Reflections

Mental health, coloniality and fieldwork in the European university: a reflection in three challenges – commentary to Taylor

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In this reflection piece, I discuss three challenges to the way we think about fieldwork and mental health in the context of European universities. These challenges emerged out of reading and reflecting on Stephen Taylor's paper "The long shadows cast by the field: violence, trauma and the ethnographic researcher". Specifically I reflect on coloniality and whiteness and the ways in which I consider them to be entangled in both the problem and the discussion around universities' handling of the mental health of their staff and students. In doing so I rely on decolonial and critical whiteness literature to argue that universities' disregard for the (mental health) risks associated with conducting ethnographic fieldwork as well as the academic culture which fuels this disregard, reveal the ways in which universities and the knowledge they produce privilege whiteness.

Keywords: fieldwork, PTSD, white empiricism, European universities, trauma

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I enjoyed reviewing Stephen Taylor's (2019) paper "The long shadows cast by the field: violence, trauma and the ethnographic researcher". This is a piece of academic scholarship that has the potential to empower not just the writer, through a process of reflection and, hopefully, therapeutic processing, but also the reader. The paper offers reassurance to researchers with shared or similar experiences of witnessing (and/or experiencing) violence during fieldwork and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It confirms that our struggles are not unique. Taylor's (2019) paper acknowledges the spatial and temporal unboundedness of trauma and experiences of violence that originated in fieldwork but stay with the researcher, physically, mentally and intellectually after a return to one's home institution. It also offers an honest reflection on the ways in which research and academic knowledge production thrive on the supposed spatial, embodied and mental separation of the researcher and the research context. I would argue that this separation relies on and is reflective of academia's longstanding reliance on the trope of the objective, dispassionate observer who is seen as the pinnacle of scientific neutrality and research. In other words, it relies on the idea that the world can be studied without getting involved in it and that this is what constitutes *good* research. More geographically speaking, violence in much ethnographic fieldwork

seems to be a sign of the 'over there' (e.g. Smith 1999), something the (mostly white and often male) ethnographic researcher goes out to explore and which is brought back, analysed, processed and turned into knowledge to then be distributed by academic journals in the Global North, but does not involve the researcher emotionally.

In this commentary, I want to reflect on the inherent coloniality in academia's failure to take the mental health of its students and staff seriously. I do so by focussing on three challenges which underlie Taylor's (2019) paper and the critiques of academic culture therein. Firstly, I focus on the coloniality of conducting (ethnographic) research and the unequal power geographies that this relies on and perpetuates. Here I suggest that the practice of Northern (predominantly white, heterosexual and male) researchers conducting ethnographies in formerly colonised countries and regions has a tendency to imagine and reify those regions as violent and unstable. I do not argue that this is what Taylor's (2019) paper sets out to do, however I think it important to be alert to the prevalence of this dynamic in ethnographic and geographical research. Secondly, I focus on the trope of the dispassionate (male), objective (white) researcher, who studies, but is unaffected by violence. I argue that a continued academic and scientific desire for objectivity and emotional detachment, as evidenced in the academic culture described in Taylor's paper, further undermines the progression of self-identifying women researchers of colour, who are always already seen as less objective and dispassionate (Prescod-Weinstein 2020). This trope is damaging to all researchers and its authoritativeness is what allows universities to not invest in the mental health of their researchers. Finally I will conclude by arguing that for socio-economically marginalised, disabled, genderqueer and non-genderqueer researchers of colour trauma has always been embodied, that we have carried it with us through our academic careers, where it has weighed us down, into fieldwork and back again. I suggest that we have become too good at ignoring it and tucking it away so as not to further distance ourselves from the aforementioned ideals of objectivity and emotional detachment. By failing to make space for trauma, PTSD and experiences of embodied violence, universities continue to be hostile environments to those researchers they proclaim to so desperately want to attract and support.

I write this commentary and I read Taylor's (2019) paper as a Black cis-heterosexual woman early career researcher who has struggled with PTSD for a number of years. Contrary to Taylor, I carried my PTSD into my PhD work, where it affected my ability to conduct the fieldwork I had initially set out to do. I am thankful for this paper; however, I also think it necessary to carefully reflect on the predominance of what de Leeuw and Hunt (2018, 3) call "re-centering the feelings and emotions of (often White) settler non-Indigenous subjects [...] who despite (or perhaps in part because of) critical self-reflexivity continue to maintain discursive and material power in myriad spaces." Hopefully this paper will be a useful starting point for more (and more diverse) discussions around trauma, ethnographic research and mental health in academia.

Challenging the coloniality of ethnographic research: from 'over here' to 'over there'

Several authors have pointed to the coloniality inherent in ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Thobani 2015; Soares dos Santos 2019). Although a majority of these analyses are located in the field of anthropology, geographers too have pointed to the colonial legacies of geography as an academic discipline (e.g. Noxolo *et al*. 2012; Esson *et al*. 2017). As Taylor's (2019) paper shows, European universities often see the risks that come with ethnographic research as outside their remit and responsibility. I would argue that, given the extent to which university culture has been shaped by white, socio-economically advantaged men of European origin, this dynamic is amplified when the risks concern non-white European cis-male researchers. Issues of safety and security, having to deal with microaggressions and harassment at the university and on fieldwork disproportionately affects women, people of colour, genderqueer and disabled researchers. Universities' denial of responsibility for the risks of fieldwork is facilitated through the imagined distance between the university and the field. The former is presented as a stable, rational place of knowledge production and management, whereas the latter is, in the case of formerly colonised countries, a place of knowledge extraction, often perceived as unstable, violent and irrational. The physical distance between ethnographic field site and prestigious university is heightened through an imagined distance between the *place of*

study and the *place to be studied*. This binary, which universities wittingly or unwittingly subscribe to by not investing time, energy or financial resources into making sure that students and staff enjoy the same protections from violence, harassment and discrimination when on fieldwork than they purportedly do at university, reinforces the idea of the 'over there' as a place of risk, and the over here as a place of safety. Smith (1999) and Said (2003) are only two of a number of authors writing about how knowledge and research contribute to the othering of Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific. What this binary also hides, however, is the fact that for women, people of colour and religious and sexual minorities alongside them, the university, and European societies more broadly, have seldom been places of rationality, stability or safety. At the university as much as in society our experiences of racism and discrimination have been marginalised and brushed aside (Prescod-Weinstein 2020). We continue to live and work at the margins of (academic) society and our mental health attests to it (Jones 2017; Davies 2020).

Challenging the trope of the dispassionate (male), objective (white) researcher

As Prescod-Weinstein (2020) has eloquently argued, ideas of objectivity and emotional detachment are firmly intertwined with white supremacy. Introducing the concept of *white empiricism* she argues (2020, 421) that "white empiricism is the phenomenon through which only white people (particularly white men) are read as having a fundamental capacity for objectivity and Black people (particularly Black women) are produced as an ontological other." I argue that universities' inadequate response to the mental health of their students and staff reveals the extent to which universities are built on white empiricism. As Taylor's (2019) paper reveals, universities make little room for the trauma that staff and students carry with them, especially since, as I have discussed above, the idea is prevalent that this trauma is brought in from outside academia. In Taylor's paper, and in the lived experiences of many, universities' expectations are that researchers be dispassionate and objective and that they observe, not feel. This is damaging and needs to change. As Prescod-Weinstein (2020) argues, this trope is especially damaging to Black women working in research, because it posits us as positioned *other*, a far distance from science's claim to objectivity. As such, leaving one's trauma at the door also maintains the university as a space that benefits white straight men above all others, furthering the problematic notion that their experiences are what constitutes or comes closest to the elusive idea of scientific objectivity. However, positioning oneself, as is increasingly done in social sciences, is not a bad thing. As de Leeuw and Hunt (2018) write, not acknowledging our authorial position obscures how the identities we straddle and the places we write from and about are bound up with colonialism. Not being able to acknowledge and share the trauma we experience on fieldwork or at university as students, early career researchers or professors upholds the idea that being a dispassionate, objective researcher is possible and that it is desirable.

'Our trauma has always been here': challenging colonial whiteness in the university

I would like to conclude my brief commentary with a challenge based on the preceding two sections: advocating for an expansion of counselling and psychological support services and greater awareness of the possibly long-lasting trauma induced by fieldwork is not enough to change European universities' attitudes towards experiences of violence and trauma. We need to challenge the underlying beliefs and dynamics, steeped in white empiricism and a colonial geography of violence, that make current attitudes possible and normal. As long as we fail to acknowledge that thinking of trauma as always originating outside the university – on fieldwork in formerly colonised countries especially – silences the ways in which European universities allow racism, sexism, homo-, transphobia and ableism to stand unchallenged, we will continue to perpetuate it for marginalised researchers. We also continue to perpetuate the idea that some places (those we study) are inherently more violent than others (those where we study). As long as we fail to acknowledge that the expectation that researchers at any stage in their careers deal with their mental health privately or in the small enclaves that universities have created for such purpose, we continue to uphold an idea of knowledge production that benefits white men, who have for so long constituted the standard on which we measure scientific objectivity.

In his (2019) piece, Taylor is very self-reflective on his own positionality and the often obscured dynamics that allow white male researchers to conduct research in areas unfamiliar to them. Violence here, although not unexpected, caught the researcher off guard and destabilised his understanding of what is and what is not part of the research process. The violence that we know as people and especially as women of colour sometimes, but not always, means that we are already too used to carrying the experience of violence around with us to be thus caught off guard. This is not a good thing. I do not write this to in any way minimise our respective experiences of violence and the individual and collective struggles we fight to make space for us in the academic world. I write this because things need to change.

I want Taylor's (2019) piece to take up space. But even more than that I want it to pave the way for researchers working and writing at the margins of academia, battling their own private and societal battles to read this piece and feel validated that they, and their trauma, should take up lots of space too.

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