum, a concern for the cultural, economic, political, and social structures that cause harm across the world (Goyes, 2023c).

As conceptualised in the paragraph above, a central concern of decolonial work is with the *voices*, *experiences,* and *knowledge* of the subaltern. These voices need to be 'liberated', their histories and political praxis made more visible, their epistemological force reinstated, and their

worldviews underscored as valid alternatives. Decolonial theorists pledge to elevate the voices of the subaltern—a necessary remedy to coloniality that casts a veil of silence over everything that deviates from the Western ways of being.

With its commitment to the voices of the subaltern, can decolonial theory contribute to providing help to the colonised without causing more harm? Specifically, the decolonial pledge to elevate the voices of the subaltern seems like an answer to the colonial wounds produced by academia, which materialise in *the Malinowski approach*.[2] In this approach—named after the Polish-British ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (e.g., 1978)—, white middle-class academic 'outsiders' go 'into the field', gather data, and then swiftly exit, leaving the researched communities empty-handed while they profit from the 'stolen knowledge'. The wide discomfort with the Malinowski approach in the global South is well illustrated in the lines that Chilean writer Isabel Allende (2002, p. 51) mockingly wrote when referring to one of her fictitious characters: 'In his youth, Leblanc had spent a *brief* time in the Amazon and then had written a *voluminous* study on the Indians that had caused a sensation in academic circles' [the italics are mine]. These words summarise the unethical actions of scholars who mine data in neo-colonised locations.

Critical scholars and activists alike applauded a theoretical perspective that undertakes the challenge of defying Western exploitation of neo-colonial locations—also in terms of knowledge production.

Decolonial expansion

Boosted by its subversive potential, decolonial perspectives mushroomed in academia. Haug and colleagues (2021, p. 1923), for example, documented that 'references to the "Global South"'—a fundamental concept in decolonial theory (Goyes, 2023c)—'have grown almost exponentially since the 1990s, with a particularly steep increase over the last 15 years'. Decolonial calls have also taken other names—like Southernising or decentring science—but, although with slightly different messages, they all tried to convey the same core message. For instance, Connell (2006, p. 259) called for a deconstruction of 'metropolitan thought', denouncing that social theory is mainly produced in the global North and that scholars socialised into 'reading from the centre' generalise and globally apply insights made in a few, core countries.

Swayed by decolonial theory's radical concepts, critical criminologists also joined the decolonial movement. The *boom* of decolonial criminology—at least in the Anglophone world— started with the publication of the article titled 'Southern criminology' in the British Journal of Criminology, authored by Carrington et al. (2016, p. 1). The paper set forth an approach to 'decolonise and democratise the toolbox of available criminological concepts, theories, and methods'. This pioneering text was quickly followed up by other publications—many of them also in the British Journal of Criminology—including: 'A friendly critique of "Asian Criminology" and "Southern Criminology"' (Moosavi, 2018), 'Decolonising Southern Criminology: What can the "Decolonial option" tell us about challenging the Modern/Colonial foundations of criminology' (Dimou, 2021), and 'Mapping the Pains of Neo-Colonialism: A Critical Elaboration of Southern Criminology' (Ciocchini and Greener, 2021).[3]

But for all the furore caused by decolonial theory across the social sciences, something may strip it of its subversive potential. Scholars started using the decolonial label without profoundly engaging with its practice and political commitment—these scholars, I might say, are not

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[2] Nigel South and I used this concept, inspired by a presentation by Sveinung Sandberg, in an event co-organized by David Rodríguez Goyes and Kerry Carrington and hosted by the Católica University of Colombia in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 2019.

[3] A more comprehensive account of decolonial and Southern criminology appears in Goyes et al. (2021).

decolonial, but dress as decolonial and make of the perspective a trend from which to profit. Quiñones (2020), in a post on ResearchGate, asked: 'Decolonial turn in the social sciences? Or a new fashion of academic extractivism that promotes a sympathetic colonialism?' Quiñones denounced three harmful dynamics he argued existed in the academic 'decolonial movement':

1. Most 'decolonial work' is published by authors in European universities, using neo-colonial sites as data mines and 'borrowing' ideas of local thinkers to later introduce them as their own in the Anglophone world of 'global' academia.
2. The Western academics who 'borrow' ideas from Southern intellectuals receive all the credit for their pioneering work. Meanwhile, the original sources fall into oblivion.
3. Many 'decolonial' researchers are depoliticised and fail to embrace decolonial ethics and political praxis. These researchers engage in academic extractivism without partaking in the political action necessary to undo coloniality.

These three critiques echo the thought of Aymaran scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who declared in a conference: 'The postcolonial is a desire, the anticolonial is a struggle, the decolonial is an obnoxious fashionable neologism' (in Gago, 2016).

Rivera Cusicanqui criticised the way 'departments of cultural studies in many North American universities have appropriated the "postcolonial studies" in their curricula but with a culturist and academicist stemple, detached from the political urgency' (2010, p. 57). Northern institutions, says Rivera Cusicanqui, 'adopted the ideas of subaltern studies and threw debates in Latin America, creating a jargon, conceptual buildings, and imposing referencing manners that take academic analyses away from political commitments and dialogues with the insurgent forces' (ibid.). Rivera also criticises key decolonial thinkers who, she says, built 'a small empire within the empire, strategically taking the contributions of the Indian school of subalternity and the multiple Latin American streams of critical reflection about colonisation and decolonisation' (ibid.). I don't agree with all of Quiñones and Rivera Cusicanqui's criticisms, but what is important in Rivera Cusicanqui's analysis is the reminder it contains about the dangers of empathy: while trying to co-experience and help, scholars might be actually engaging in a vampiric relationship with those they believe they are helping. Scholars benefit and advance their careers while the 'helped' are left even more impoverished, seeing how their knowledge and experiences are now somebody else's property.

While finishing this chapter, I asked Walter Mignolo – a key representative of decolonial theory and a target of Rivera Cusicanqui – about these criticisms. Mignolo explained that critics 'think that the decolonial is about celebrating the Indigenous people' but that is, he said, mistaken: 'the Indigenous Peoples are defending themselves; they have tremendous intellectual power, their own media, their own scholars, they publish in important publishing houses'. Rather, Mignolo explained, decolonial work is to be done in another dimension, 'in the social sphere in relation to the forces of domination', meaning, 'in the global North, confronting the people that are creating the conditions for those people to be poor and to be racialized'. He warned against going to the communities of the Indigenous people seeking to rescue them, 'You cannot tell them what to do. Don't go there as a saviour. Work here'.

I derive three lessons from the debate between decolonial theorists and critics: first, decolonial work can be done at two sites, the empires that sustain coloniality and the colonial locations that suffer the consequences. Second, the core of decolonial work is debunking modernity as the ultimate social order and offering alternatives. Third, inspiration comes from those who live alternative forms of social organisation.

In some criminological applications of decolonial theory, however, the task of debunking the myth of modernity and offering alternatives has been replaced by a fight about who 'says it best'. Some of these applications have lost sight of the goal of decolonial theory and have

become about making a name for oneself. A sign of how some using the 'decolonial' banner forget to embrace its mission, is forgetting to acknowledge the voices of intellectuals who, from colonised locations and decades in advance, had made the same claims. As Nigel South wrote in a joint publication, 'For all the newness of a "southern criminology" we really should remember how much significant work had already been done setting a southern critical perspective' (Goyes et al., 2023, p. 4; see also South, 2023).

Pseudo-applications of decolonial theory may suffer from the same pitfalls as earlier critical criminology: profiting from other people's pain, building the image of saviour for one's own gain, and further colonising already 'marginalised groups'.

For Rivera Cusicanqui (as for Mignolo), the ethics of real decolonial work – which she calls *anticolonial* – must be developed together with a decolonising praxis: 'there cannot be a discourse about decolonising, a decolonial theory, without a decolonial praxis' (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010, p. 62). If decolonising is not only about theory, it must also include methods. Indeed, selecting a research method determines which aspects of reality we want to see. As Santos (2014) explains, when constructing a scientific representation, researchers choose a limited number of phenomena to include and disregard the ones they will not incorporate. But selecting a method is also about the researchers' praxis in the field – i.e., among the societies we research. The decision about which method to apply is also about how researchers will go about their research and interact with the people who inhabit the worlds under investigation.

Having presented some of the pitfalls of doing critical, activist, and decolonial work, time is due for me to present how Nigel South and I went about conducting decolonial work. Ours was an application that tried to combine Mignolo's perspective on combating the ideas in the global North 'creating the conditions' for coloniality in the global South, with Rivera Cusicanqui's call for a decolonial praxis of collaborating with the political urgency heralded by grassroot movements.

Indigenous marginalisation, Western scholars, and peer methodology

In a sample of the 'top' 24 criminology journals (measured by impact factors) only 155 articles had ever been published about Indigenous issues up to 2021. Seventy-eight per cent of the published articles were about violence committed by Indigenous Peoples; there was almost no engagement with Indigenous methodologies; and very few of the authors were Indigenous (Goyes and South, 2021). In an extensive, running study, Antje Decker has identified the same issues (Deckert, 2014, 2016, 2023).

The criminological blindness toward Indigenous issues is appalling, all the more because of the current circumstances of Indigenous Peoples around the world. Four elements compose their current circumstances: (1) their experiences of processes of colonisation and neo-colonisation (Cunneen and Tauri, 2017); (2) their consequential 'lack of political power and autonomy' derived from their existence 'under the control of an immigrant or ethnic group-dominated state' (Coates, 2004, p. 13); (3) the small size of their populations compared to non-indigenous inhabitants; and (4) their engagement in a process of decolonisation (Coates, 2004). Notwithstanding the principles and recognition entailed in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the marginalisation that Indigenous Peoples experience is materialised in their disadvantaged contact with social services such as access to and permanence in the educational system, access to health services, and their overrepresentation in criminal justice systems and victimisation rates – the latter two being topics on which criminology has traditionally focused (Cunneen and Tauri, 2017).

Moved by our empathy with the situation of Indigenous Peoples in Colombia, Nigel South and I started a series of research projects to analyse their situation while enlarging their voices and highlighting their epistemological power (Tanya Wyatt and Ragnhild Sollund, professors in criminology, also joined us for parts of the project). Soon, a series of questions about identity and positionality appeared. Nigel was a white, male professor working at a Northern university; I a male researcher working for another Northern institution. Our collaborators came from four Colombian Indigenous communities. Power relations, due to our positionality, were skewed. Under those circumstances, as Rob White (2023) writes, a burning question appears:

> [w]hat is to be done, but from the point of view of 'the coloniser' not the 'colonised. To put it differently, while the march of decolonisation has happened over the course of the past century…and is still occurring globally in different forms…questions remain as to who is and should be involved in these processes, and how. This is not only a matter of specific activities and political movements, it fundamentally goes to the heart of knowledge and knowledge production itself.

Trying to respond the best way we could, we engaged in what Santos calls 'cultural translation' (2014), a tool for creating non-hierarchical communication between different sets of knowledges. The reasoning behind cultural translation is that every knowledge tradition is incomplete and they can benefit from the contributions of another tradition – particularly when gathering tools to fight against colonial impositions (Goyes, 2018). In cultural translation, the parties agree on a shared concern (none of the parties imposes its interests). Then, through the interaction of ideas and practices, the group seeks to learn and make sense of the world, 'giv[ing] emergence to a new knowledge configuration' (ibid, p. 333).

Based on that ideal, we chose *peer methodology* as our research method. *Peer methodology* is an unconventional research method in which members of the group targeted by the investigation – in this case, Indigenous people – are part of the research team. Lushey and Munro (2015) described this method as attempting to: (1) empower vulnerable groups;[4] (2) enhance the understanding of an issue; and (3) gain deeper access to the information considering that, usually, interviewees are more willing to discuss with peer researchers than with academic researchers. Peer methodology, attuned to decolonial work goals, seeks to democratise knowledge creation by informing understandings of an issue with the views of the subaltern.

Peer methodology provides the advantage of knowing and understanding from the inside, being a remedy to the 'impossibility of bearing witness'– understanding when one has not experienced a phenomenon first-hand (Henry, 2010). Data is only entirely understandable when the analyst – or at least one among the group of analysis – shares the broad universe of meanings and signifiers with the research participants. In our case, that would only be possible by 'speaking' the cultural language of Indigenous representations.

By using peer methodology to research environmental and Indigenous issues, we wanted to generate knowledge which would help prevent ecological destruction and the consequences of the plundering and devastation of nature, in collaboration with those who suffer from the inside. We also wanted to challenge the northern cognitive dominance by acknowledging that usually neglected groups are strong knowledge producers. We wanted to challenge, from below, the structural barriers that usually exclude specific segments from being recognised as knowledge producers. Further, we wanted to contest from the inside the ideologies and cultures that sustain

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[4] A parenthetical note is that the ethics of 'empowering' and 'giving a voice' to 'marginalised' and 'vulnerable' populations remains a topic that criminologists should further discuss. 'Empowering' means that the only power worth having is the one Western academia concedes − a highly colonial way of thinking. How can we enlarge the voices of those not present in academic work without furthering the coloniality of knowing? For more on this, see Goyes et al. (2024).

racist and neo-colonialist practices and that imply that Indigenous Peoples need external, white saviours to survive and progress.

We believed that peer methodology, when correctly applied to Indigenous criminology, has two additional virtues: it contributes to dismantling coloniality via a 'knowledge redistribution', in which persons usually excluded from criminological production are now actively included in the community of knowledge producers, and to being a small-scale source of income redistribution when, ideally, peer researchers are economically remunerated. We also believe that peer methodology is aligned with Indigenous methods (Archibald et al., 2019; Atisa, 2020; Smith, 2012) and ethics (George et al., 2020), mainly due to its communitarian ethos. We thus considered that this approach could contribute to the growth of Indigenous criminology while being faithful to its principles and interests. In our proposed use of the method, the project should be the 'property' of the whole team (four Indigenous peer researchers and two outsiders). Indigenous researchers were part of the entire project, from project design to fieldwork, data analysis, and output production.

Our application of this method revealed a series of challenges, the first of which is gaining access to Indigenous Peoples' communities. The Colombian Indigenous Barí People[5] have a policy of rejecting research projects conducted by outsiders in their territories and with their People. This policy results from experiences where they felt robbed of their knowledge by outsiders, who left and never returned (Goyes et al., 2023). We deemed this policy adequate to protect the community from further colonial exploitation and saw peer methodology as valuable in having access to the community under the commitment of giving back to it. The second challenge was the application of ethical protocols because they do not correspond with the worldviews of the Indigenous communities with which we cooperated. Some Indigenous communities see signing documents, such as informed consent, as eternal bonds. As a third challenge, many interviews needed to be conducted in Indigenous languages, so the craft and art of translation had to be done correctly to avoid misinterpretation.

We involved out 'volunteer' but salaried researchers in the setting-up of a systematic research project. Knowledge was sought to be exchanged horizontally, inspired by Freire's pedagogy of freedom (Freire, 2001), developed through a zone of translation (Santos, 2014) with adapted ethical protocols. Systematic data collection co-designed by 'both sides' resulted in 84 interview sessions with various participants and ethnographic notes. We co-analysed, wrote and published together. The Global Challenges Research Fund (obtained by the University of Northumbria and the University of Essex) and the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, funded the three waves of research.

Pros and cons of peer methodology
We identified two main advantages of peer methodology: its usefulness in creating unique knowledge, and the symbolic value of acknowledging the epistemological contributions of Indigenous people. The most critical shortcoming is that peer methodology is a short-term solution to a deep, structural problem.

Advantages: Production of unique insights and symbolic value

Our research project, through our use of peer methodology, produced three articles published in top international journals. The first one documented how the cultural representations of nature that Indigenous Peoples hold, could inspire protective behaviours and be expanded into broader environmental prevention measures (Goyes et al., 2021a). The second article

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[5] The Barí people live in the rain forests of Colombia and Venezuela around the central and eastern mountains of the Venezuelan Andes.

underscores that while many of the most powerful forces involved in the extinguishment of Indigenous Peoples and their cultures are visible and direct forms of violence, such as war, there are also structural, systemic invisible factors at play, such as governmental intervention, the official educational system, well-intended outsiders, and technology (Goyes et al., 2021b). The third article shows that genocidal processes in which the powerful have betrayed the trust of Indigenous communities have created trauma in the latter, resulting in reluctance and suspicion regarding the acceptance of 'gifts' from external sources, including potentially beneficial health treatments (Goyes et al., 2023).

Attuned with Mignolo's (2011, 2018) version of a decolonial praxis, the symbolic value of our research countered coloniality in the social sphere of Western academia. By showing the unique knowledge that Indigenous Peoples can produce, we challenged the idea that Western scholars are the ultimate intellecturals. And, recognising the contributions of our peer researchers debunked the myths and 'biases' of ignoring the role of 'research assistants' in research (Deane and Stevano, 2016). Further, our waves of research set a precedent for what is valuable in multicultural universities. After we successfully published articles in high-impact journals, the Antonio Nariño Univerisy, which hosted the projects in Colombia, opened up a new line of 'intercultural research' in which Indigenous peoples were included in research projects to combine Western views with Indigenous cosmovisions. Thus, our projects seem to have had the symbolic value in local and 'global' academia by underscoring the capacities of knowledge creation by those usually excluded. These waves of research also opened up a new way of researching that defies hierarchical structures.

Our research project also had some positive impacts at the individual level. The pedagogy of freedom (Freire, 2017 [1969]) we applied, and its critical optimism seems to have transformed the self-perception of the Indigenous researchers (who at the time were bachelor law students) from recipients of knowledge into creators. As such, the project was a turning point in the lives of the team's peer researchers in building an identity as knowledge producers and valued members of the academic community. Angie declared to a national newspaper,

> Since I became part of the project, I know that my life's goal is to be a person who contributes to my community, creating knowledge through articles that my sisters and brothers can read, appreciate and exploit. That is the best heritage we can leave them.

Shortcomings: A short-term solution

Whilst we had some success in applying decolonial theory as proposed by Mignolo, we failed at implementing the decolonial research – also called anticolonial – championed by Rivera Cusicanqui (2010). In other words, the success of our project remained in the social sphere of Western academia, but did not transcend to the situation of Indigenous Peoples on the ground. Despite our best efforts, the peer researchers remain temporary employees in a volatile job market. Of the four peer researchers, only one continued with a career as a scholar, while the other three found jobs as assistants in law firms. Empathy seems to have mainly served the empathisers (Nigel and I) who by playing the role of collaborators strengthened our CVs with new prestigious publications. In our application of peer methodology, it was not peer researchers who collected the most significant benefits for their lives and careers. The highly unequal outcomes show that peer methodologies might only temporarily stop the inequalities they seek to reverse. After the project, with its three waves of research, was over, inequalities seemed to return and even increase: Nigel and I consolidated our names in academia, while the Indigenous researchers seemingly remained in the same situation. Peer methodology appears to be a short-term solution for a long-term problem; it depends on the 'goodwill' of funders, academic staff, and others who sanction which research projects are to be conducted.

Furthermore, non-orthodox decolonial research such as the studies we have conducted seemingly continues to 'fall[..] on deaf ears' (Phillips et al., 2020). Our contributions, we believed, would broaden criminology and raise awareness about the importance of researching Indigenous issues. Yet, as Deckert (2024, p. 1) documents, Indigenous matters remain at the periphery of criminology despite creative research projects: 'the surging decolonial debate had little effect on the quantity of topical research published in high-ranked mainstream criminology journals'. Yet, our articles are still recent, so there might be hope that in time they will exert a larger effect on the discipline.

Conclusion

This chapter started listing three colonial harms that can derive from using empathy as an excuse to conduct research on or with oppressed people. In particular, harms can derive from: profiting from the pain of the researched by gaining access to them and then publishing their experiences; building an image of saviour to gain prestige in academic critical milieus while silencing the voices of those on the ground; and colonising the oppressed by self-arrogating the role of theoretician of the subaltern. Critical criminologists, who declare their sensitivity to the marginalised and intention to help, should be wary of these shadowy sides of empathy in academia. All the more considering that critical criminology in the 2000s expanded its concerns from class, gender, and ethnicity to global inequality, imperialism, and colonisation. Decolonial theory, focused on making visible the subaltern voices, seemed to offer the formula for how to help the colonised without further exploiting them. However, some of its applications across disciplines seemed to be more concerned with helping scholars build their CVs than with effecting a change (either on the social sphere of Western academia, or on the ground together with grassroot social movements).

In the project that Nigel and I ran from 2019 to 2023 in collaboration with four Indigenous People, we sought to make Indigenous ways of living, knowing, and relating with nature more visible in international criminology. We implemented a peer methodology in which members of the four communities were themselves researchers on equal terms with the 'outsider' collaborators. The project produced unique insights thanks to the exclusive information gathered by the peer researchers. It also conveyed the value of Indigenous epistemologies for criminology and sociology. The projects had, however, only temporary effects on the lives of the peer researchers: only one out of four of them continued in academia, and the ones in legal practice had to embrace 'mainstream' state law, despite their desire to practice Indigenous Law. It seems that the project benefited the empathic outsiders more than the receivers of empathy.

This evaluation of our project seems dire, and it partly is. Criminology is still the 'business of the elite'. Scholars in the discipline seem fond of the comforts and excitement of 'research tourism' and 'exotic parachuting'. Both elements hinder the redistribution of epistemological and economic capital to truly make space for other voices. The validity of the commentary by Leon Moosavi (2018) persists: the big question is 'whether the decolonisation of criminology is even possible given the discipline's Western origins, and its historic-relationship with elite coercion'.

However, the evaluation of our project is also a motive for celebration and recognition of its merits. Every being on earth suffers the effects of coloniality – regardless of the place of residence, the colour of the skin, ethnicity, and gender. We are all trapped in ways of being, behaving and knowing – some as 'ultimate knowledge creators', the others as data miners and exotic populations to research (Goyes, 2016). Non-hierarchical collaboration between Western scholars and Southern Indigenous populations, where the former surrender the privileges and comforts to facilitate the visibility of the latter – including by acknowledging them as co-authors

and knowledge creators – defies in praxis the rationale of coloniality. Our project sent the message that modern European ways of knowledge creation are not the only valid forms of epistemological production. The collaboration between two knowledge traditions, critical European and Indigenous South American, enabled sending the message that coloniality and the epistemological abyss it produces is best eliminated in a praxis in which the multiplicity of valid knowledges collaborates. We failed at the anticolonial endeavour that Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) promotes. Still, we succeeded at the decolonial work that Peruvian activist scholar Anibal Quijano (2000) started, and Argentinean activist intellectual Walter Mignolo (2018) furthered. Both sides of the fight against colonialism and coloniality are important and necessary. Our triumphs were primarily thanks to the work of Angie, Pablo, Mireya, and Tatiana, the peer researchers, but our success was in great measure facilitated by Nigel South, an ally who, despite having achieved prominence in criminology long before our first meeting in 2013, put his knowledge and craft to the service of Colombian Indigenous Peoples.

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