Decolonial Feminist Research

Rebecka Lundgren and Sushmita Mukherjee

Intersection 2023 - South Asia Learning Collaborative Meeting

December 8, 2023

SOUTH ASIA
SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY
LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Objectives of the Listening Session

- **To identify** ways in which evidence generation and utilization can reinforce equitable power structures.
- **To encourage** a culture of reflexivity and curiosity about how research practices might reinforce inequalities and what we can aspire to do to change the situation.
- **To understand** how we experience our relationships as researchers and how to (re)present research participants and their knowledge.

Our **Agenda**

1. Decolonial feminist research (**presentation**)
2. Questioning our power as researchers (**individual reflexive exercise**)
3. Decolonial feminist research processes and principles (**presentation**)
4. What must we stop doing to make progress towards practicing decolonial feminist perspectives? (**small group activity**)
5. Wrap-up

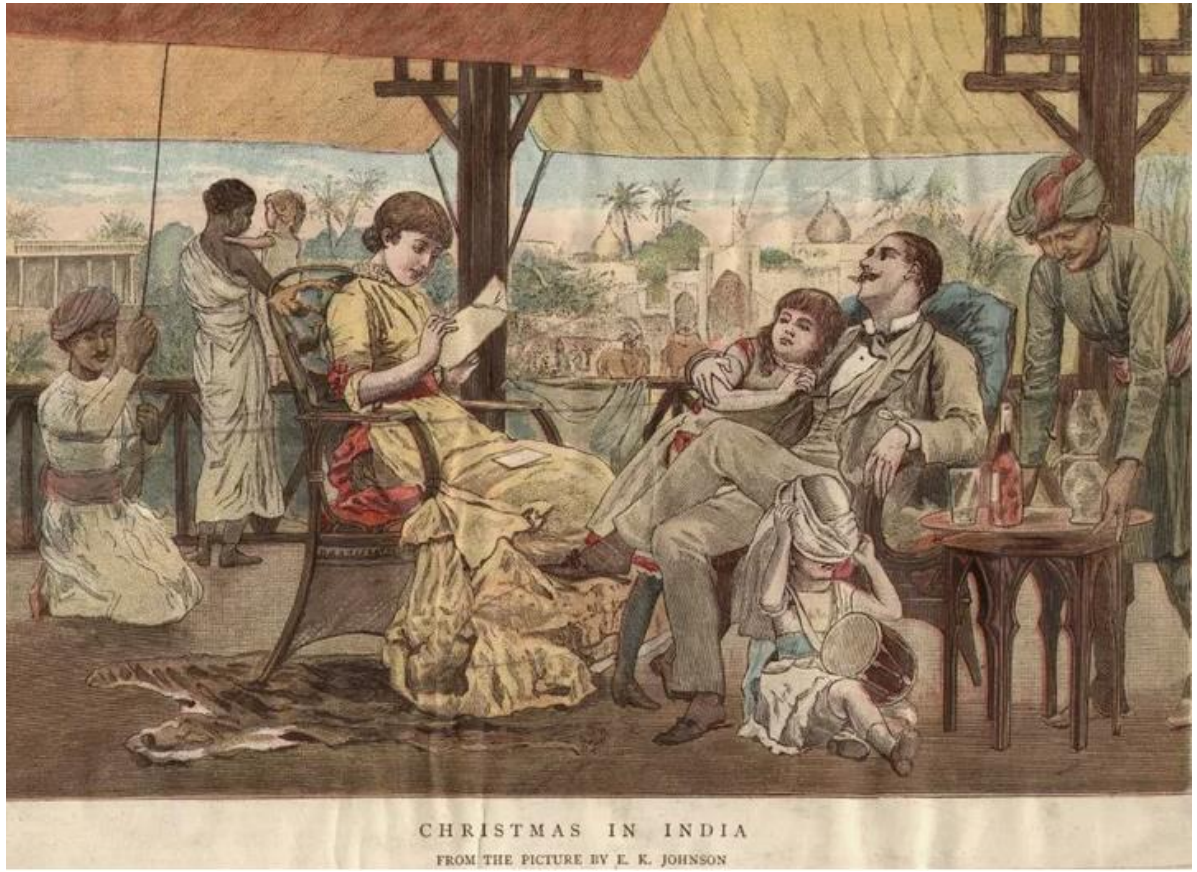
PRESENTATION

1

Decolonial Feminist Research

Colonialism

- Coloniality refers to ‘the pattern of power which has emerged as a result of colonialism’ and is an explicit strategy of epistemological control and domination (Misoczky, 2011: 347).
- Assumption: indigenous communities don’t know how to… [fill the blank – think, use the land, manage themselves, create institutions…] - Idea of a civilizing mission
- Notion that people are ‘different’ and their ‘difference’ from ‘us’ equates to inferiority’
- Difference is symbolized by the color of skin – racism entangled with colonialism
- Gendered ideologies - Idea that actions occur for the ‘good’ of humankind - Desire to understand ‘the Other’



Source: Rischgitz/ Getty Images

Source: George Rinhart/Corbis via Getty Images

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE:

power hierarchies that position the colonizer as superior and the colonized as inferior

- Not valuing community knowledge/expertise
- Assuming what issues are important to communities
- Using a “Western” worldview as the standard/norm - ‘white gaze’
- Presenting communities as the “Other”
- Righteous tone

Colonialism in Research

- Top-down, North-South, donor-driven agendas
- Research not always relevant to communities
- Local organizations/actors collecting data for others to analyze
- International actors, e.g., consultants as experts
- International actors “building capacity” of local actors
- Different pay and benefits structures between international and local actors
- Language used about communities (e.g., marginalized, vulnerable, beneficiary)
- Idea of progressing towards being ‘modern’ or less ‘traditional’
- Idea of research as objective and neutral
- Lack of consideration of positionality
- Assumptions about how change occurs (theory of change diagrams)

Decolonial

- Decolonizing-> originally about a colonial power withdrawing/being forced to withdraw and the colonized country becoming independent.
- Now -> a way of deconstructing/dismantling colonial ideologies

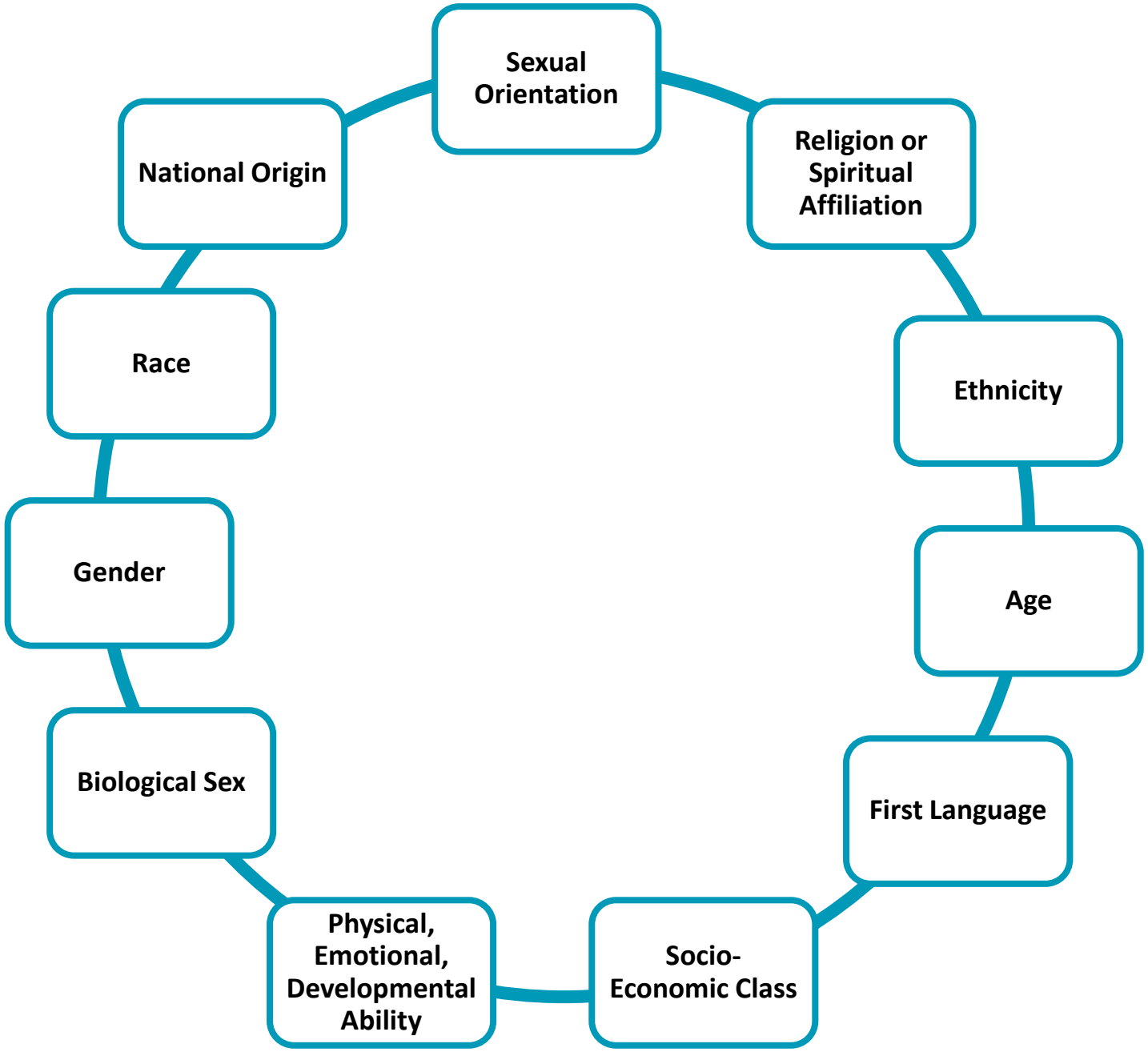
- Decolonizing movement suggests that we can't completely dismantle but can minimize impacts of colonialism. This is about acknowledging the negative impacts and seeking to reduce ongoing negative impact.
- First need to identify the impacts then develop strategies to minimize impact.
- Link to localization

Feminist Principles in Research

- Challenging power hierarchies throughout the research process
- Bringing benefit to participants
- Situating descriptions of people's lives in their material conditions, power hierarchies, identities – situated, contextual not homogenous
- Reflexivity – critical reflection on power and positionality
- Reciprocity – give and take
- Ethics of care – emphasizing interpersonal relationships, connections with people are grounded in relationships, valuing the relationship over the data
- Knowledge of communities is centered, not Western 'theories'.
- No such thing as 'objective' knowledge
- Researcher is not neutral

Q:

How do you identify yourself as a researcher?



INDIVIDUAL REFLEXIVE EXERCISE

2 Questioning our Power as Researchers

Q: In what ways do you see colonial behaviors in your research?

PRESENTATION

3

Decolonial Feminist Research Processes and Principles

When doing research, consider:

CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC

- Assumption that something is a problem
- Willingness to consider unexpected data

STRATEGIES TO RESPOND

- Prioritize needs and voices of communities
- Frame problems with humility
- Identify the positionalities of ourselves and others involved in the research

WHO PRODUCES KNOWLEDGE

- Who is identified as being a ‘source’ of data – and who is left out
- How we define ‘expertise’ is often tied to whose knowledge we value

STRATEGIES TO RESPOND

- Value knowledge of communities
- Choose methods that create opportunities for community voices to be heard and for power hierarchies to be challenged

When doing research, consider:

POSITIONALITY AND POWER

- Power hierarchies associated with who collects data
- Data collection positioned as low-skill, while analysis done by experts
- Decision-making about data often occurs at some distance from the location where the data was collected.
- Often, we neglect to think about the power hierarchies those who collect data
- Trust-building with participants

STRATEGIES TO RESPOND

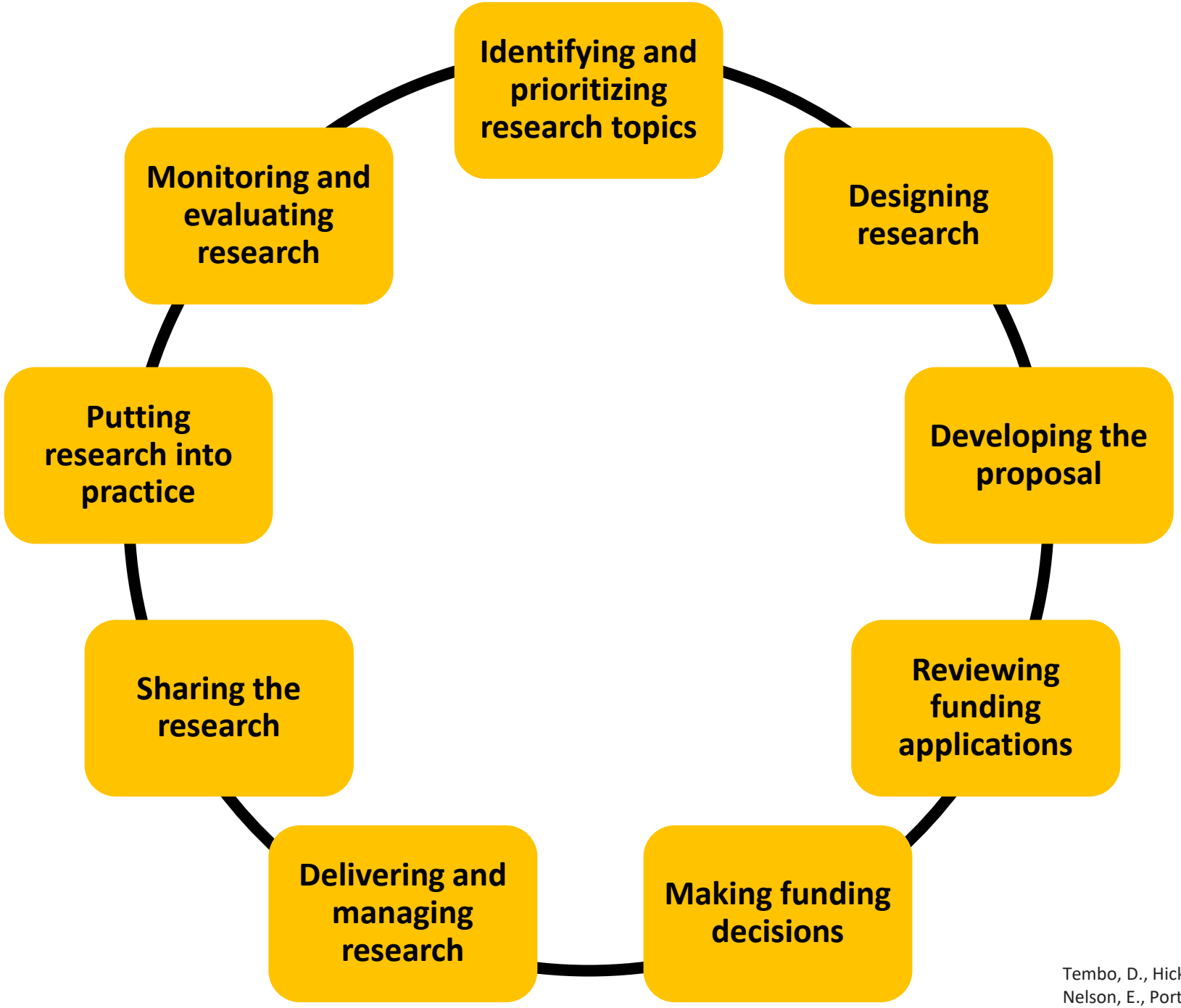
- Ensure those collecting data reflect on their positionality
- Reduce the impact of power imbalances with communities

INCLUSION AND REPRESENTATION

- Difference between informing people, consulting them, and creating space for them to make decisions
- Problems with how issues are represented by those outside the context, how stories are presented, how people's accounts are summarized and simplified
- Not just about words but the visuals

STRATEGIES TO RESPOND

- Intentionally involve communities in analysis, validation
- Work closely to ensure language and visual representations of communities reflect dignity reduce reinforcement of colonial power hierarchies



Tembo, D., Hickey, G., Montenegro, C., Chandler, D., Nelson, E., Porter, K., ... & Rennard, U. (2021).

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

4

What Must We Stop Doing to Make Progress?

SOUTH ASIA
SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY
LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Q: What must we stop doing to make progress towards practicing decolonial feminist perspectives?

5 MINUTES

Make a list of all the things you can do as a researcher to achieve the **worst** result imaginable with respect to power as a researcher and knowledge production and the representations of participants and their knowledge.

10 MINUTES

Go down this list item by item and ask yourselves, ‘Is there anything that we are currently doing that in any way, shape, or form resembles this item?’ Be brutally honest to make a second list of all your counterproductive activities/processes/ procedures.

10 MINUTES

Go through the items on your second list and decide what first steps will help you stop what you know creates undesirable results.

25 minutes

5 Summary and What's Next

Relevant Reading

[Becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer: Addressing the complexities of positionality and representation]

Management Learning

[Decolonising global health in the Global South by the Global South: turning the lens inward]

BMJ Global Health

[Effective engagement and involvement with community stakeholders in the co-production of global health research]

BMJ

Being a decolonial feminist researcher requires an ethical commitment to decolonising our ways of 'seeing and doing.'

Manning (2018) p. 323

SOUTH ASIA
SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY
LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Thank you.