

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

CIES Symposium – October 26-27, 2017

Hosted by:

George Mason University, Center for International Education
CIES Gender and Education Standing Committee
CIES South Asia Special Interest Group



CIE Methodology and Possibilities of Other Futures

Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher, University of Pennsylvania.

*when you take away the punctuation
he says of
lines lifted from the documents about
military-occupied land
its acreage and location
you take away its finality
opening the possibility of other futures*

F. Voeltz, Body of Work / When You Take Away the Punctuation
quoting Craig Santos Perez, Chamuru scholar and poet

I have struggled to write this piece because I am not sure I can deliver on what is perhaps expected of me. Despite our best intentions, I do not believe that we will decolonize CIE research anytime soon, mostly because it would take more than we are willing to give, but also because we are so deeply entrenched in our ways of knowing, seeing, understanding, and feeling the world that there is little room for us to think otherwise. Even the framing of this very thoughtful symposium - and this panel in particular with words like decolonization, scientific, rigor - are entrenched in a particular way of understanding the world.

CIE research has largely been informed by “western¹” epistemologies and has been “rooted in an understanding of the development of capitalism as a global economic system” (Roy, Negrón-Gonzales, Opoku-Agyemang, & Talwalker, 2016, p. 9). We divide the world into binary categories² pitted against one another: east and west, north and south, first and third, developing and developed, and then seek to understand how the majority world might look like the minority who hold all the power. Our knowledge flow is one directional: from the Global North, downwards to the South. Our goal seems to be to recreate the third world in the first world’s image.

¹ I acknowledge that there are Black, Chicana, and Native epistemologies to name a few that are “located” in the West, but these epistemologies unfortunately remain on the margins. By “western”, I am specifically pointing to White Euro-American Epistemologies grounded in Cartesian and/or behaviorist terms.

²All of the terms used to describe groups of nations are problematic in one way or the other (see previous footnote) and so throughout this piece, I use these terms interchangeably as a heuristic device, not as absolute categories.

Lately, there has been much talk to “decolonize” CIE research and teaching as a way to challenge the north’s imposition on the south. We talk about inclusivity of other voices, of finding “value” in the third world, of our own “privilege”, and of destabilizing (Mercer, Mohan, & Power, 2003) or decentering the Global North. But this is not decolonization. To decolonize CIE research and methodology would require conceding the power and authority that we³ have taken and at times been bestowed. It would mean putting our third-world thought partners as first author, even in those instances where we did all the work. It would mean publishing in journals of and from the global south, even if these are not recognized by our tenure committees in the academy. It would mean changing how we disseminate information, not just in terms of “open access” and more accessible writing and languages, but also other forms of dissemination – storytelling, movie making, plays, poetry, spoken word - and “counting” these as legitimate and scholarly. It would mean changing the standards of what we consider to be valid data, even if it means taking risks and exploring the metaphysical, the fantastic, and the unobservable. As much as we are committed to the idea of decolonizing CIE research, the professional stakes are perhaps too high for most. Decolonizing research would mean giving up the stage, which most people are not willing to do. The best we can do is share the stage and decenter the global north to make room for the third world. What I can offer then are a few thoughts regarding this decentering that build off work that has already started in this regard (Baily, Shah, & Call-Comings, 2016; Takayama, Sriprakash, & Connell, 2016; Mercer, Mohan, & Power, 2003). As such, I have three sets of comments around methods, conceptual framings, and location.

My first recommendation – and perhaps this is the most obvious, is for methodological pluralism – different questions need different kinds of methods. And here, I do not simply mean both qualitative and quantitative research. Rather, I am interested in exploding the boundaries of what we count as “knowledge”. Our ways of knowing the world are grounded in empiricism and a particularly understanding of “science”. This “science” is what Nyamnjoh (2012) describes as one that has

tended to celebrate dichotomies, dualisms, teleologies and analogies, dismissing anything that does not make sense in Cartesian or behaviourist terms, confining to religion and metaphysics what it cannot explain and disqualifying as non-scientific more inclusive epistemologies. This epistemology’s logic is simple and problematic: it sacrifices pluriversity for university and imposes a one best way of attaining singular and universal truth. (p. 131)

Thus, what is needed is a broadening not only of methodological tools and ways of knowing, but more importantly, expanding the notion of what is considered data, including methods and sources that might strike us as invalid, unreliable, anecdotal, and unobservable. To decenter CIE methodology would require us to move beyond sharing our knowledge with others and teaching them the skills we know (or building their “capacity”), to instead reexamine our own ways of knowing and its limits and to open our minds to other ontologies and epistemologies.

Related to the issue of epistemology is our conceptual frameworks. For too long we have studied international educational development in the periphery – it is time to turn our gaze to the core. To do this, we need to turn our frames of reference around: that is, we need to ask third world questions of the first world (Roy, et. al. 2016). One might argue that there are enough people who conducting research in and about the US (the epicenter of the global north) and Europe and so more is not needed. While this is true,

³ I include myself in the “we” despite being a child of the global south, as my location in the “first world” (that too at an “elite” institution), gives me gives me a degree of privilege and authority (though comparatively less than my white colleagues) that is not afforded to my colleagues in the majority world. Further, my education has been informed by White Euro-American epistemologies.

the frames of references that are largely used are of White Euro-American epistemologies – we need to flip the script and encourage researchers to turn their gaze to the Global North and understand the Global North from southern perspectives. This is not in an attempt to necessarily increase our knowledge about the Global North but to be able to better understand the implications of northern policies on southern states. For example, why is that while to seek to recreate the Global South in the powerful Global North's image, that we still find throughout the West, deep poverty, gender inequality, and even malnutrition? The “solutions” to these problems are being transferred to Global South in the name of development. Without understanding these issues in the north, we are allowing them to spread and recreate themselves throughout the Global South.

My final point is the location of our research. There are two essential areas of research that CIE researchers should consider – and they lie at two extremes: one at the heart of the capitalist enterprise and the other at those corners of the earth where capitalism has not yet extended its reach. Let me start with the first. As mentioned earlier, for too long, CIE researchers – especially those who study International Educational Development – have studied educational development in the periphery. Much of our fascination with the periphery has been grounded in questions of poverty, particularly the education of those at the “bottom of the pyramid”, the poorest of the poor (Pralhad, 2010). However, it is important to remember that poverty is not inevitable, it is actively constructed (Escobar, 1995; Roy, et al., 2016). Moreover, poverty is a relational concept (Roy, et al., 2016) – what it means to be poor in Philadelphia, the city where I currently live, is vastly different from what it means to be poor in Karachi, my city of birth. Questions of poverty are usually questions of injustice. And these questions of injustice are intimately tied with the capitalist enterprise. Remarkably, while the first goal in the new SDGs is to end poverty, the onus on that herculean task falls on the poorest nations of the world with the assistance of the richest countries. Yet, the solution to end poverty is not necessarily with the poor but with the rich themselves whose insatiable desires are creating an unprecedented wealth gap both within and across borders. It is thus time to turn our gaze to the core and understand how the spread of capitalism and the Global North's dependency on the Global South (for cheap labor and resources) is tied to the creation of poverty, and which then affects the kinds of schooling made available (or that is affordable) in the third world. On the other hand, we also need to study those places “beyond capitalism's reach” as Gidwani (2008, p. 218) argues, in order to discover alternatives to capitalism, which would in turn allow us to imagine and advocate for other forms of education, modernity and development – ones that actually will lead us to a more equitable future.

References

- Baily, S., Shah, P., & Call-Cummings, M. (2016). Reframing the center: New directions in qualitative methodology in international comparative education. In A. W. Wiseman & E. Anderson (Eds.), *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education 2015 (International Perspectives on Education and Society, Volume 28)* (139 – 164). Bingley, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Gidwani, V. K. (2008). *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian development and the politics of work in India*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mercer, C.; Mohan, G., & Power, M. (2003). Towards a critical political geography of African development. *Geoforum*, 34(4), 419–436.
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2012). 'Potted plants in greenhouses': A critical reflection on the resilience of colonial education in Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47(2), 129–154.
- Pralhad, C. K. (2010). *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid: Eradicating poverty through profits*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School Publishers.
- Roy, A., Negrón-Gonzales, G., Opoku-Agyemang, K., & Talwalker, C. (2016). *Encountering poverty: Thinking and acting in an unequal world*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Takayama, K., Sriprakash, A., & Connell, R. (2016). Toward a postcolonial comparative and international education. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(S1). Retrieved from <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/cer/0/0>
- Voeltz, F. (April 25, 2012). Body of work / when you take away punctuation. *detail collector*. Retrieved from <http://frantelope.wordpress.com/2012/04/25/body-of-work-when-you-take-away-punctuation/>

CITATION:

Ghaffar-Kucher, A. (2017, October). CIE methodology and possibilities of other futures. In CIES Symposium, *Implications for Methodology - Towards a more Equitable Future*. Conference Proceedings of the 2nd Comparative and International Education Symposium: Interrogating and Innovating CIE Research, George Mason University. Arlington, VA: GMU. Retrieved from: <https://cehd.gmu.edu/2017symposium/>

Other Symposium Sponsors

