

## Decolonizing Interpretive Research: A critical bicultural methodology for social change

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper introduces a discussion of decolonizing interpretive research in a way that gives greater salience to and understanding of the theoretical efforts of critical bicultural education researchers over the years. Grounded in educational principles that have been derived from critical social theory, a decolonizing approach to theory building, as exercised by subaltern critical researchers must also be understood as also encompassing an underlying autoethnographic qualitative dimension; in that it is inextricably rooted in the histories and "authority of lived experience" (Teaching to Transgress, hooks, 1994) of the researcher. Hence, bodies of research produced within the context of hegemonic epistemologies and traditional research priorities are analyzed, deconstructed, and reinvented, as we say in the Freirian tradition, in ways that dialectically posit decolonizing meanings to support emancipatory praxis and social change.*

*Keywords: decolonising interpretive research, Freirian tradition, bicultural education*

### INTRODUCTION

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point is to change it (Karl Marx, 1885)*

*For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing—none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit (Paulo Freire, 1989)*

Decolonizing interpretive research is rooted in a critical approach that focuses on creating counterhegemonic intellectual spaces in which new readings of the world can unfold, in ways that lead us toward change, both in theory and practice. True to this underlying revolutionary aim, many bicultural critical qualitative researchers have drawn heavily from the tradition of critical social theory, as was founded, articulated, and evolved through the writings of Marx, Hegel, Gramsci, Lukács, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, Habermas, and others. More specific to the critical pedagogical tradition, progressive and radical educational theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Dewey, Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Apple, Shor, hooks, Kincheloe, and others have both provided inspiration and contributed to defining this important counterhegemonic political project for schooling and society.

However, despite the tendency to speak of critical theory or critical pedagogy as unifying fields of study, the many influences on these traditions are seldom cohesive and, thus, no one view can be positioned as the universal representation or authoritarian voice of the field. Instead, the political sensibilities from which a decolonizing interpretive research has emerged is both highly diverse and resistant to a universalizing language—a language of empirical inquiry that has often

been anchored in dominant epistemologies, which have resulted in the intellectual, social, and material colonization of subaltern populations, generally deemed as other. Hence, it is important to recognize that this discussion, true to its critical pedagogical foundation, can only provide an evolving and broadly defined qualitative understanding of this critical qualitative research methodology—an approach that has generally been perceived as solely a theoretical endeavor. Herein lies an important rationale for the need to provide a discussion of a decolonizing interpretive research methodology; in that, subaltern intellectuals working to critique, redefine, and reinvent dominant theoretical approaches to social phenomenon have often effectively employed this critical approach. Accordingly, the works of critical bicultural interpretive researchers, in particular, have evolved through a critical inquiry process that brushes Western traditional notions of culture, schooling and society against non-Western epistemological traditions—traditions that are anchored and have evolved within their own lived histories of struggle.

Some of the critical bicultural pedagogical works that epitomize this decolonizing research approach include *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Anderson, 1988) *Culture and Power in the Classroom* (Darder 1991/2012), *Red Pedagogy* (Grande 2004), *Indigenous Methodologies* (Smith 1999), *Conflicts in Curriculum Theory* (Paraskeva, 2011), and *Whitecentricism and Linguoracism Exposed* (Orelus, 2013), among others. All of these writings can best be described as both critically interpretive and epistemologically bicultural in nature. Moreover, it is not incidental that all the critical theorists who have authored these bicultural texts are members of historically colonized populations. In that all of them have arrived to their scholarly research anchored to a decolonizing sensibility as bicultural human beings—that is, they have been forced to navigate across the dialectical social terrain of dominant/subordinate tensions and contradictions, as part of their process of survival, as subaltern or subordinate cultural citizens and critical scholars (Darder 1991/2012). Furthermore, the same tensions and struggles of their biculturation process have also shaped them as educators and researchers who have elected to ground their decolonizing theories of schooling upon a critical pedagogical tradition. As such, the underlying ethos of their research has been to bring about, in deliberate and meaningful ways, a fundamental epistemological shift in the production of knowledge and, by so doing, offer a more just and emancipatory vision of the world.

Toward such a decolonizing end, critical bicultural theorists have chosen to engage the dominant literature on pedagogy, curriculum, methodology, and schooling in ways that treat these writings as data to be systematically and qualitatively analyzed, based upon their own (autoethnographic) historical experiences of difference, as both historical subjects in their self-determination and bicultural critical educators in their field. Hence, to consider decolonizing interpretive research that emerges within these instances, as solely a theoretical endeavor, is to ignore and diminish the powerful decolonizing dimension of the qualitative process these theorists bring to their counterhegemonic inquiry and subsequent analysis. Therefore, a decolonizing interpretive approach may be best understood as a deeply subaltern form of qualitative research practice; one which seeks to formidably challenge and disrupt the one-dimensional Eurocentric epistemicides prevalent in traditional theories of schooling and society (Paraskeva, 2011). Thus, there is a significant qualitative dimension at work here; in that it is precisely from an “authority of lived experience” (hooks, 1994) and their deeply subaltern knowledge—generally rendered marginal and irrelevant to mainstream thought—that a decolonizing view of the world is even possible.

Central to the qualitative labor of a decolonizing interpretive approach are radical processes of social inquiry, critique, and cultural reformulation (or reinvention, as Paulo Freire would say) that strike at the very heart of dominant ideologies linked to persistent asymmetrical practices—practices that, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduce classed, racialized, gendered, sexual, abled,

religious, and other social and material formations that sustain fundamental inequalities and exclusions. This research process then entails a multitude of careful (re)readings of the world and of histories, in ways that critically and openly engage what Freire termed the oppressor/oppressed contradiction (Darder, 2015). More importantly, bicultural relationships as they emerge between the subject and object or signifier and signified must be understood as dialectically mediated within the social and material relations of capitalist production. As such, theories of schooling and society here are understood as fundamentally rooted in assimilative official transcripts of society, generally governed by the interests of the wealthy and powerful. More specifically, critical bicultural interpretive researchers labor under a set of significant philosophical and political assumptions inspired by the critical pedagogical research tradition; where all thought understood as:

*... fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society and particular societies are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).*

With all this in mind, decolonizing interpretive research, as discussed here, must be profoundly understood as not only a process of the empowerment of individuals, but more importantly as a systematic political effort to shift in both theory and practice the ways in which we comprehend ourselves and make sense of the world. As such, critical bicultural researchers who embark upon such a process are not only uncompromisingly committed to reinterpreting the world, but to the struggle for the reinvention of social and material conditions of everyday life. Inherent here is a dynamic and evolutionary understanding of knowledge as informed by the radicalization of consciousness—a revolutionary social process, anchored in history and lived experience (Darder, 2015). Moreover, there is no illusive claim of neutrality in the research design and execution of decolonizing interpretive research, in that its fundamental purpose and aim is to serve as a critical bicultural epistemological tool in the transformation of schooling and society.

### **PRINCIPLES THAT INFORM A CRITICAL APPROACH**

*By applying a critical pedagogical lens within research, we create an empowering qualitative research, which expands, contracts, grows, and questions itself within the theory and practice examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)*

As the discussion above suggests, decolonizing interpretive research is well grounded upon critical bicultural principles of knowledge construction (Darder 1991/2012), in concert with the intellectual traditions of critical social theory as first articulated by the proponents of the Frankfurt

school; and then later reformulated by radical educational theorists as critical pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> It is helpful here to provide a brief overview of the principles that inform the critical epistemological underpinnings of this research approach. At the heart, critical principles counter classical positivist approaches to the study of human phenomenon. This points toward dismantling traditional Western philosophical assumptions and values of empiricism associated with legitimate forms of knowledge construction. These include research conclusions that privilege reasoning shaped by an underlying belief in the superiority of an either/or, linear, reductionist, hierarchical, concrete, object/subject or nature/human separation, and neutral, decontextualized, ahistorical, and apolitical methodologies in the ways we construct knowledge about social phenomenon.

Accordingly, a decolonizing interpretive approach to knowledge construction is often considered a meta-process of investigation, in that it involves the interrogation and disruption of currently held values, beliefs, and assumptions and from this systematic interrogation and disruption a move toward a bicultural reformulation of how the social phenomena of oppressed populations is understood. Again this bicultural research methodology is intentionally meant to challenge mainstream social structures of inequalities that perpetuate racialized, gendered, economic, sexual, and other forms of social exclusions that persist within education and the larger society. In the process, decolonizing interpretive research seeks to unveil and destabilize the existing structures of power that perpetuate the material and social oppression of the most vulnerable populations.

True to its Marxist intellectual foundation, this form of critical inquiry does not seek to simply describe or interpret the world based on traditional notions, but rather encompasses an underlying commitment to the conceptual rethinking of the norm, as a qualitative process of analysis. Major assumptions that inform this critical bicultural process of inquiry are directly linked to ten principles tied to this perspective, which are concerned with the mediation of power relations in society; the acknowledgement of the manner in which privilege and wealth impact all types of inequalities; recognizes that all ideas or truths unfold amid particular forms of ideology; and, as such, dominant research epistemologies are implicated in the persistent reproduction of social exclusions and disempowerments tied to historical and contemporary systems of human oppression.

It is worth restating that to articulate or define a critical educational theory in a definitive manner is never an easy endeavor, given that the many theorists (Freire 1971; Giroux 1981,1983; McLaren 1986; Shor, 1987; Darder, 1991; hooks, 1994; Bauman, 1995; Carlson & Apple, 1998; Kellner, 1995; Grande 2004; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Kahn 2010) who have contributed to its development have been reticent and, rightly so, to posit what might be perceived as a simplistic recipe in our understanding of this deeply complex field of study. Nevertheless, through a careful analysis of the literature in the field, efforts have been made to assist novice educators and researchers, approaching the literature for the first time, to gain a better sense of the underlying critical principles that inform and drive its epistemological directions. It is precisely from such critical pedagogical efforts that principles for conducting a decolonizing interpretive analysis<sup>2</sup> and can be offered here. Hence, in brief, the critical bicultural pedagogical lens that underlies decolonizing interpretive research may include a variety of aspects that speak to the following principles. Moreover, it is these critical principles that inform the decolonizing textual analysis undertaken in the development of critical bicultural reformulations of dominant or

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<sup>1</sup> See the historical discussion of critical pedagogy in the introduction to the *Critical Pedagogy y Reader* (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of the principles of critical research is based on the introduction to the *Critical Pedagogy Reader* (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009), where critical pedagogical principles are defined.

colonizing educational theories, in order to support and sustain a genuine process of social change, in both theory and practice.

### ***Cultural Politics***

All research is conducted and functions within a cultural context that is shaped by the cultural norms and acceptable boundaries of legitimate knowledge as connoted by the dominant culture. The purpose of critical research then is to function as a culturally democratizing and emancipatory epistemology that recognizes the manner in which cultural politics are implicated in the process of both domination and subordination. As such, the practice of research is understood as a political act and, thus, represents a terrain of struggle over the definition and control of knowledge and material resources. Accordingly, the role of critical researchers is understood as that of cultural workers.

### ***Political Economy***

Researchers traditionally function within the values and norms that support the political and economic interests of the powerful. With this in mind, the political economy and its impact upon the construction of knowledge is clearly acknowledged. Class relations are, thus, seen as central to understanding the manner in which educational researchers develop a sense of their purpose and see their positionality within society. Moreover, critical researchers maintain that a system of meritocracy and economic inequalities is directly linked to the production of research; and, as such, wittingly or unwittingly functions to preserve asymmetrical relations of power within institutions and the society at large.

### ***Historicity of Knowledge***

For critical researchers, all knowledge is understood as both historical and contextual, where often the reification of knowledge renders historical events or states of affairs as permanent, natural and common sense phenomenon. The immutable myths of structural conditions of inequality are best challenged through bringing the power of historicity to bear on the investigation of human phenomenon. Likewise, critical researchers understand themselves and their “subjects” as historical beings who, simultaneously, shape and are shaped by historical conditions that inform the contemporary moment. Thus, the personal histories of researchers and their “subjects” are always implicated in the research process and, because this is so, researchers begin their study of inequalities from the definitions provided by those with whom they seek to learn.

## **DIALECTICAL VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge is understood in the critical research tradition as dynamic and reconstructive. It is never seen as absolute or purely objective, but instead always as both contextual and partial in nature. Critical research seeks to disrupt the traditional binaries and dichotomies (i.e. humans/nature; mind/body, etc.) and hierarchical notions (i.e., elitism, privilege) of the world. And so, oppositional elements function within a continuum of tensions that confront and challenge what Paulo Freire (1970) called “limit-situations”, which can also open up new possibilities of interaction between human beings and the world. This speaks to an epistemology of knowledge construction where contradictory elements and tensions linked to the negation of oppositionalities must be recognized and engaged in efforts to arrive to emancipatory knowledge. More important, critical researchers contend that all knowledge is generated and constructed through the on-going historical relationship of human beings to the world.

### ***Ideology***

A critical epistemology contends that there is always a set of ideas or ideology that shape the frame or lens by which researchers study and make sense of the world. Therefore, all theories and methods of research are linked to particular cultural/class interests and relations of power. Important to note here is that ideology generally exists at the level of unexamined assumptions often considered to be “common sense” or “naturally” existing.

In direct contrast, a critical methodology claims that research is never a neutral enterprise, in that it encompasses the values, beliefs, ethics and contradictions at work in the mainstream of society

### ***Hegemony***

The construction of common-sense notions within the process of research functions effectively to naturalize or normalize particular relations of power and practices that perpetuate paternalism and deceptive notions of impartiality that shroud hegemonic interests. This is made possible in that traditional practices of research, more often than not, serve to legitimate the existing social order, irrespective of contradictions and inequalities that exist. Research practices, then, as part of an ideological machinery (i.e. culture industry) function to preserve the status quo. Such control of the social sphere is said to be hegemonic, the Gramscian sense, in that it is carried out by the unexamined moral and intellectual leadership of researchers, deemed legitimate makers of knowledge.

### ***Critique***

Critique here entails interrogation into the values and beliefs that sustain asymmetrical relations of power. Critical research serves to unveil the hidden epistemologies and logic of power at work within the structure of traditional methodologies and, thus, their research conclusions. In this light, critical research methodologies functions in the interest of deconstructing and reconstructing conditions for transformative practice and social empowerment. A deep realization that people can change their conditions through a critical process of naming their own reality, problematizing their reality, and positing new possibilities for change, is also supported by this approach.

### ***Counter-hegemony***

In the context of a critical methodology research always occurs within a contested terrain of meaning and a competition of ideas, in that power relations are always at work within institutions and society. Hence, critical research must be linked to emancipatory efforts to dismantle oppressive theories and practices, in an effort to transform existing conditions. This calls for a research process that can support the creation of intellectual and social spaces where alternative readings of the world can exist in the interest of liberatory practice and social justice. Inherent to a counterhegemonic principle of research, is the on-going development and engagement with a language of possibility.

### ***Alliance of Theory and Practice***

Critical research methodology must be fundamentally linked to the practical intent of transforming inequities. Research then must be informed by and exist in alliance with practice. The emphasis here is in on what Freire (1970) called *praxis*, where social relations are grounded in a reconstituting and self-generating process of reflection, dialogue, and action. Research then must be understood as having purpose within the context of institutions and everyday life of the most

vulnerable populations. Hence, critical research outcomes must always be linked to the real world; and as such, it must be flexible and fluid, able to shift and move according to the actual conditions that emerge within the context of human interactions. Similarly, research theory is always informed by practice, just as practice always informed by the epistemological loyalties we embrace.

### *Conscientization*

Critical research seeks to support a purposeful and emancipatory interaction between the research and the people or the texts that are engaged in the course of study. Essential to this process is a deep concern for the development of democratic voice, participation, and solidarity within the context of institutions and larger society. Toward this end, knowledge construction of the research process is always understood as a collective process, which engages the on-going interactive process beyond subjective/objective dialectic. Through its dialectical engagement, critical research seeks to support knowing the world and self through a connected, humanizing and democratizing process. At its core, a deliberate intent to support conscientization (*Conscientização*)—the development of social consciousness and an expanding sense of human interactions—is ever-present.<sup>3</sup> Hence, underlying the outcome of critical research is always the question of collective emancipatory action for transforming existing conditions of inequality and injustice in schools and society.

## DECOLONIZING THE INTERPRETIVE

*You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-re-education-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice—you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said (Trinh Min-Ha, 2009)*

Decolonizing interpretive research engages forthrightly with the phenomenon of human oppression and its debilitating historical impact upon the identities, social location, representations, and material conditions of subaltern populations. This notion is further substantiated by Boaventura de Santos Souza (2005) and Joao Paraskeva (2011) in their discussions of *epistemicides*; which points to a process in which knowledges outside the Western purview are not only rendered invisible but either absorbed or destroyed, as is precisely the case when we speak of colonializing epistemologies. Decolonizing Interpretive Research then speaks to a form of oppositional study that undertakes a critical analysis of bodies of knowledge in any field that engage with issues related to the lives and survival of those deemed as *other*. A central concern here is the extent to which a colonizing or what Edward Said (1978) called “orientalist” gaze is implicated in the Western production of research conclusion about the other. Thus, an accompanying question is to what extent do Western political and economic interests distort the perceptions of the other, where an underlying hidden curriculum is the assimilation of the other, in order to preserve the classed, racialized, gendered, and sexual hierarchies or supremacies of Western cultural domination.

It is not surprising then to discover that “the deep underlying assumption that emerges in [traditional] studies is the physical and mental laziness of ‘non-Westerners’ as an immanent

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter three on “conscientização” in Freire & Education (Darder, 2014).

quality that makes them unproductive.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, studies derived from such a deficit perspective, despite well-meaning intentions, ultimately work to undermine the social and material conditions of the oppressed, often leaving them marginalized, exploited, disempowered, and excluded from participation in decision-making about their own lives and from the benefits enjoyed freely by the wealthy and privileged. In response, decolonizing interpretive research fiercely brushes across dominant interpretations of the West in an effort to both decolonize knowledge and reinvent epistemological approaches or ways of knowing anchored in the histories, cultures, languages, and cosmologies of the oppressed. Nancy Fraser’s (1990) concept of *Subaltern counterpublics* is useful here in that she speaks to the concept of “arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (p. 56).”

Herein is found the counterhegemonic dimension essential to decolonizing interpretive research; for without the “formulation of oppositional interpretation” born of the deep dialectical tension between hegemonic and subaltern knowledges that must be courageously navigated by the bicultural researcher, a genuinely decolonizing formulation of the world would be impossible. Furthermore, decolonizing interpretive theorists in education draw heavily on their own historical experiences and cultural knowledge. This is in line with Frantz Fanon’s insistence that as colonized subjects liberate themselves from the colonized frameworks that have constricted their consciousness, they “are all the time adding to their knowledge in the light of experience, [and] will come to show themselves capable of directing the people’s struggle (p.141). As such, education, as a space for knowledge construction and socialization of students, can be discussed and analyzed as the colonizing institution for dealing with the Other—dealing with the racialized other “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short, [Western education functions as a hegemonic apparatus] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the [Other]” (Said, 1978:3).

The interpretive studies conducted by Anderson, Darder, Smith, Grande, and Paraskeva, and Orelus for example, whether stated to be so or not, are also well representative of a process of decolonizing the interpretive, in that all these bicultural theorists bring their histories as colonized subjects to bear on the manner in which they engage philosophically, historically, and qualitatively with the decolonizing of educational theories related to oppressed populations. I also want to note here that a decolonizing interpretive dynamic is at work in many of the writing of subaltern or bicultural researchers throughout the last century, although this phenomenon has never been specifically codified in the manner offered in this discussion. Hence, there are radical sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and literary writers from racialized and oppressed communities that have employed precisely a decolonizing interpretive lens, in their efforts to extend and redefine our understanding of oppressed and disempowered populations. Again, they as member of these communities and intimately tied to the histories of oppression of which they write, offer an oppositional reformulation that is epistemologically and politically necessary to forging a transformative praxis—one linked to critical theories and practices within these fields of study. Examples of these are found in the historical writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Stuart Hall, Cornel West, Chandra Tapalde Mohanty, Homi Bhabha, Vandana Shiva, Rodolfo Torres & Victor Valle, and others to name a few.

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<sup>4</sup> Frenkel, M. & Shenhav, Y. Decolonizing Organization Theory: between Orientalism and Occidentalism. Accessed at: <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/proceedings/postcolonial/Frenkel.pdf>



It is also worth noting that often these bicultural interpretive researchers were not necessarily aware of the work of the others, since they were emerged in different intellectual traditions and in different historical and regional contexts. Yet an underlying similarity in the oppressor-oppressed dialectic expressed in their works gives credence to the epistemological differences that emerge from constructing knowledge from a subaltern positionality. As a consequence, these authors have further opened the way for counterhegemonic interpretations that critically privilege their cultural histories and experiences as bicultural human beings to the act of reinventing educational theory. Hence, the autoethnographic episteme from whence their research emanates sits subtly but powerfully underneath—an essential decolonizing-episteme that is absolutely central to their research conclusions. Further, had these authors not found the wherewithal, courage, and intellectual support to follow the inner calling of their primary cultural voices, the classic decolonizing interpretive treatises they produced—centered on the lives and education of formerly colonized, enslaved, and genocided populations—would have remained ever silenced within the hegemonic tyranny of the positivist research tradition.

### DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGY

*The intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place. Decolonizing Methodologies is not a method for revolution in a political sense but provokes some revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999)*

Any decolonizing methodology must begin with the view that all human beings participate actively in producing meaning, irrespective of their social location. Critical bicultural researchers involved in conducting decolonizing interpretive study do not simply see their work as an academic exercise in knowledge construction, but as part of a larger imperative for liberating subaltern meaning and provoking revolutionary thought. In this sense, decolonizing researchers recognize themselves as cultural workers and, thus, their intellectual efforts are understood as deeply political projects of contestation. Therefore, they do not enter the arena as impartial and neutral observers or solely objective thinkers but, rather, as transformative intellectuals, grounded in a humanizing emancipatory political vision of inquiry. Hence, critical bicultural researchers and all those with whom they seek to (re)create knowledge must be cognizant of the histories, lived experiences, cultural realities, and economic plights of the communities they seek to serve by way of their intellectual labor—not solely as an academic or abstract scheme, but rather as an intimately experienced phenomenon.

Decolonizing interpretive methodology encompasses a critical process of study that helps to expand the limits of rationality and, by so doing, supports the development of counterhegemonic forms of thinking and reflecting upon the world, so to better grasp the impact of current social and material relations of power at work in the lives of subaltern populations. In turn, decolonizing interpretive research designs aim to demystify the artificial limits of racialized formations and economic hierarchies of domination, also viewing all languages and cultures as significant to our planetary survival. In the process, critical principles serve to support the epistemological creativity, imagination, questioning, doubting, and risk-taking so necessary to this approach. And, lastly, as inferred in the last section of this discussion, all this signals a research design that incorporates the decolonizing researcher as an unapologetically political participant, whose knowledge is

understood *a priori* as partial, unfinished, and deeply informed by the particular historical, economic, and cultural configurations of the times.

Although the critical principles briefly discussed earlier also inform a variety of other critical qualitative approaches, including critical ethnographies, critical narratives, and indigenous research modalities, the discussion here is focused on a decolonizing interpretive methodology, in that it is often the least well defined, understood or discussed in research methods courses within most educational studies programs. This may be the case, because interpretive theory building is often, overtly or covertly, discouraged in educational research and only seldom offered up as a viable alternative, particularly to graduate bicultural students in the field who are often not considered capable of such depth of analysis—whether openly acknowledged or not. Yet, it is significant to note that despite this deficit notion, all of the earlier cited examples of decolonizing interpretive research were, in fact, works that emerged directly from the doctoral dissertations of their bicultural authors.

Similarly, there are many in the field of education that openly discredit decolonizing interpretive research as purely “library work,” which fails to provide a challenging research experience, produce practical or useful knowledge, or include subaltern voices. Of the first line of critique, decolonizing interpretive research is by absolutely no means a lesser alternative in research design or less rigorous.

*Original theoretical contributions are a profound intellectual challenge....If you know an area of inquiry inside out and are intimately familiar with the issues and controversies in the field, you have the chance to contribute a new theory...If you do choose to pursue a theoretical [approach], you will be expected to argue from the literature that there is a different way of understanding a phenomenon than has heretofore been presented. Some of the more viable theoretical dissertation in the social sciences are those that bring together or integrate two previously distinct areas (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, pp.54-55).*

About concerns that a decolonizing approach is less rigorous, due to its expressed political and cultural subjectivity, there are a few things that must be understood. Rigor is the outcome of developing an intellectual capacity to engage critically and move with depth into different aspects and dimensions of an issue or problem that one is studying and to do this both systematically and creatively. However, within the context of a decolonizing interpretive analysis, critical bicultural researchers must enact these critical skills in a manner that consistently contends with the link between theory and practice and within their own labor as educators and researchers out in the world. Academic rigor within the context of a decolonizing interpretive research design must be understood then as not only a cognitive or abstract process of analysis. Rather, it also entails a deeply physical, emotional, and spiritual activity for bicultural researchers; which, when practiced consistently, allows them to become more integral human beings, through a creative epistemological process of what Freire called problematization and radicalization (Darder, 2015) — an empowering process of knowledge construction that is also deeply rooted in the researchers worldview.

On the second criticism relative to practicality or usefulness, a decolonizing interpretive design is meant to generate new insights or develop a new theory from the richness of a detailed comparison of bodies of existing literature related to both theory and practice. This is essential if critical bicultural researchers are to disrupt and deliberately shift the hegemonic understanding of a social or educational phenomenon and move beyond traditional views of schooling and society.

This inherently implies that a different practice must ensue, given the shift in the epistemological framework that both defines the problem and posits alternatives for future liberatory practice.

For example, this call for critical approaches that move beyond the deceptive quantophrenias of positivism, also speaks to the unrelenting and uncritical tendency to embrace quantification of all social phenomenon and the tyrannous discourse of evidence-based, even among many qualitative researchers. This traditional privileging of a scientific epistemology of knowledge construction, wittingly or unwittingly, disrupts our ability to delve deeper into the human meanings and conditions that result in oppression and its disastrous consequence on oppressed populations. Freire's work, along with the critical principles introduced earlier function in direct opposition to this tendency in education and the social sciences. It is for this reason the Fanon insisted, "But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work...must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. [They] must go on until [they have] found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge" (p.223). This *learning of the future* that Fanon refers to is precisely that decolonizing knowledge that can support a shift in dominant social relationships and social structures in the interest of economic and cultural democracy in the world.

And lastly, there is the often-voiced and well-meaning concern about the "absence of voices" in this research approach. Decolonizing interpretive research signals an analysis that requires inherently a formidable decolonizing process of deductive analysis—an inferential analysis that is deeply anchored upon a priori communal knowledge of the bicultural voices of those racialized communities in which they labor (Darder 2012). That is, to "*know an area of inquiry inside out and [be] intimately familiar with the issues and controversies*" that exists within the communal cultural context. Accordingly, the research conclusions, although assumed to be an individual production or unilateral voice (due to the individualistic assumptions of knowledge construction in the episteme of the West), can only be derived from the bicultural researchers' consistent and on-going critical engagement with the joint voices of fellow subaltern subjects, within education and the larger community. Hence, decolonizing interpretive research is inextricably tied to the communal subaltern voice (or the "I am because we are" voice), which sits and remains ever at the center of this auto-informed qualitative analysis. In many ways this dialectical understanding of the bicultural voice, echoes Freire's notion that the emancipatory knowledge of the researcher must emerge from an intimate understanding of "the empirical knowledge of the people" (Freire 1970/2012, p. 181).

All this, of course, entails a very grueling and precarious process, in the reformulation of existing hegemonic conceptualizations based on traditional epistemologies of the subaltern, which must be systematically deconstructed by way of critical bicultural epistemologies and cultural wisdom brought to light by the decolonizing analysis. It is from whence that the decolonizing interpretive researcher unfolds renewed emancipatory insights and new bicultural perspectives. These decolonizing perspectives, anchored to a priori knowledge of lived histories and non-western epistemologies of the world, are exercised in the contestation and reinvention of hegemonic practices within schools and subaltern communities. This also points to a dialectical understanding that one's individual voice exists dialectically in relationship to a larger communal voice. It is, however, important not to essentialize the meaning of what has just been stated, in that bicultural theorists are critical researchers who recognize that they are deeply accountable for the exercise of their individual voices. But, however, who are keenly aware that their bicultural voice is also inherently tied to the collective voices of their communities—historically subordinated by genocide, slavery, colonization, and imperialism to conserve the political and material interests of a domestic and internationalized economic apartheid.

Hence, the overarching purpose of a decolonizing methodology is to provide an

emancipatory reformulation of the conceptual or ideological interrelationships that exist between theoretical explanations and practical applications within a specific field or area of study. In light of this purpose, the development of theory (or a theory building emphasis) must be understood here as primarily an integrative process. This to say, it will either produce a new or reformulated critical framework for consideration in some aspect of human phenomenon or demonstrate the ways in which existing theoretical constructs in the field do (or do not) coincide with the critical epistemological requirements discussed here and/or in relation to other counterhegemonic theoretical perspectives (i.e. critical, feminist, queer, etc.). Important to this rearticulation is a sound decolonizing analysis and interpretation that clearly demonstrates what theoretical, structural, and practical transformations would be necessary, in the process of effectively integrating decolonizing conclusions that arise from such a study.

Some research aims might include developing an extension of a theoretical framework into areas in which it had previously not been applied, by applying the insights of a critical pedagogical perspective. Or, it might entail a research design that subsumes several separate theories into a single larger framework or that demonstrates previously unacknowledged links between theoretical systems that point to decolonizing alternatives. On another note, it may encompass the introduction of an existing decolonizing conceptual framework from another field (e.g., theology, psychology, etc.) into education, with appropriate modifications and extensions to make it meaningful within a new intellectual and practical space. And, lastly, this methodological design might engage a variety of more limited theoretical discussions related to a specific phenomenon, which in so doing provides new critical insights related to theory and practice, by integrating concepts and perspectives from several critical or decolonizing perspectives (e.g., racialization, queer studies, and disability theories).

Decolonizing interpretive studies are generally designed with a close eye toward the development of a well-crafted critical bicultural argument that follows a clear logical progression, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of both neutral and descriptive positivist notions of traditional research. As such the study begins with a thoughtful and well-developed introduction that states the central problem and focus of the study, in ways that reflect a critical bicultural lens in the contextualization of the problem and the use of demographic data to illuminate the extent of the problem. The introduction also provides readers with a glimpse into the conceptual frameworks most closely related to the topic, with an emphasis on situating the social or educational phenomenon within both the historical and contemporary moments. This generally includes an engagement with the limitations of existing formulations, unexamined data, contradictory notions, the hidden curriculum of educational policies and practices (Apple, 2004), and other aspects that can help support the critical theoretical interrogation and decolonizing analysis that will follow.

Also important to this work is a presentation of existing bodies of literature that focus on the topic of study, which provide empirical support and point to the need for a critical bicultural approach in understanding, deconstructing, and recreating the central problem or question that drives the study. Moreover, a critical interpretive design provides a place for a detailed presentation of the new theoretical construct of analysis, which must emerge from a comparative decolonizing analysis of existing bodies of literature related to the central question, carefully substantiating the claims made through a decolonizing process of critical reinterpretation. Such a study concludes by summarizing the process of critical analysis and moving toward an emancipatory theoretical position or liberatory framework, considering the implications for educational practices and policy formulation that would be consistent with the new decolonizing approach and how it differs from the hegemonic perspective.

Hence, wherever possible, appropriate recommendations related to emancipatory pedagogy, curriculum, leadership, and/or educational policy or practices can be offered, linking these in clear

and consistent ways to the structural and practical transformations required to enact the decolonizing approach or political recommendations derived from the analysis. Moreover, this approach to research integrates a critical lens of analysis across the study, arranging discussions along the logical progression of the argument, according to the relationship of topics to this progression, rather than by chronology. That is, discussions unfold decolonizing forms of knowledge, through a critical bicultural analysis of existing bodies of literature pertinent to the topic of study and brushing these constantly against the existing emancipatory literature and the bicultural knowledge held by the author—all which help open the field to reinvention. The critical understanding that emerges here can be further demonstrated through the presentation of new curriculum, theoretical approach, knowledge practices, or political strategies that move the field into more humanizing ways of being and reading the world.

### INQUIRY AS HUMAN PRAXIS

*For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Paulo Freire, 1970)*

For Paulo Freire (1970), the construction of knowledge was above all a process of human praxis. Key then to this critical conceptualization of both pedagogy and human inquiry is an understanding of the imperative process as an expression of our true vocation: to be human. As such, when the communal and individual process of inquiry is stifled or squelched—as it has been for so long for many oppressed populations—the result are conditions of dehumanization that disable the social agency, voice, and political self-determination of racialized and economically impoverished communities. For Freire, coming to voice and democratic participation are undeniably linked to an evolving process of *naming of world* and cultivating the power to *denounce injustice and announce justice*. This is key to the discussion here, in that “oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). In direct opposition to this, decolonizing interpretive research is meant to provide a counterhegemonic space for human inquiry that works to support a liberatory process of consciousness, as critical bicultural researchers arrive to new readings of the world.

Moreover, Freire (2000) adamantly asserted, “While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind’s central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern (Freire, 2000 p. 43). *Inescapable concern*, indeed, given the current oppressive conditions produced by neoliberalism’s destructive creep internationally and the accompaniment of dehumanizing social forces that produce exclusions based on false notions of social privilege, ideologies of race, patriarchy, and other forms of social exclusions and their unrelenting push for the disaffiliation of the masses. Counterpunctal to all forms of exploitation, domination, disempowerment, false generosity, and all forms of violence against the oppressed, a decolonizing interpretive approach engages forthrightly the colonization of our humanity, in search for ways of knowing and being that can genuinely support a politics of liberation and freedom.

As a revolutionary praxis, the restoration of our humanity is privileged within decolonizing interpretive research, where the bicultural researcher engages systematically in a critical process of problem-posing (Freire, 1970), so as to reformulate new truths that are more in line with emancipatory possibilities. It is precisely through a rigorous and sustained progression of problematization that critical bicultural researchers arrive to decolonizing conclusions. These conclusions fundamentally reassert formally negated histories, cultural knowledge, and lived

experiences as legitimate and valuable dimensions of both knowledge construction and our current existence, despite our legacies of social and material subordination. Through this process, decolonizing interpretive research is fueled by a radical humanizing political commitment to uncover—through critical engagement with the oppressive structural forces that shape our lives—the knowledge necessary for the making of a culturally democratic and economically just future. By so doing, decolonizing interpretive research offers powerful renditions of new voices and bravely posits anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist directions for social change, through a critical bicultural praxis of human inquiry.

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