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# Towards a Postcolonial Research Ethics in Comparative and International Education

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# **Towards a Postcolonial Research Ethics in Comparative and International Education**

The article considers the relevance of postcolonial theory for understanding research ethics in Comparative and International Education (CIE). An understanding of postcolonial theory is outlined, which forms a basis for setting out a postcolonial research ethics in CIE. It is argued that postcolonial theory makes a distinctive contribution to understanding of research ethics in CIE by: providing a critique of dominant approaches; an understanding of the postcolonial condition in education as a context for research ethics; an appreciation of postcolonial research ethics as emancipatory; and, a view of postcolonial research ethics as being situated and dialogic in nature.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; research ethics; comparative and international education

## **Introduction**

Although there has been a proliferation of critical literature on research ethics in educational and social research, only limited attention has been given to a consideration of the place of research ethics in comparative and international education (CIE). For example, recent influential texts on research in CIE (see for example Bray, Crossley et al. 2003, Phillips and Schweisfurth 2007, Cowan and Kazamias 2009) barely make reference to research ethics. This is surprising given the attention that has traditionally been given to issues of researching across cultures within CIE, the complex ethical issues that this raises and the deep-seated nature of power and inequality implicit in researching in postcolonial settings. Further, there has been only a limited attempt to apply insights from postcolonial theory to research ethics in education (see for example,

Smith 1999, Chilisa 2009)<sup>1</sup>. This is despite the growth in literature that has applied postcolonial theory to a broader understanding of education in the postcolonial world (see for example, Tikly 1999, Crossley and Tikly 2004, Hickling-Hudson, Mathews et al. 2004, Coloma 2009).

The aim of the article is to critically consider the possibilities of postcolonial theory for understanding research ethics in CIE and to outline the basis for a postcolonial approach to research ethics. The article starts by outlining a view of postcolonial theory and of the postcolonial condition as the basis for deconstructing dominant approaches to research ethics whilst the second part of the article explores in more depth the implications of postcolonialism for research ethics.

### **Postcolonial theory, ethics and social justice**

This section provides a broad view of postcolonial theory by summarizing key ideas elaborated elsewhere (Tikly 1999, Tikly 2001, Tikly 2004, Tikly 2011). However, postcolonial theory is not singular or coherent. This account is, therefore, necessarily partial by presenting a particular ‘take’ on postcolonial theory and of the postcolonial condition in order to advance an understanding of research ethics later in the article.

Postcolonial theory emerged in its current form in the cultural turn of the social sciences, although it draws on a longer tradition of critical, anti-colonial writing and theorising (Young 2001). Developed in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, it operates as a ‘critical idiom’ (Loomba 2005) for interrogating the discursive basis of Western rule. The value of postcolonial scholarship for CIE is that through focusing on the discursive basis of education in former colonising and colonised countries, it allows

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<sup>1</sup> Tuhewei-Smith deploys key themes in postcolonial theory, whilst remaining ambivalent to postcolonial theory as developed in the Western academy.

the cultural effects of a Western education on non-Western cultures to be analysed in depth.

However, this focus on the cultural and discursive level does not imply that the material, (including the economic and political) dimensions of the postcolonial condition are insignificant or lack ethical implications. Nor is it being implied that there is nothing ‘outside of the text’ as some forms of poststructuralism suggest. Rather, as argued elsewhere (Tikly 2001, Tikly 2004, Tikly 2011) education in the postcolonial world is shaped by a range of economic and political forces at a number of scales including the local, national, regional and global; alongside other characteristics of contemporary globalisation including climate change and the spread of global diseases such as HIV/ AIDS. These more material aspects provide a powerful rationale for a consideration of research ethics as they ‘articulate’ with the cultural/ discursive level (Morley and Chen 1996). It is through discourse that the material world is interpreted and understood and unequal power relationships are legitimated. Thus ethical discourses are more than simply words or language. They legitimise social practices that have material effects.

Much postcolonial theory has elaborated the ‘postcolonial condition’ i.e. a global shift in the cultural, political and economic arrangements that arise from the experiences of European colonialism, both in former colonised and colonising countries. There has been much debate about the meaning of the term and particularly the use of suffix ‘post’ given that some countries continue to be colonised and that many formerly colonised countries retain large inequalities between postcolonial elites and the majority of the population. It is also important not to present a homogenous and essentialised understanding of the postcolonial condition as it includes a plurality of development paths and dynamic cultural contexts. Crucially, colonised and formerly

colonised groups continue to struggle against its effects. Furthermore, the postcolonial condition is also characterised by the emergence of a ‘new imperialism’ (Harvey, 2003; 2009; Tikly, 2004) by which is meant the economic, political, military and cultural hegemony of the USA and its Western allies within contemporary globalisation<sup>2</sup>. For all of these reasons, it is more helpful to consider postcolonialism as a general *process* of disengagement of formerly colonized countries from European colonialism and classical imperialism and their reinsertion into the flows and networks that characterize contemporary globalisation<sup>3</sup>.

The view of postcolonialism as a process has implications for the way that colonialism is *understood* and narrativised. In keeping with postmodern and, in particular poststructuralist emphases, postcolonial theory provides a critique of the ‘metanarratives’ of the European enlightenment. Writers such as Foucault and Derrida have proved particularly influential. This re-narrativisation reconceptualises colonialism, not as a sub-plot of some ‘grander’ (European) narrative, but as a violent process central to the development of globalisation.

This decentering of European thought is highly significant to any consideration of ethics. Western ethics are comprised of different ethical imperatives, including those arising from religious and more secular humanist traditions with differential influence in colonial and postcolonial settings. However, within the European enlightenment a particular universalist view of ethics has predominated and has subordinated other

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<sup>2</sup> Although as Harvey (2011) has observed, this hegemony is increasingly challenged by the emergence of the BRIC economies accompanied by a new form of colonial relationship between China and Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, we use the term ‘postcolonial’ to describe a general condition rather than ‘post-colonial’, which might imply that colonialism is ‘over’.

Western and especially non-Western ethical traditions. This has been linked to a trajectory of Western humanist thought, which has taken as its normative point of reference the white, affluent European male subject. Although claiming to be ‘universal’, key writers in the field of moral philosophy were influenced by notions of biological and cultural difference and hierarchy such that non-Western cultures were assumed to lack sufficient capacity for reason for inclusion within a universal ethic (Goldberg 1993, Manzo 1997). Moral philosophy and Western humanism have also been premised on a notion of ethical rationalism (Christians 2007) that separates reason from emotion and means from ends. It is through the coupling of an instrumentalist view of science and progress to a process of *othering* of non-Western cultures that Western humanism has been complicit not only in colonialism but other barbarisms of the modernist era including slavery, war and genocide, all in the cause of ‘progress’. The incisive critique of enlightenment ethics by postcolonial, poststructuralist and feminist scholars raises the question as to whether any post-enlightenment universal ethic is possible.

Foucault and his followers argue that there have been significant shifts in Western humanist influence in the development of globalisation in the post World War II period, linked to the development of a new neo-liberal governmentality (the overall art or rationality of government in Western liberal democracies). This shift has seen a growing emphasis on *homo economicus* as the subject of ethical discourse, i.e. the individual economic agent unfettered by the state, free to pursue his or her own economic interests. This individualistic model contrasts with the models of economic/social actors posited in many non-western traditions. In this way, development economics with their associated ethics show a distinct cultural bias from their inception (Escobar 1995, Tikly 2003, Tikly 2004).

Writing within a postcolonial perspective, the ideas of the sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos are particularly helpful for framing a discussion about research ethics and are therefore considered in some detail. Santos has identified mechanisms by which Western knowledge claims the power to exclude other approaches to understanding the world as though they were ‘non-existent’. These include the assertion of modern science and high culture, as the sole criteria for truth and aesthetic quality; a Western, linear view of time, development and progress; the classification and naturalisation of differences which are used to legitimise hierarchies; universalising assumptions of Western knowledge and ethics that exclude local contexts and realities; and, a ‘logic of productivity’ in which economic growth becomes the sole criteria through which development and progress are evaluated. These logics combine in a production of absence or non-existence as ignorant, backward, inferior, local or particular, and unproductive or sterile (Santos 2012; 52-3), each imbued with ethical deficit.

Linked to the decentering of modernist metanarratives has been an ‘epistemic shift’. This involved going beyond the old ‘binary oppositions’ of ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’, ‘First’ and ‘Third World’ and ‘Black’ and ‘White’ and the development of more contingent and complex views of colonial culture, politics and identities, achieved, for example by: focusing on the ‘unstable’, ‘hybrid’ and ‘fractured’ nature of colonial and postcolonial identities (Bhabha 1984, Bhabha 1996); the complex interplay of colonialism, patriarchy and caste in the formation of different subject positions amongst the colonized (Spivak 1988); and, processes of transcultural ‘mixing’ and exchange, alongside the complexities of diasporic identification (see Gilroy 1993 for example). The formation of exiled and refugee communities have contributed to this process. The fluidity and historicity of cultures and of cultural relations is paramount in



this approach, thus challenging views of cultures as hermetically sealed, essentialised, and static entities. This is important for our purposes because it complicates and liquefies the relationship between ethics and any particular cultural or intellectual tradition. It requires ethics open to the influence of other ethical traditions and how different views on ethics, even within one cultural tradition, may draw on traditional as well as modern and postmodern ethical values and outlooks.

This mixture of ethical sources and influences has underpinned the struggle against Western colonialism and imperialism and inspired contemporary postcolonial thought. Young (2001) provides a detailed account of the development of anti-colonial thought that highlights the interplay between indigenous intellectual traditions and aspects of Western thought in anti-colonial writing (see also Ashcroft et al's (1989) collection of essays, *The Empire Writes Back*).

Ghandi, for example, criticised Western modernity with its reliance on violence as inherently 'evil' and counter-posed it with ancient Indian civilisation and the non-violent tradition which he characterised as 'holy' (Gandhi 1910). He combined Indian ethics with aspects of Western thought from the ideas of Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreu and Emerson. Steve Biko's conception of black consciousness contrasted an African humanism based on collectivity and a spirit of *Ubuntu* (togetherness) with the individualism of 'White' (European) civilisation. Black consciousness was also influenced by Christian ethics (as re-interpreted by Black theologians). Similarly ideas of African socialism (Nkrumah, Kaunda, Diop) and of self-reliance (Nyerere) combined an inherently communal African ethic with a reading of Western Marxism and an analysis of the class-based nature of African societies. These combinations of different

traditions not only challenge the colonised/coloniser binary but also generate the richness and diversity of ethics in anti-colonial thought.

This early wave of postcolonial literature, written in national struggles for liberation, contains a nascent alternative view of humanism, often developed in antithesis to Western humanism. This has provided a point of departure for some postcolonialists from Eurocentric postmodernist and poststructuralist thought (Parry 1995) that seeks only to deconstruct the effects of knowledge/ power and involves self-consciously building on previous anti-colonial discourses to conceptualize alternatives based on emancipatory visions of social justice. We will argue that this shift provides a starting point for reconceptualising a postcolonial research ethics.

There remains a tension, however, within postcolonial theory between the deconstructive aspect which focuses on a deep suspicion of Western humanism and the more 'reconstructive' aspects which focus on developing alternatives to colonial rule and elaborating visions of social justice. Some of these tensions are evoked by the reality that many attempts at 'reconstruction' in the post-independence periods have not only served to perpetuate inequality but in some instances have been associated with acts of cruelty, war and genocide in the name of 'progress' that echo excesses committed under colonialism. These tensions may be amplified by the continuing hegemony of Western forms of knowledge and views of ethics as part of a new global discourse of 'development' (Escobar 1995). The persistence of these tensions raises important philosophical questions about whether it is possible to conceive of any epistemological basis on which a postcolonial and emancipatory ethics can be based.

One possible starting point is Santos' view of developing an *epistemology of the South*. For Santos this involves several moves. Firstly, it involves replacing a sociology of absences (above) with a 'sociology of emergences' so that the 'emptiness of the future according to linear time (an emptiness that may be all or nothing) becomes a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one time, and constructed in the present by means of activities of care' (Santos 2012: 54). Drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch, Santos describes the sociology of emergences as the inquiry into alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities. It acts both on possibilities (potentiality) and on capacities (potency). It has an ethical core that is linked to a vision of what *ought to be*. As it involves an anticipatory consciousness, it must - unlike Western rationalist thought - also necessarily involve a theory of emotions.

Linked to this is a concept of the *ecology of knowledges* (Santos 2007). This starts with the assumption that all practices and human relations not only imply more than one form of knowledge but also concomitantly imply ignorance. Santos notes the excessive overreliance on practices based on scientific knowledge in modern capitalist society but without pressing for outright rejection of scientific 'rationalist' knowledge. Santos sees the 'remedy' to the supposed superiority of scientific discourse as lying in greater cognitive justice in which the majority of the population are granted access to hegemonic, scientific knowledge and then using this in counter-hegemonic ways. This also involves recognising alternative forms of knowledge and promoting interdependence between scientific and non-scientific knowledges.

For Santos, the development of an ecology of knowledge rests on the possibility of inter-cultural *translation* that allows for ‘mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible’ (2012: 58). This translation of knowledges is presented as *diatopical hermeneutics* making the ecology of knowledges possible. Translation between two or more cultures, involves identifying their isomorphic (distinctive) concerns and the different answers they provide. Diatopical hermeneutics stem from the idea that all cultures are incomplete and may, therefore, be enriched by engaging in dialogue with or confronting other cultures. As Pannikar, the originator of the concept, explains, diatopical hermeneutics stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other *without assuming that the other has the same basic self-understanding* (Pannikar 2012).

However, Santos argues that recognising the relativity of cultures does not require adopting relativism as a philosophical stance. It does imply, however, ‘conceiving of universalism as a Western particularity whose supremacy as an idea does not reside in itself, but rather in the supremacy of the interests that support it’ (p.23). Diatopical hermeneutics presupposes a ‘negative universalism’: the impossibility of cultural completeness.

International treaties on human rights are an example of a universalizing Western discourse. This is significant because human rights are often considered as underpinning research ethics by scholars in CIE (see below). Santos contends that ‘as long as human rights are conceived of as universal, they will operate as a globalized localism, a form of globalization from above’ (Santos 2002: 44). This matters because arguably human rights policies have for the most part been at the service of the economic and geopolitical interests of the hegemonic capitalist states, the same states that have legitimated ‘unspeakable atrocities’ revealing ‘revolting double standards’

(p.45). The distinctive Western liberal mark in human rights discourses was established in the universal declaration of 1948, ‘which was drafted without the participation of the majority of the peoples of the world; in the exclusive recognition of individual rights, with the only exception of the collective right to self-determination which, however, was restricted to the peoples subjected to European colonialism; in the priority given to civil and political rights over economic, social and cultural rights; and in the recognition of the right to property as the first and, for many years, the sole economic right’ (p. 45). Crucially, Santos also recognizes what he describes as the emancipatory potential of human rights discourses but realizing this potential involves a process of translation.

This process of translation needs to start from the recognition that all cultures have distinctive conceptions of human dignity that effectively legitimize different forms of equality and inequality. Expanding on the work of translation, Santos offers an example of developing a common understanding of human dignity by bringing together the Western concept of human rights, the Islamic concept of *umma* and the Hindu concept of *dharma*. (One could add to this the African concept of *Ubuntu*). He identifies a common concern across different cultural traditions for productive life, even if expressed in different ways: for example, in the modern capitalist conceptions of ‘development’, in Gandhi's conception of *swadeshi* or the indigenous peoples' conception of *Sumak Kawsa*. Whereas the capitalist conceptions of development are based on conventional economics and on the idea of infinite growth resulting from gradually subjecting practices and knowledges to the logic of the market, *Swadeshi* and *Sumak Kawsay*, are based on the idea of sustainability and reciprocity respectively. This process of translation is enabled by a dynamic view of culture that envisages reiterative processes of cross-cultural translation in response to each encounter with diversity. It

is possible to envisage processes of translation taking place at different scales from the global through the regional, national, local and pertinent to this article, in inter-cultural research partnerships. Thus, in CIE research, it is not only the subject of the research that is under ethical scrutiny but the ethics that inform the research process.

Santos' ideas are significant for the model of situated and dialogic ethics we develop in the second part of the paper. Also significant here is the work of the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. Although situated outside of the broader postcolonial literature we argue that Amartya Sen's ideas about human capabilities (Sen 1999), on identity (Sen 2006) and his more recent work on justice (Sen 2009) address key issues identified by postcolonial critics. For Sen, the usual objective of development, namely economic growth, is replaced by the realisation of human freedom. Consequently, 'development' ought to be principally concerned with the nurturing of capabilities (opportunities) that individuals and groups require to realize their valued 'functionings' (beings and doings). These necessarily differ according to cultural context but might include being well-nourished, mobile, well-educated, autonomous and independent, safe, respected, having paid work and taking part in democratic debate etc. Central to Sen's ideas is that realization of human capabilities through processes of informed public dialogue at a number of levels. This in turn relies on a comparative rather than a universal view of ethics in arbitrating between different justice claims that may rest on different assumptions.

Of particular interest for our discussion is the possibility that Sen's view of reason as the basis for moral judgment. Sen demonstrates that, far from being a 'Western' concept, the use of reasoned judgment has been central to Eastern intellectual

traditions and integral to ideas about justice<sup>4</sup>. Sen also highlights that there need be no conflict between the use of emotions and reason in making value judgments. Thus ‘there is no particular ground for denying the far-reaching role of instinctive psychology and spontaneous responses. They can supplement each other, and in many cases an understanding of the broadening and liberating role of our feelings can constitute good subject matter for reasoning itself’ (Sen 2011: 128). Like Santos’ work on translation, this view of justice supports the desirability of a dialogical view of ethics.

Implicit in both Santos and Sen’s ideas about the possibility for cross-cultural dialogue on ethical issues but not elaborated in detail is the question of humanism. Humanism is important in any discussion of ethics (including research ethics) because it speaks to the agency of the ethical subject (what it is to be and to act ethically). As we have seen, much poststructuralist thought is not only highly critical of Western humanism but is also deeply suspicious of the whole idea of humanism. The influence of Foucault’s work on many poststructuralist and postcolonial writers concerning how human subjectivity is constituted through disciplinary institutions and discourses has been particularly significant in this regard<sup>5</sup>. Many postcolonial scholars have, however, attempted to set out what can be defined as a new or ‘critical humanism’ that, protects the possibility of emancipatory agency.

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<sup>4</sup> Sen discusses at length the use of the concept *rahi aql*, the ‘rule of the intellect’, considered by the Muslim Mughal Emperor Akbar to be the basis for assessing differing ethical arguments put forward by different religious groups.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault claimed that central to his work was the objective to ‘create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1994: 326).

For Edward Said, a new humanism must ‘excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn’t make it onto the reports...’ (Said 2004: 81-2). Similarly, Paul Gilroy sets out a vision of a ‘new cosmopolitanism’ based on a planetary humanism. As he explains, ‘The planetary consciousness I am invoking was a precious result of anticolonial conflict. It is now a stimulus to multi-culture and a support for anti-racist solidarity. It was linked to a change of scale, a wholesale reimagining of the world which had moral and political dimensions’ (Gilroy 2006: 289). Building on Gilroy’s ideas of a new cosmopolitanism and in keeping with Santos’ ideas about translation, Mbembe and Posel argue that

This new humanism is underpinned, too, by the insistence that debates about democracy should move beyond simply the idea of rights (important as these are), to engage the question of obligation. In a politics of hope, which revives our commitment to human dignity for all, we need to grapple with the question: what are the obligations and responsibilities which a democracy requires of its citizens, as much as of its state’ (Mbembe and Posel 2005: 284).

The view of critical humanism is important for our purposes because it provides the possibility of moral and ethical agency linked to social justice and inter-cultural dialogue as the basis for the development of research ethics.

### **Towards a postcolonial research ethics in education**

In this section, we critically apply our reading of postcolonial theory to research ethics in CIE. In particular, we consider how postcolonial theory contributes to a critique of Western research ethics; provides a context for understanding research ethics as an aspect of the postcolonial condition; and, a basis for developing an emancipatory, situated and dialogical view of research ethics appropriate for the postcolonial era.



Kitchener and Kitchener (2009) present a five level model of ethics in social research. This involves consideration of ethics from the point of view of individual action, ethical rules that govern decision making (including for example the ethical guidelines that govern educational research), ethical principles that underpin rules, ethical theory that provides a framework for interpreting and explaining guidelines and rules and meta-ethics that explores the meaning of ethics itself. The current discussion is largely at the level of ethical theory. We will continue at this level as we consider how postcolonial scholarship contributes to a critique of Western research ethics in favour of situated and dialogic approaches to research ethics. We draw extensively on critical (emancipatory) literature on research ethics whilst rejecting some of the underlying assumptions. In particular, much of this literature presents too homogenous a view of culture and does not take sufficient account of the more global and transversal ethical issues that are so important for CIE research.

### **Postcolonial theory and the critique of dominant approaches to research ethics**

We have argued in the previous section that, postcolonial theory provides the basis for a distinctive critique of dominant approaches to research ethics in CIE. Although much CIE research does not make explicit its ethical basis, it is possible to identify two distinctive approaches. Each has different underlying assumptions about the ethical basis of education and about the research process. We present each approach as an ‘ideal type’ for heuristic reasons. In reality, they may overlap or be conflated in any particular research. We will suggest the assumptions in each represent a point of tension with postcolonial theory and that, furthermore, both are Eurocentric in nature.

The utilitarian, market driven approach is particularly evident in much of the research and evaluation work carried out the World Bank and some aid agencies. Here the

dominant principle or 'ethic' is 'value for money' driven by a utilitarian concern with the effectiveness and efficiency of education. The underlying assumptions are positivist and focus on the 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of the research process. Favoured methodologies reflect these concerns and include, for example, forms of econometric and cost-benefit analysis and randomized control trials. However, whilst presenting the illusion of neutrality much of the research undertaken within this approach can be interpreted as regulatory in nature and linked to neo-liberal governmentality (see also Tikly 2003, Tikly 2004). For Santos, the concern with value for money has the effect of privileging some kinds of research questions and problems whilst silencing others, for example, around indigenous concerns or social justice issues. When used in the context of country or programme evaluations, the utilitarian approach can also drive research governance by insisting value for money principles. Typically, less attention is given to other aspects of research ethics including, for example the nature of the relationship between funders and researchers, within research partnerships or between researchers and researched. Research participants in this approach are viewed principally as informants rather than as active participants in the research process and, in this sense, researchers can be viewed as 'predatory' by co-opting informants to the researchers' purposes (Canella and Lincoln, 2007).

The rights-based approach on the other hand is more characteristic of the approach towards education and educational research sponsored by UN agencies, international and local NGOs. The underlying rationale for research and research questions within this approach is provided by appeals to human rights including children's rights or to associated entitlements or targets (for example, the Millennium Development Goals). A range of methodologies may be used within this approach ranging from quantitative to more interpretative and participatory approaches. The research process itself is more

likely to be governed with reference to explicit code (or codes) of ethics such as those emanating from UNESCO or from research associations or institutional review boards. The common principles underlying these guidelines, including nonmaleficence, beneficence, respect for persons, fidelity and justice arose in the context of the development of Western social science disciplines and share a common origin with human rights discourses in Western moral philosophy (Kitchener and Kitchener 2009)<sup>6</sup>. Whilst, as Santos notes, rights-based approaches (and for that matter Western ethical codes) are often used as a basis for protecting the interests of the most vulnerable and for emancipatory purposes, there is a contradiction between this and their Eurocentric bias. As several commentators have noted (Smith 1999, Grande 2004, Barnes, McCreanor et al. 2009, Chilisa 2009, Cram 2009 for example) Western ethical codes can have the effect of silencing indigenous approaches to ethics. They can also exclude consideration of ethical issues at key stages of the research process, particularly: who is involved in conceptualizing the research and defining research questions; who ‘owns’ the data; and, who benefits from publishing and disseminating research findings (Silka 2009). Canella and Lincoln (2011) give several examples where implementing Western research ethics can appear irrelevant, problematic or have unintended and contradictory consequences in non-Western settings. Many of these scholars have also illustrated the significance of non-Western codes of ethics for educational research.

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<sup>6</sup> Particularly influential here are natural rights theory and versions of deontology. Kitchener, K. and R. Kitchener (2009). *Social Science Research Ethics: Historical and Philosophical Issues*. The Handbook of Social Research Ethics. D. Mertens and P. Ginsberg. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage: 5-22.

## **The postcolonial condition as a context for considering ethics in educational research**

Consideration of the postcolonial condition in education provides a context for identifying issues and questions for research and understanding on-going inequalities in the research process. As with the postcolonial condition more broadly, there have been shifts in the ethical basis of colonial education including the ways in which colonial education has been legitimated with continuity and discontinuity between the colonial and independence periods. A few illustrative examples drawn from a range of postcolonial contexts may suffice to illustrate this shift<sup>7</sup>.

Colonial education was hugely disruptive for native knowledge systems and forms of pre-colonial education, which had their own ethical basis and value system, rooted in pre-colonial economies and social relations. In Africa, for instance as Nyerere (1967) explained in his pamphlet on *Education for Self-Reliance*, classic European-style colonialism and missionary education were justified in relation to the supposed inferiority of the colonised and in relation to an evangelical civilising mission. This existed in a state of tension with a more utilitarian, instrumentalist view of colonial schooling for servicing the colonial economy through developing the necessary basic skills and dispositions of servitude (Nyerere 1967, Altbach and Kelly 1978, Tikly 2003, Kallaway 2009). These dual purposes were evident to education systems introduced by other colonial powers including the French (White 1996) and indeed the Japanese

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the examples here relate to contexts that the authors are more familiar with and the account is necessarily partial.

(Takeshi and Mangan 1997) although there were differences<sup>8</sup>.

Furthermore, within countries that developed as settler colonies, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, countries in the Caribbean and South Africa, the underlying ‘logic’ of Western rule also led to complex and often contradictory policies that were simultaneously assimilationist, exclusionary and segregationist (Altbach and Kelly 1978). Schooling within European countries, such as England, was often used to support the imperial project. Text books often contained racialised stereotypes of the colonised with a curricula that sustained the assumption of European cultural and racial superiority (Mangan 1988, Mangan 1993).

By privileging a Eurocentric curriculum in both colonising and colonised countries, colonial education had the profound and lasting effect of devaluing indigenous cultures, languages and identities for both colonisers and the colonised. It also produced gendered subjects that reflected dominant European patriarchal attitudes (See for example Mohanty 1988, Unterhalter 1991). Colonial education was also highly elitist in nature. This produced a disjuncture between Europeanised elites and the great mass of the colonised population, a disjuncture that continued into the post-independence period.

The moral imperative of education in the formerly colonised world began to shift after independence and the introduction of the new paradigm for ‘development’, introduced

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<sup>8</sup> As these authors explain for example, education under British colonial rule tended to be culturally segregationist whilst under French rule it was assimilationist in orientation. Japanese colonial education has been characterized as having both segregationist and assimilationist aspects.

after the Second World War. The colonial order based on the innate inferiority of the native was transformed by the discourse of ‘development’, which sought to incorporate populations into a new capitalist world order, albeit on the periphery (Tikly 2004).

Education was central to this process. The dominant discourse for educational purposes was human capital theory. Whilst this had a predominantly instrumentalist ethic, namely to produce human capital for the national and global economy, there have been important shifts in emphasis over the years.

In the 1950s, the focus for much education policy was on manpower planning. From the early 1980s and in the wake of the oil shock, the debt crisis and the introduction of structural adjustment lending by the multinational agencies, the emphasis shifted to a focus on the rates of return from investments in different levels and sectors of education. The upshot was the prioritisation of primary education at the expense of higher levels. This has led to a reduction in the capacity of universities in the low-income world to undertake educational research, a point that we return to below (See also Tikly 2003). The hegemonic role of neo-liberal thinking during the 1980s, particularly in the context of the so-called Washington consensus also resulted in the introduction of user fees in education which had a disastrous impact on educational enrolments (Samoff 1994).

The shift towards the post-Washington consensus in the late 1980s meant education increasingly deployed not only to economic growth but to poverty reduction by promoting the health and welfare of populations. Rights-based discourses legitimize dominant economic discourses but also serve as a source of contradiction and tension. The tension is played out between, on the one hand the inegalitarian effects of neo-liberal policies through structural adjustment lending, increasing marketization and privatisation of schooling, in contrast to the more egalitarian aims of the Millennium

Development Goals in education (Tikly 2011, Tikly and Barrett 2011).

The dominance of Western economic thinking, particularly neo-liberalism, has had a profound effect, not only on sustaining inequality in the low income world but also in shaping power relationships between institutions of the global North and South concerning research. It explains the power of the World Bank and other, principally Western-led, donors in determining research agendas. It also provides one explanation for the uneven capacity between Southern and Northern based institutions in conducting educational research with the lack of investment in higher education across the low income countries.

Meanwhile, the increasingly diverse nature of the school-going population in former colonising countries and the struggles of indigenous and immigrant groups to have their cultures, languages and histories recognised have raised ethical questions about how to engage with alterity and difference (Todd 2003). The response has varied depending on the context and has involved a mixture of assimilationist and integrationist policies. More recently, the response to diversity in most Western countries has been by reference to variations of multiculturalism, arguably the preferred approach for managing difference under late capitalism. As many commentators have pointed out, however, this has often failed to challenge the underlying Eurocentric assumptions of the curriculum. There also remain marked differences in outcomes for different ethnic groups reflecting the persistence of institutionalised racism (Ladson-Billings and Gilborn 2004, Banks and Banks 2010). Non-European ethnic groups often continue to be under-represented in Higher Education and other research institutions in Western countries. When combined with the relative poverty of universities in the low income world, this is problematic for a field such as CIE because it reflects and reinforces wider global inequalities as consequences of the colonial legacy. It also further limits the

possibilities for processes of intercultural translation to occur within the research process as we argue below.

### **Postcolonial research ethics as emancipatory**

As Edward Said (above) and others (see for example Hall 1996, Loomba 2005) have pointed out, the emancipatory intention of much postcolonial scholarship has been to bring to the fore the voices and experiences of those who have been historically marginalised by the colonial encounter. These studies have sought to highlight the contribution of indigenous voices to research and the value of their perspectives to an understanding of research ethics. This is significant because it provides a basis for potentially reconstructing research ethics to take account of the interests of historically marginalised groups.

In some instances research ethics are articulated with a critical humanist perspective relating to wider social justice concerns. This is true about Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999) work, which focuses on *Decolonising Methodologies*, and Sandy Grande's (2004) work on *Red Pedagogy*. Both of these texts present a dynamic and fluid view of indigenous cultures, explaining how they have developed in relation to but also resistant to Western hegemony. The texts also present a view of cultures as being overlaid by different forms of inequality and oppression based on gender and class that articulate in complex ways with ethnic identities. In both cases, developing an indigenous approach to research, methodologies and research ethics sees the research process as an instance of critical pedagogy that is inextricably linked to a wider emancipatory project for indigenous groups.

### **A postcolonial perspective on 'situated ethics'**

A product of the cultural turn in the social sciences and the influence of postmodernist



and poststructuralist perspectives has been a growing interest for ‘situated ethics’ and their application to education (Simons and Usher 2000, Piper and Simons 2005, Danaher and Danaher 2008). This approach recognises ‘research is a social practice, or more accurately a variety of social practices, each with its own set of ethical issues’ (Simons and Usher 2000: 2). Accordingly ‘the whole point about a situated ethics is precisely that it is situated, and this implies that it is immune to universalization. A situated ethics is local and specific to particular practices’ (ibid). The pragmatic realities of undertaking research within the limitations of time and funding also tend to focus attention on a situated ethic appropriate to academic partners and the people being researched.

These ideas resonate with some core themes in both postcolonial perspectives and the significance attached to culture and context in much of CIE research (see, for example, Crossley 2000). Further, much of the critical literature on research ethics, including that addressing indigenous and other postcolonial settings, derives its appeal from its attention to the particular and local. Indeed, it often implicitly assumes the local or the nation state as the principle unit of analysis for understanding and interpreting the relevance of indigenous research ethics. Unfortunately, this is also a limitation of this literature because it does not sufficiently explore the ethical implications of unequal power relationships as an aspect of the postcolonial condition and the increasing significance of transverse cultural linkages across local and national boundaries.

From a postcolonial perspective, no approach to research ethics can ever be complete and claims to universalization always need to be treated with suspicion. Nonetheless, this does not preclude imagining research ethics as operating in several ways simultaneously. Such a view is particularly important given the increasingly cross-national and cross-cultural nature of research in CIE. It is possible to imagine, for

example, ethical guidelines evolving at a global level in the context, for example, of the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies and that these would influence and be influenced by guidelines and covenants at the regional, national and local levels. This would involve, however, a different view of ethical guidelines from the hegemonic, regulatory view. Here ethical guidelines would be developed through processes of cross-cultural dialogue (below) and would seek to affirm diversity in ethical thought rather than seek to universalise a homogenised ethic. It would also seek to locate discussion of ethics at the appropriate level within a contextualised understanding of power relationships and of inequality in education (See also Bond 2012).

There is a further sense in which a postcolonial research ethics need to be situated. That is in relation to a contextualised understanding of the research process itself. Part of this understanding would revolve around the politics of partnership in a context where CIE research increasingly takes place in cross-national teams (see for example Silka 2009, Barrett, Crossley et al. 2011). It involves engaging with the complexities of power relationships between researchers and researched in postcolonial settings, if research ethics are to be transformative (Mertens, Holmes et al. 2009). Finally, but very importantly, a situated approach from a postcolonial perspective requires a critical understanding of self in relation to the research process (Cannella and Lincoln 2011). This is to acknowledge in Foucauldian terms the micro-capillarity of power and the complex and contradictory ways in which discourses around research ethics construct the subjectivities of researchers and the researched in relationships of inequality. It is also to affirm the potential for a liberatory agency, in keeping with the critical humanist thrust of postcolonial scholarship.

### **Postcolonial research ethics as dialogical**

The primary methodology for developing a situated ethic ought to be dialogue between the interested parties. A dialogical view of research ethics goes to the heart of the view of postcolonial research ethics presented here. Cannella and Lincoln define a dialogical approach to research ethics in terms of a ‘philosophical concern for the equitable treatment of others, moral examination of self, and particularized understandings and responses that are infused throughout our research practices (engaging in ethical dialogue and negotiation that becomes the core of research practices)’ (Cannella and Lincoln 2011: 216-7). Importantly for our purposes, dialogical ethics can also be seen as a way to conceptualize how a process of dialogical hermeneutics (see above) might occur in the context of the research process. As Hall explains:

Dialogical dialogue begins with the assumption that the other is also an original source of human understanding and that, at some level, persons who enter the dialogue have a capacity to communicate their unique experiences and understandings to each other. . . . . It can proceed only on the basis of a certain trust in the "other *qua* other"--and even a kind of "cosmic confidence" in the unfolding of reality itself. But it should not--indeed cannot--assume a single vantage point or higher view outside the traditions themselves. The ground for understanding needs to be created in the space between the traditions through the praxis of dialogue (Hall 2012: 1).

This view of dialogical ethics has further implications for the conduct of research. For example, it speaks to the importance of human relationships as the basis for the research process. In this regard, it is suggestive of a covenantal rather than a contractual (Brydon-Miller 2009) basis for conceptualising relationships between researchers from different cultural backgrounds and between researchers and researched that is itself the product of an act of translation but would be built on an ethic of trust (Bond 2007), care, human dignity and social justice.

Such an approach would recognize and make explicit, through dialogue, the workings

of power on the subject matter and the research process itself. It would seek to identify key ethical questions at each stage of the research process. Who defines the research questions and in whose interests? How are the roles and responsibilities defined within cross-cultural teams? What are the theoretical and methodological assumptions guiding the research? How can the research be conducted ethically and in the best interests of the researched? Who benefits from the research findings? To what extent can the research contribute to the development of an ecology of knowledges and to an epistemology of the South that can act in the interests of the historically marginalized? Such a dialogic approach is not confined to cross-cultural research. Through actively engaging with the existence of diversity and different human interests based on ethnicity, language, identity, sexuality etc, the research process also becomes an act of a critical pedagogy echoing Freire (1970) and Grande (2004).

## **Conclusion**

Given the dominance of Western thinking, the application of postcolonial theory to research ethics presents profound challenges to researchers and their practices associated with ethical review and research processes. We suggest that a postcolonial perspective can provide a critique of the Western bias in research ethics in comparative education by deepening the existing critical literature through drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions inherent in the postcolonial condition. In contrast to the deconstructivist emphasis within poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches, it can also provide a basis for reconstructing a postcolonial research ethics although this involves moving beyond a poststructural reading of the postcolonial condition to embrace the possibilities of a new critical humanism. A postcolonial approach draws attention to the importance of locating a discussion of research ethics within an account of the postcolonial conditions in former colonised and colonising countries. Extending

the existing critical scholarship, which has tended to focus on the nation state as its primary unit of analysis, a postcolonial perspective can assist in drawing attention to the importance of situating a discussion of research ethics at a number of scales and levels within and between nation states. We have argued that the critical humanist perspective, evident in postcolonial scholarship, can contribute to an emancipatory view of research ethics in comparative education. Furthermore, a dialogical approach to defining research ethics can contribute, in Santos' terms, towards broader processes of inter-cultural translation and the development of an epistemology of the South.

What has been presented is just one reading of postcolonial theory and of the postcolonial condition. Nonetheless, we hope that the article has made a contribution to the emerging critical literature on research ethics in cross-cultural postcolonial settings in ways that will provoke re-consideration of actual practice within the field of comparative education.

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