



Collective and Decolonial Practices in Narrative Approaches: A Duoethnographic Reflection within the Context of Niger

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Abstract

This paper explores what it means for two white Western psychologists, trainers, and researchers to engage in decolonial practice within a training on collective narrative practices conducted with Nigerien mental health providers in May 2023. The analysis is grounded in themes identified by participants through the co-construction of a collective document during the training. Building on these themes, we engage in a dialogic and reflexive examination of our positionalities, focusing on the tensions, contradictions, and power dynamics involved in practising psychology within global inequalities. The findings highlight the limitations of Western psychological frameworks in addressing structural injustice, and the risks of reproducing forms of domination even within efforts aimed at decolonisation. At the same time, the study points to the potential of collective and narrative practices to open spaces for more relational, situated, and decolonial approaches. We argue that this shift is essential, particularly in light of the escalating conflicts and genocides fuelled by colonial and capitalist forces in today's global context. Furthermore, we acknowledge the limitations of Western psychology in advancing justice for marginalized communities and consider how these insights will shape our future work.

Keywords Decoloniality · Duoethnography · Collective narrative practices · Western psychology · Liberation psychology · Anti-oppressive practices

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Introduction

In May 2023, we were invited by an NGO affiliated with a UN agency in Niger to lead a training session on mental health and human rights in the Niamey region. The NGO designed the training specifically for mental health providers and practitioners, with a focus on addressing collective trauma and promoting healing.

Having collaborated both academically and clinically for several months, we, the authors of this paper, saw this as an opportunity to reflect on the intersection of our work in community mental health and human rights in the Global South. This event marked a new phase in our scholarship, allowing us to critically examine our roles as practitioners and researchers in non-Western contexts.

Therefore, in our journey, we embrace the concept of decolonization as the path forward to expose white privilege, structural and colonial racism entrenched within mainstream “conversational silencing” of racism in psychology (Durrheim, 2024), and the pressing need to reconsider methodologies, tools, and practices from an anti-capitalistic perspective (Cullen et al., 2020). As two clinical psychologists dissatisfied with the current mainstream ideas of our discipline and consequences on people, particularly if intersectionally oppressed, we believe that a shift in our discipline and models is imperative. The current global landscape, marked by escalating conflicts and genocides driven by colonial and capitalistic forces, highlights the inadequacies of Western psychology in advancing justice for oppressed communities. In response, we initiated a dialogue on the necessity of replacing outdated tools and methods that fail to contribute meaningfully to the liberation of the people we encounter in our fieldwork and research.

Accordingly, this paper addresses a central tension: what does it mean for two white Western psychologists to engage in decolonial practice while operating within institutional structures that may reproduce colonial relations of power?

To answer to this question the study aims to explore this tension through a duoethnographic reflection grounded in a collective narrative training conducted with Nigerien mental health providers in Niamey. By engaging with themes co-constructed during the training, we critically examine our positionalities, the contradictions embedded in our roles, and the possibilities and limits of decolonial practice within such contexts.

Positionality

In this section we will introduce the reflections of our positionality and how this impacted our work and reflections.

Chiara: I come from a middle-class family originally hailing from Naples, in the South of Italy. During my childhood, my parents moved to the North of Italy due to work commitments since my father struggled to secure employment in the South that matched his educational qualifications. This geographical shift left me feeling like I didn't quite fit into either the Northern or Southern Italian identities. However, over time, I developed a connection to both regions, while always acknowledging my roots in Naples. As a child, I keenly felt the impact of migration, having experienced it firsthand with my family. I also encountered initial discrimination as someone from the South of Italy, yet I remained open and curious in my interactions with others.

Before embarking on my journey as a psychologist, I worked as a therapist for children with disabilities. The notion of disability has long unsettled me, not only due to its implications but also the social stigma it carries. I have often questioned why certain individuals, especially children, are labelled as “deficient” in functions deemed essential by society. During my time working with children across different Italian institutions, I frequently found myself pondering, “Why should these children be pressured to conform to a society that doesn’t readily accept them, rather than the other way around?”

This dissatisfaction propelled me to Sudan, specifically Khartoum, where I spent a year working with an NGO focused on developmental disabilities. My time in Sudan was transformative for different reasons. Firstly, I observed and experienced cultural and societal aspects where societal norms were genuinely respectful and inclusive of diversity. Each member of the community was supported by the community itself to actively participate within it. On the other hand I also encountered new challenges and experiences that profoundly shaped my perspective. In Khartoum I also formed deep connections with Palestinian individuals who became integral to my life. I witnessed the harsh realities of child mortality due to malnutrition, lack of medical care, or social circumstances. Additionally, I experienced firsthand the complexities of being a white woman with Christian background from a country with an imperial history in an Islamic and colonised country. These experiences heightened my awareness of my heritage as a white Western individual and woman, as well as the profound ramifications of colonialism, which pervasively impact the lives of both the colonized and the colonizer in different manner. This realization led me to adopt a critical perspective toward Western organizations that aim to assist countries of the Global South, as I have observed colonialist, capitalist, and extractive tendencies in their approaches.

As a psychologist, I am currently engaged in pursuing a doctorate in Migration and Intercultural Processes at the University of Genoa. Beyond academic endeavours, my pursuits demonstrate a deep commitment to actively address and advocate for the underlying causes of human rights violations and their significant impact on mental health. I firmly believe that mental well-being is intrinsically linked to the preservation of human rights. Without the presence of the latter, achieving genuine mental health for all remains an elusive goal. I increasingly sense how the colonial legacy of my education and my identity as a white woman hinders my journey as well as open doors and privilege in my work and everyday life. I strongly feel the need to confront this both personally and within academic and healing realms. Questioning and reflecting about how my cultural legacy is reproducing inequalities within my work is a fundamental step to be and to adopt framework and methodologies genuinely equitable. Perceiving myself at the beginning of this path, I feel the need to enact my critical consciousness through self-reflective practices as well as to engage in an open and reflective dialogue with people belonging to different traditions and backgrounds.

Since almost the beginning of our collaboration I have found in Guido a friend and colleague with whom I pursue this path together. Together, we are engaged in listening to each other, reflecting deeply, providing constructive critique, and taking actionable steps to navigate and advance through this process together.

Guido: I come from a tradition rooted in radical political vision. I was born into an Italian communist working-class family that instilled in me a profound commitment to justice and collective redemption. My personal and professional trajectory is deeply

shaped by my family's history, which was marked by the major conflicts of twentieth-century Europe.

On my mother's side, during the First World War, part of my family perished due to famine on the northeastern Italian front, one of the most devastated areas of the conflict. My maternal grandfather, at the age of nine, was forced to leave his village to work in coal mines in Belgium. Only later did he learn that his father had migrated to the United States, leaving him to grow up in a stepfamily in Paris.

On my father's side, the aftermath of the Second World War brought further hardship: his sister died of tuberculosis, and the family fell into economic ruin, experiencing poverty and marginalization. These intergenerational experiences of loss, displacement, and struggle form the historical backdrop of my commitment to social justice.

In early adulthood, this legacy translated into political engagement. During the early 1990s, while training to become a clinical psychologist, I became involved in radical anti-fascist groups and participated in the Italian no-global (alter-globalization) movement. My understanding of justice gradually expanded to include intersectional concerns, particularly around class and gender (Sommier & Fillieule, 2013).

However, only later did I begin to critically recognize how my own formation—as a white, Western, male professional—was shaped by colonial legacies. This realization marked a turning point, confronting me with the limits of my training and the ways in which my positionality could reproduce forms of epistemic and relational violence.

Since 2006, this awareness has led me on a path of decolonization, beginning with my engagement in Palestine. In dialogue with colleagues from Gaza, South Africa, Australia, and Iraqi Kurdistan, I participated in critical exchanges that challenged the assumptions of Western, masculinist psychology and exposed its embedded privileges.

This journey continued in Niger, where I encountered another layer of complexity: the power structures of international NGOs and UN agencies, often reproducing neocolonial forms of domination under the guise of humanitarian aid. During my time there—ending shortly before the 2023 military coup—I collaborated with colleagues from community-based organizations and the Faculty of Psychology at Mounumi University in Niamey.

It was in this context that the teachings of my theoretical mentor, the Palestinian writer Salman Natur, became central to my work. As he wrote, "If we lose memory, the hyenas will devour us." This insight pushed me to reconnect with ancestral histories as a way of resisting what de Sousa Santos (2018) calls the "cognitive empire". For me, this includes reclaiming the memory of antifascist struggles in Italy, and figures such as Antonio Gramsci, as resources for imagining an indigenous Italian community psychology of liberation.

Listening to and critically engaging with each other became the cornerstone of the collaboration between Chiara and me. At this stage in my journey, I felt deeply conflicted about continuing to work within institutional frameworks such as the UN. I was hesitant to begin a new training program in Niger, fearing that I would impose tools shaped by white epistemologies onto local colleagues.

Chiara challenged this position, identifying in it a form of white fragility—an expression of reluctance to confront, rather than withdraw from, one's implication in systems of power. Through our dialogue, I came to see that disengagement could itself reproduce inequality by avoiding responsibility.

Together, through dialogical and narrative approaches, we reworked the training process into a space for critical and liberatory conversation. This collaboration became not only a methodological choice but a shared ethical and political practice—what we understand, following bell hooks (2018), as radical love in action.

We met in 2022 in the context of Conflict and Psychology laboratory, directed by Guido and approached by Chiara in the framework of her post-degree internship. Starting from this time an ongoing collaboration in different projects and experiences started. Furthermore, we became increasingly aware of how our methods and tools were perpetuating structures of power and domination, extracting indigenous knowledge, and fostering adaptation to unjust conditions imposed by colonial powers. For instance, working to alleviate symptoms in individuals affected by political oppression and colonization, or those failing in their migratory journey or denied the right of refuge, by testing conceptual models that attest to their psychological fragility, imposes a form of adaptation or re-adaptation to inequitable conditions dominated by colonizing powers, thereby expropriating agency and participation (Zutlevics, 2002).

Using a duo-ethnographic methodology (Norris & Sawyer, 2016) the purpose of this article is to start a conversation on issues of domination and liberation within psychology faced during a training we conducted in Niger. We aim to document the personal decolonial journey of two white researchers and trainers, which emerged from critical discussions during and after the journey in 2023 training in Niger. Drawing from the collective narrative approach (Denborough, 2008) proposed during the training and specifically the themes that our Nigerien colleagues identified in the collective document they created at the end of the training, we offer critical reflections on the notions of decolonization, white domination, and anti-capitalistic practices in the context of healing (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020; Martín-Baró, 1998). Furthermore, we examine how these reflections will inform and shape our future work.

Methodology

In this section, we provide a detailed, step-by-step account of the work that informed our training in Niger, as well as the duoethnographic reflective process that guides this essay.

We begin by focusing on the methodology behind the training with the Nigerien mental health provider to establish the context for the reflections presented in the duoethnography. First, we explain the processes and methodologies used during the training. Then, we describe the duoethnographic methodology, which serves as the framework for our reflective analysis in this essay.

Collective Narrative Practices

During our training in Niger, we participated in discussions with our Nigerien colleagues on collective narrative practices (Denborough, 2008, 2018). Mental health providers convened to exchange stories, experiences, and viewpoints, engaging in collaborative reflections on transformation and healing. Indeed, through collective narratives, individuals discover validation, support, and unity, fostering community amidst marginalization (Denborough, 2008). By collectively challenging stigma and advocating holistic care, barriers are dis-

mantled, promoting social change. These practices offer a platform for sharing, validating, and finding solidarity, fostering community resilience and resistance (Strauven, 2021).

The training spanned five days, with a particular emphasis on Collective Documents and the Tree of Life (Denborough, 2008). The reflections we present in this paper stemmed from discussions initiated during the analysis of themes arising from the collective document and carried out by the researchers/trainers together with the Nigerien mental health providers. After dedicating two days discussing about the very sense of being a mental health professional in the Nigerien context, our Nigerian comrades crafted a collective document. This document encapsulated the themes identified through their discussions during the training, along with the skills inherited from their traditional and familial values that they employ to address these themes. Importantly, the themes presented in this paper were initially co-constructed with participants during this collective process, rather than generated solely by the authors.

In proposing this activity, we followed the methodology outlined by Dulwich Centre (Denborough, 2008, 2018). This methodology entailed several steps: first, defining the purpose of the collective document; then, inviting contributors to share their stories, experiences, and reflections on the document's theme; facilitating collaboration among contributors using reflective questions; and finally, taking notes on emerging themes within the group. With 18 participants, we organized them into three groups, each led by a facilitator. The facilitators guided the discussions within their groups and took notes on the key points and common themes emerging from each group. At the end of the groups' discussion, we were tasked with collecting all facilitators' notes and compiling a preliminary draft of the collective document. This draft was intended to be shared with the entire group the next day for collaborative finalization.

However, we found ourselves unable to continue working on the document due to unclear and scarce materials. The next day, instead producing the document ourselves, we asked our colleagues to collaborate on creating the document together. To reach this conclusion, we engaged in a discussion, deliberating on the reasons behind our impasse. Ultimately, we concluded that it was necessary to return to the group and collectively promote both the thematization and writing processes. Although the process was highly engaging and transformative, we faced a setback at the end of the training day. The computer we were using to write the collective document unexpectedly shut down due to overheating, resulting in the loss of all our progress. Despite this setback, four individuals chose to stay and rewrite the entire document with us. As we worked together, we gradually realized that we had taken a back seat in the writing process, as our colleagues assumed leadership and completed the document without our guidance. This experience highlighted the inefficacy of working in isolation boding a hierarchical structure of power and the crack between white saviours' teachers and black subaltern trainees and underscored the importance and success of collective, horizontal collaboration, uniting us as allies in the pursuit of pathways to liberation from colonial routes of knowledge.

Duoethnography

Employing a duoethnographic approach, the reflections delineated in this paper originated from discussions initiated during the co-creation of the collective documents and the final themes arising from it. Duoethnography is a collaborative research method where two or

more researchers engage in dialogue about their different experiences in relation to a specific phenomenon. The purpose of this approach is to critically examine and rethink existing beliefs through a written conversation that takes the form of a play-script. Duoethnography enables the creation of layered, interconnected auto-ethnographic narratives focused on a particular research context or question, highlighting the complex, reflective, and creative aspects of both the research process and the final product. As both a curriculum and research method, duoethnography addresses two key issues: representation in qualitative research (how findings are depicted within a dynamic phenomenological text) and praxis (how research drives personal transformation). It gives researchers the opportunity to explore their multifaceted identities and understand how their lives are influenced by social and cultural contexts (Norris & Sawyer, 2016). Recent studies employing duoethnography have explored various subjects, including institutionalized racism, beauty standards, post-colonialism, the construction of multicultural identities, and professional boundaries in mental health professions (Nelson & Phillips, 2019).

Duoethnography is particularly suited to the objectives of this study, as it enables the exploration of relational tensions and contradictions emerging from our positionalities as Western practitioners operating within a postcolonial context. By placing our experiences in dialogue, this approach makes visible differences, frictions, and asymmetries that might otherwise remain implicit. In decolonial contexts, duoethnography offers a methodological space to interrogate power, privilege, and complicity, rather than presenting a unified or authoritative account. It allows for the unsettling of singular perspectives and supports a reflexive engagement with the limits of one's own knowledge and practice (Norris & Sawyer, 2016).

During the training, we initiated a critical dialogue grounded in the themes emerging from the collective document (Denborough, 2008), incorporating biographical and autobiographical reflections to explore uncertainties and psycho-emotional entanglements that may unconsciously sustain patterns of domination in our work (Hills et al., 2023). At this stage, these reflections were primarily experienced as emotional responses and relational tensions rather than as structured analytical dialogue.

The duoethnographic process developed more fully over the three months following the training. During this period, our exchanges unfolded through both synchronous and asynchronous formats, including in-person conversations, phone calls, email exchanges, and text messages. In the later stages of this process, particularly during the third month, these exchanges evolved into more structured written reflections. This gradual shift allowed for a more deliberate and critical engagement with the themes and tensions that had initially emerged during the training.

Following the principles of duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2016), we engaged in a dialogical and relational process of reflection on power dynamics, particularly within non-Western contexts and in relation to our own positionalities. Through this process, individual perspectives were articulated, revisited, and progressively woven into a shared narrative. By integrating our personal experiences during and after the training, we collaboratively developed a "we" narrative that reflects our evolving understanding of the mental health profession and its training in such contexts. This narrative remained grounded in the themes identified by Nigerien colleagues during the collective document process, which served as the foundation for our duoethnographic exploration.

The dialogic text presented in this manuscript should not be understood as a verbatim transcript of recorded conversations. Rather, it is a deliberately crafted play-script dialogue in line with duoethnographic traditions, constructed through the selection, organisation, and reworking of the authors' written reflections. While some excerpts are presented verbatim from these reflections, the dialogue as a whole constitutes an interpretive and narrative construction rather than a direct transcription of naturally occurring interactions.

The analytic process unfolded in several stages. The themes structuring this paper were not generated by the authors but were initially identified by Nigerien colleagues during the collective document activity conducted as part of the training. Our analysis therefore did not aim to produce new themes, but to engage reflexively with these collectively generated themes in relation to our positionalities and roles within the training context.

Both authors first revisited their written reflections and exchanges independently, focusing on how these themes were experienced, interpreted, and problematized in their respective accounts. This was followed by an iterative dialogical process in which interpretations were compared, discussed, and progressively refined. Through this engagement, we developed a shared understanding of how the collectively identified themes resonated with, challenged, and exposed tensions in our own perspectives and practices. Subsequently, each author selected excerpts from their written material that spoke most directly to these themes. The resulting dialogic text was collaboratively reviewed and refined to ensure that it accurately conveyed the content, tone, and tensions of our exchanges.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study is grounded in a duoethnographic reflection on the authors' own experiences and positionalities, it is situated within a collective training context involving Nigerien colleagues. Ethical considerations therefore extend beyond individual reflexivity and require careful attention to how collective processes and contributions are engaged and represented.

The themes discussed in this paper were co-constructed with participants through collective narrative practices, and the stories and proverbs included are presented in anonymised and collective form. Participants were informed that the training process could contribute to subsequent reflections and academic outputs. They were also invited to take part in the development of this work; however, they chose not to participate. Particular care has been taken to avoid the inclusion of identifiable or sensitive material.

This work is guided by an ethics of care, which emphasises relational accountability, respect, and responsibility in representing shared processes. Rather than treating participants' contributions as extractable data, we approach them as part of a collective knowledge-making process that fundamentally shaped the direction of the inquiry.

At the same time, our positionality as white Western psychologists working within a postcolonial context generates specific ethical tensions. These include the risk of appropriating or reframing participants' contributions within Western academic frameworks, as well as the asymmetries that structure access to authorship and publication. We engage with these tensions reflexively, while acknowledging that they cannot be fully resolved within the scope of this work.

Results: A Duo-ethnographic Conversation on Love, Liberation and Radical Change

During the creation of the collective document, it became apparent that mental health practitioners in Niger face numerous challenges. They identified four themes representing their experiences as mental health providers and workers: *the unfamiliarity of medical doctors with psychological sciences, resistance from families and communities towards psychological professions, daily struggles against economic and environmental adversities, and the looming spectre of war and violence*. Additionally, they identify also the *familiar and traditional values* that they were using to resist the challenges they identified.

Following, after briefly describing each theme, we critically examined them within the context of our duo-ethnographic work.

Unfamiliarity of Medical Doctors with Psychological Sciences

Participants in discussions acknowledged the evolving international role of psychological science but noted its newness and inadequate understanding within medical contexts. They observed that universities have failed to effectively promote collaboration among health practitioners.

Guido: The emergence of this concept has prompted me to ponder the issue of how psychological disciplines often find themselves subordinate to medical science, highlighting the need for recognition and affiliation among disciplines within frameworks of knowledge that perpetuate power hierarchies and gaps in healing sciences. This “colonial trap” impedes healing disciplines from assuming a liberating and anti-oppressive role, instead compelling them to conform to the dominant discourse of Western hard sciences. Western hard sciences tend to reproduce colonial disciplinary discourses that prioritize the power of subaltern classes. From my perspective, a psychology of liberation should endeavor to construct alternative discursive paths to those rooted solely in biomedical and empirical evidence.

Through discussions with Nigerien colleagues, I gleaned that the masculine, white, imperialistic, and capitalistic nature of dominant psychology, along with its ongoing pursuit of “supremacy” in the realm of white science, obstructs the unleashing of the healing potential inherent in mutualistic, liberatory and community-oriented psychology.

Chiara: I would like to emphasize the crucial importance of constructing and sharing processes of shared learning and liberation in a manner firmly grounded in the genuine needs of the communities we aim to serve. Initiating a process of conscientization is a foundational step in this regard. This entails dedicating time to listening, understanding, and collectively define the issues we intend to address, and subsequently organizing corresponding actions to pursue. I firmly believe that this space of listening, understanding, and collaboration cannot be overlooked if we seek to imbue psychology with a truly liberating function.

However, when we examine the system through which psychology and psychological research are sustained—largely through projects and donations from national and supranational entities—it becomes apparent that funding priorities are often dictated by the political climate and objectives of Western countries. This can create contradictions. It is essential to involve communities in defining the issues to be addressed and the actions to be taken to ensure that proposed solutions are authentic, relevant, appropriate, and, above all, liberating. Within this reflection, another critical element is the allocation of funds for projects aimed at countries in the Global South. This perpetuates a dynamic of subalternity between Western countries and those in the Global South. Perhaps it is time to reconsider this system, redirecting it towards fostering change within local communities in the West, thereby facilitating the liberation of colonized countries. In essence, a psychology of liberation cannot be imposed from above; it must emerge through a participatory and conscious process within the communities concerned. In this process, the psychologist should act as an ally to facilitate and support the conscientization process.

This theme also generated tensions within our own reflections, particularly regarding our presence in the field. The following exchange illustrates how our positionalities led to different interpretations of whether staying or withdrawing constitutes a more ethical stance.

Guido: At several moments during the training, I found myself questioning whether we should be there at all. More than once, in the past, I was explicitly told to go back to my own country and do this work there. And I couldn't ignore that. It made me think that perhaps what is needed is not our presence, but our absence.

Chiara: I understand that. And I also felt the discomfort of being there. But at the same time, I don't think the answer is simply to withdraw. For me, the possibility of building something together requires proximity—being there, spending time, sharing experiences.

Guido: But isn't our presence already part of the problem? Even when we try to resist it, we arrive from the Global North, carrying a certain position.

Chiara: Yes, but I don't think the issue is just being there or not. It's how we are there. Being present doesn't have to mean reproducing a model where those who come from outside teach and those from the Global South learn.

Guido: I hear that, but I'm not convinced we can escape that dynamic so easily. Being there already places us in a position of power. Our presence is superimposed by colonial bodies (such as INGOS or UN agencies), and donors who carry an imperial legacy (USAid, World Bank, EU commission, among others.)

Chiara: We cannot fully escape it. But I don't think withdrawal is the solution either. Otherwise, we risk closing the possibility of relationships, of shared processes, of learning from each other.

Guido: But if people do not really want us to stay in their country, because of our colonial heritage, shouldn't we take that seriously?

Chiara: Yes, absolutely. But I also think those voices are not the only ones. There are also moments where collaboration feels meaningful. The question, for me, is how to stay differently.

Guido: So the tension is between staying and leaving in contested spaces and places.

Chiara: Yes. And neither option feels entirely ethical on its own.

Resistance from Families and Communities Towards Psychological Professions

In shedding light on the challenges encountered by mental health practitioners in Niger, it is crucial to confront the pervasive skepticism and stigma surrounding the field of psychology within local communities.

Guido: This theme also highlights the dominating dispositive of mainstream psychological discourse (Foucault, 2005). Instead of combating the resistance of communities and families to psychological discipline, I would question why this resistance exists. The first reflection that comes to mind is that the psychological practices proposed to indigenous communities are still predominantly white and racializing. So that, simply proposing models that might be more acceptable to non-western individuals extracting local healing traditions and idioms can be another form of colonization and imposition. At this level, rejection could also be interpreted as a form of resistance to colonial extractivism that seeks to impose models of functioning and adaptation that are globalized and harmful to traditional systems of meaning and values. In general, from all forms of resistance, I believe that effective, enduring, and shared forms of care that enact people participation, freedom of choice and reciprocal support can be invented.

Chiara: Beginning with this consideration, it occurs to me that our Nigerien colleagues shared one reason why psychologists faced social acceptance issues: the lack of economic recognition for psychologists. Those studying psychology, often ending up as teachers in schools, were perceived to have low economic recognition. Colleagues mentioned that, in their view, perceptions of psychologists within their communities are gradually changing due to psychologists engaging in professional relationships with them through the increasing presence of international NGOs. As these NGOs increasingly implement mental health projects, they require local mental health providers and offer them salaries that are viewed favourably by the community, thereby enhancing their social recognition. This raises the question: Are psychologists benefiting from the presence of these NGOs? By affiliating with Western organizations, they seem to be gaining respect and recognition. This, in turn, leads me to consider the broader role of international NGOs in countries of the Global South.

Reflecting on my experience in Sudan, I was struck by contradictions within these institutions. While they integrate into public discourse concerning the care and support of disadvantaged individuals, their presence in colonized countries reinforces economic dependency between colonizing and colonized nations. Subordination is observed on various levels: for

instance, local staff never earn as much as Western counterparts, and roles of responsibility and program coordination are predominantly assigned to Western personnel. These differences are further emphasized by the language used to describe NGO workers, which reinforces the existing power imbalances. For instance, employees from Western countries are labelled as “expatriate staff,” whereas those from the host countries are termed “local staff.” This terminology highlights and perpetuates the hierarchical relationship between the two groups. Contractual arrangements also differ significantly. Expatriates usually have the opportunity to undertake “multiple missions” in various locations, along with benefits related to being “expatriate personnel,” which are not available to “local staff,” who, upon project completion, lose their opportunity to work for the NGO. Furthermore, regarding projects, funds for cooperation, development, and emergency projects are primarily sourced from predominantly Western national and supranational institutions, which determine their funding priorities based on their political agendas, without direct, active, and enduring involvement of the communities in which they operate, thus perpetuating a cycle of aid tourism and commerce destined to further stabilize these relationships of subordination.

I wonder what the fairest path is to achieve equal dignity and conditions for all and question the presence of these Western entities in Global South countries.

Daily Struggles Against Economic and Environmental Adversities

Economic and environmental challenges exacerbate the struggle, as many participants recall the difficulty of supporting themselves during studies. They recount resorting to various odd jobs and fighting to secure a place to sleep.

Guido: This theme is profoundly disturbing regarding the issue of privilege and the defense of this privilege that psychology enacts. In my view, the educational journey can be an emancipatory act that accompanies the trainee on a path of conscientization and move away from the margins. It restores the liberating function to the discipline of psychology. The white psychologist in training, privileged and unlikely to confront economic and class issues in their educational path, is disengaged from the fundamental awareness of how economic privilege determines well-being and health. This privileged path to professional training disembodies the psychologist from the crucial understanding that economic privilege is a determinant of wellness and health, making them an agent of readjustment and re-socialization to inequitable conditions rather than a promoter of social change. If one were to think of the psychologist in their white perception, they would be seen more as a champion of power rather than an activist for radical change.

Chiara: When a psychologist lacks awareness of issues related to privilege and socioeconomic disparities, there is a risk that their practice may reflect and perpetuate the social status quo rather than actively contributing to change and equity. To fully grasp the significance of this consideration, it is necessary to examine the role of the psychologist as a social change agent. Psychologists are not only professionals who provide individual support to their clients but also social actors who can influence societal dynamics and promote systemic changes. However, if a psychologist fails to recognize power disparities and socioeconomic inequalities that permeate society, it

is unlikely that they can effectively intervene to address them. Furthermore, coming from privileged backgrounds can influence the psychologist's perspective and priorities. Those from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds may be less inclined to recognize disparities and actively engage in social change, as maintaining the status quo may be more comfortable and advantageous for them. Consequently, they may be perceived as defenders of the existing social order rather than agents of change and social justice. Therefore, addressing this lack of awareness and the impact of privilege on the professional practice of psychologists is essential to ensure that psychology is truly equitable, responsible and liberatory. This requires ongoing commitment to training on awareness of disparities and the promotion of practice based on equity and social action. Only through this approach can psychologists authentically fulfil their role as agents of social change and advocates for equity for all.

The Looming Spectre of War and Violence

Amidst these daily struggles, the pervasive threat of war and violence casts a long shadow.

Guido: The extreme consequences of a psychological perspective serving gender, race, and class violence are the simultaneous and dramatic spread of war and genocide. Current examples include phenomena of dehumanization and blaming entire oppressed populations, whose extermination is justified, as seen in Palestine and Gaza under the guise of ethnic cleansing. Dominant psychological frameworks reduce the phenomenon of war to a matter of pure psychiatric suffering, shamefully forgetting the political antecedents and determinants of mental health. Colonial and white psychology prefers a supposed apolitical objectivity over unequivocal and unapologetic stands on behalf of the oppressed.

Chiara: I recall a phrase that my uncle used to tell me, “Chiara, if I have to choose a side, I stand with the oppressed.” This phrase encapsulates a profound ethos of solidarity and empathy, rooted in the struggles and resilience of the Neapolitan people. Throughout history, Naples has confronted enduring challenges of economic disparity, social exclusion, and cultural marginalization. These injustices have left deep scars on the collective psyche of its inhabitants, perpetuating cycles of inequality and hardship. Yet, amidst these adversities, a spirit of resistance emerges.

Given these roots, I can only reinforce your argument. Despite the glaring realities of oppression and injustice, mainstream psychology often remains conspicuously silent. White colonial psychology, in its purported quest for objectivity, conveniently sidesteps the uncomfortable truths of systemic oppression and structural violence. By adopting a stance of neutrality, it effectively absolves itself of any responsibility to confront the root causes of social inequity and exploitation. This culture of silence permeates even within academic institutions, where the pursuit of knowledge is often divorced from social responsibility. Faced with unspeakable atrocities and human rights abuses, scholars and intellectuals hesitate to take a stand, fearful of rocking the boat or jeopardizing their academic careers. Yet, in remaining silent, they unwittingly become complicit in perpetuating systems of oppression and exploitation.

Thus, the challenge lies in breaking the deafening silence, in daring to speak truth to power, and in standing unequivocally with the oppressed. It requires a reimagining of psychology as a discipline rooted in social justice and human rights, one that actively engages with the complexities of power and privilege. Only through such a transformative paradigm shift can we hope to dismantle the structures of oppression and pave the way for a more just and equitable world.

Engaging in Dialogue through Familiar and Traditional Values

During the collective narrative practice, mental health providers in Niger vividly described the challenges they face in their profession. They engaged in reflective analysis, viewing their challenges through the lens of their traditional values and attributes. Exploring values such as patience, perseverance, endurance, resilience, social cohesion, family support, greatness, mutual assistance, and a strong work ethic, they found these values deeply embedded in their experiences, enriching their cultural heritage and serving as a foundation for addressing difficulties.

At the conclusion of the practice, they expressed a profound realization: “We already possess these instruments in our traditions. Nigerien traditions are rich and powerful. The stories and proverbs merely serve as tools to harness them.” Indeed, one story they shared was that of the lion and the hyena, teaching the importance of summoning courage to support the vulnerable and combat oppression, drawing from ancestral values.

Mutual support and social cohesion play pivotal roles, exemplified by a story of community solidarity emerged during the training where a Nigerien colleague were haring that in their village, if they see a woman hesitating to go into her attic to get some millet, the community will discreetly organize a collection to help her family, so she doesn’t face any moral judgment. The next day, a wise elder will gently suggest that she check her attic again. This story highlights the interconnectedness of individuals within the community and its impact on mental health dynamics. The community’s collective action to support a struggling family reflects strong solidarity and mutual aid, essential for maintaining well-being.

Furthermore, the importance of family support is underscored, serving as a cornerstone of practitioners’ resilience and ability to navigate professional challenges. This story emphasizes the significance of community and familial ties in fostering a supportive environment conducive to mental health and well-being, epitomized by a local proverb: ‘When things become worst, only family stays close.’ Family serves as a vital source of support and strength, equipping individuals with the skills needed to overcome challenges and serving as a steadfast support system in all circumstances.

These reflections also raised questions within our duoethnographic dialogue regarding authorship and the recognition of knowledge. The following exchange reflects our different positions on whether and how participants’ contributions should be represented within academic publication.

Chiara: I kept thinking that the people who contributed to the process should also be included in the publication. Even if it’s difficult, it feels ethically important to recognise their role in producing this knowledge.

Guido: I'm not so sure. Inviting them into academic authorship might actually put them in an uncomfortable position. They do not need, nor are asking for it!

Chiara: In what sense?

Guido: Issues of privacy, exposure... But also something structural. I don't think they need this. We do. We are the ones who need publications—for our careers, our CVs.

Chiara: I agree that the academic system serves us more than it serves them. But if we don't include them, aren't we reinforcing the idea that only certain voices can produce legitimate knowledge?

Guido: Maybe. But including them in this system doesn't necessarily change that. It might just pull them into a structure that remains unequal. It's a symbolic gesture. Like inviting someone into a system that ultimately continues to reproduce their subalternity without changing.

Chiara: I see the risk. But at the same time, what counts as "valid knowledge" is still largely defined within these academic spaces. If their contributions are not recognised there, the asymmetry continues.

Guido: Or it continues anyway. Because the system itself doesn't really allow for transformation. It absorbs difference without changing its structure.

Chiara: So what do we do? Not include them, and keep speaking in their place?

Guido: I don't have a solution. I just don't think authorship, as it is currently structured, is the answer.

Chiara: Maybe not. But neither is leaving things as they are.

Guido: So again, we are left with a paradox.

Chiara: Yes. And maybe that contradiction is exactly where the ethical question lies.

Discussion

For decades, realist and objectivist epistemologies have dominated Western scientific thought, asserting that the object of inquiry exists independently of the observer's context. This viewpoint has led social scientists to overlook the intricate interplay of various factors such as policies, cultures, and power dynamics in shaping knowledge (Gemignani & Hernández-Albújar, 2019). Furthermore, researchers have been conditioned to prioritize empirical, evidence-based research, often dismissing subjectivity as an impediment to knowledge creation. However, this narrow perspective restricts our comprehension of the world and perpetuates existing power hierarchies within academia. It is crucial to chal-

lunge these entrenched paradigms and embrace a more reflexive and relational approach to research and to practice (Gemignani et al., 2023).

The influence of biographies, emotions, and individual perspectives on research carries profound implications for researchers' approach to their work, their potential activism based on their findings or observations, and their methods as a practitioners and trainers across all educational levels (Davidson et al., 2020). According to this perspective, the transition the researcher undergoes is from one typically centred on uncovering, depicting, and scrutinizing (often characterized by excessive devotion to a fixed methodology) to an approach that is relational and cooperative. In this latter approach, the researcher becomes an integral part of the process, with their position not entirely separate from the subject matter they are investigating (Gemignani et al., 2023).

This dynamic was reflected in our own experience during the training, where we initially positioned ourselves as facilitators responsible for producing the collective document, before this role was disrupted through the shift toward a more horizontal, participant-led process.

Implications for Decolonial Practice

Decolonizing psychological models requires an integrated approach with decolonial social and civil political practices (Montero, 2009). Simply engaging in the discourse of decolonization within psychology, without actively promoting and participating in broader struggles surrounding class, gender, and race, risks diluting the transformative potential of such efforts (Martín-Barò, 1998). Similarly, the structure of NGO-led interventions, often designed and funded by Western institutions, may reproduce hierarchical relations in which local practitioners are positioned as implementers rather than knowledge producers. True decolonization demands a deep interrogation of power structures and systemic injustices, alongside meaningful action to address and dismantle them across all levels of society (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). These reflections may also be relevant for practitioners working across global and postcolonial contexts, particularly those navigating similar tensions within institutional and NGO-based frameworks.

Decolonizing psychological research and practice require also a profound undertaking to liberate Western minds ensnared in the anxieties of privilege and ingrained assumptions of superiority and moral righteousness (Montero et al., 2017). It calls for the adoption of novel research methodologies and transformative practices, providing a pathway for both the colonized and the colonizer to escape the snares of scientific capitalism (Macleod et al., 2020). These entrenched systems not only reproduce social inequalities but also perpetuate political violence and structural racism, necessitating a re-evaluation of existing frameworks and a commitment to forging alternative approaches that challenge and transcend the limitations of the current scientific and societal paradigms (Adams et al., 2015).

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Limits

The positioning of Western researchers and professionals in decolonial practices is controversial (Hui, 2023). Often, decolonizing psychology seems more necessary for the dominator than the dominated. In less contentious cases, white individuals engage in decolonial practices to address their own white fragility, attempting to compensate for a privilege they

are unwilling to relinquish by adopting a decolonial sensitivity that is not demanded from the oppressed. In more contentious situations, white liberalism employs the false decolonial flag to assert its intellectual, scientific, and political superiority over dominated populations (Fanon, 1986). This tension became visible in our own reflections, particularly in moments where our presence was experienced as both supportive and problematic, and where our attempts to engage in decolonial practice risked reproducing the very hierarchies we sought to challenge.

This dialogic process enabled the emergence of insights that neither of us could have reached individually, particularly in making visible the tensions between withdrawal and engagement, authorship and representation, and complicity and resistance.

The Fanonian perspective suggests an irreconcilability between two opposing species: the fearful white individual, afraid of losing their privilege and facing the violent reaction of the uncivilized dominated, and the non-white individual driven by the desire to replace white privilege (Fanon, 1986). Even in the decolonial psychological debate, this vicious cycle seems to manifest in the fear of exact and civilized sciences losing their empirical evidence due to contamination from primitive and unscientific beliefs, and traditional knowledge seeking to assert itself, such as in ethno-psychologies that tend to describe and classify the indigenous knowledges reproducing western vision of science and knowledge, as new scientific methods, resulting in a perpetuation of domination and the extraction of rightful sciences over inaccurate and primitive beliefs (Fanon, 1961/2004).

Radical Love as Praxis

According to bell hooks, taking an ally position is paramount in advancing social justice and equality. This perspective resonates with our attempt to reposition ourselves during the training, moving from an expert-driven role toward a more relational and collaborative stance. Individuals with privilege should not merely adopt a passive ally stance, but rather actively engage in supporting and standing alongside oppressed individuals. This involves not only external commitment but also deep reflection and self-interrogation regarding one's role and privilege in society (hooks, 2014). Alliance is not just an act of solidarity but also an act of radical love, encompassing empathy, respect, and a willingness to fight together for a fairer and more inclusive world. This concept extends to oppressed psychologies, where mutual support and collaboration are crucial in addressing common challenges and promoting individual and collective liberation (hooks, 2018).

During our training, we encountered challenges in drafting the collective document due to unclear and limited notes provided by the facilitators. However, the following day, through collaborative efforts, we managed to create the collective document alongside our Nigerian colleagues, despite the difficulties. This experience underscored the limitations of working in isolation and highlighted the significance and effectiveness of collective collaboration. The collective stance of the narrative work, switching from "I" to "we", should have been our own path to decolonization.

Radical love transcends mere displays of affection or compassion; it represents a profoundly political and philosophical approach to life and human relationships, rooted in empathy, solidarity, and action for social change (hooks, 2001, 2014, 2018). Challenging traditional forms of love constrained by prejudice, discrimination, and structural violence, radical love is grounded in principles of social justice, equity, and liberation. It entails an

active commitment to recognizing and addressing the inequalities and oppressions that pervade society, actively listening to the voices of disadvantaged individuals, learning from their experiences, and supporting their causes for equality and dignity (hooks, 2018).

In oppressed psychologies, radical love translates into an approach to psychological practice centred on respect for diversity, the promotion of human dignity, and the fight against discrimination and oppression (Turner et al., 2022). It involves recognizing and addressing the implications of power and privilege in therapy and research and working to create therapeutic and academic environments that are inclusive and respectful. Radical love is not just a sentiment but also an action, manifested through daily practices of mutual support, solidarity, and commitment to change. It is a transformative force that can inspire the creation of fairer, more compassionate communities and foster awareness of one's relationships with others and with the world (hooks, 2018).

Authorship, Positionality, and Epistemic Limits

The authorship of this manuscript reflects a central and unresolved tension within the study. While the paper engages with decolonising psychological practice, it is written solely by two white Western psychologists and is grounded in their reflexive and dialogic engagement. This raises a critical question: what does it mean to produce decolonial knowledge within academic structures that continue to privilege Western authorship and epistemologies?

The choice to structure the duoethnography between the two authors is related to the methodological focus of the study, which aims to critically examine our own positionalities, assumptions, and complicities as Western practitioners operating within a postcolonial context. The “data” of the study are therefore constituted by our reflections, tensions, and exchanges, rather than by the direct accounts of participants. However, this framing does not resolve the asymmetries it produces; rather, it brings them to the centre of the inquiry.

At the same time, we recognise that this configuration is not only methodological but also shaped by broader structural conditions. Practical, linguistic, institutional, and temporal constraints influenced the authorship of this work, including the limited time available during and after the training, the norms governing academic publication, and the positioning of this work within a Western journal context. These conditions are not external to the study but are themselves part of the colonial and capitalist dynamics of knowledge production that this paper seeks to interrogate.

Participants were informed that the training process could contribute to subsequent academic work and were invited to take part in the development of this manuscript. However, they chose not to participate in the writing process. While this decision was respected, it further highlights the complexity of authorship within this context and does not eliminate the epistemic tensions at stake.

Within this configuration, there remains a risk that Nigerian colleagues appear as contributors whose experiences and narratives serve primarily to support the authors' reflexive process. We explicitly resist this positioning. The themes structuring this paper were co-constructed during the collective narrative practice, and the collective document produced during the training represents a form of knowledge that precedes and exceeds our analysis. Participants' reflections, practices, and leadership—particularly in the moment in which

they assumed control of the writing process—were not ancillary, but constitutive of the direction and possibility of this work.

Nevertheless, the absence of Nigerien co-authorship remains a significant epistemic limitation. It reflects the difficulty of enacting fully collaborative forms of knowledge production within the temporal, linguistic, and institutional constraints of this project, and raises broader questions about what kinds of knowledge become legible within Western academic publishing, and whose voices are authorised to speak within it.

A further epistemic tension concerns the status of theory within this manuscript. While we draw on authors such as Freire, hooks, Foucault, and de Sousa Santos—whose work critically engages with coloniality, oppression, and epistemic injustice—their contributions are nonetheless mobilised here as part of a broader academic theoretical framework that is institutionally recognised and legitimised within Western scholarly traditions.

In contrast, Nigerien proverbs, stories, and practices are primarily presented as illustrative material rather than as sources of theory in their own right. These risks reproducing an epistemic hierarchy in which formally codified, written, and academically validated knowledge is positioned as “theory,” while locally grounded, oral, and practice-based knowledges are positioned as examples or data.

We recognise that this tension does not lie in the authors themselves, but in how certain forms of knowledge become authorised within academic discourse, including our own reliance on familiar theoretical frameworks to interpret the materials emerging from the training. This raises questions about what counts as legitimate knowledge, and about the difficulty of fully enacting decolonial commitments within the constraints of academic writing.

Rather than resolving this contradiction, we choose to make it explicit and to engage with it as part of the inquiry itself. This involves recognising the partiality of this account and considering how future work might move beyond this configuration—through different forms of authorship, shared writing practices, and modes of dissemination that are accountable to the communities with whom the work is conducted.

Conclusion

Our training experience in Niger, coupled with the conversation we continued after, has led to a conscientization of the still-existing contradictions regarding our role within a journey aimed at decolonizing our minds and our work. Our duo-ethnography highlights the complex and contentious nature of our positions within psychological research and practice, particularly in the context of decolonization efforts. Through this discourse, we are prompted to engage in critical self-reflection regarding our positions of privilege and power, as well as the implications of our actions within the broader socio-political landscape. We underscore the importance of challenging entrenched paradigms and embracing alternative approaches that prioritize reflexivity, relationality, and social justice. As practitioners and researchers embedded within a clinical and scientific framework that often upholds the superiority of Western psychology, we are faced with the imperative to navigate the tensions between existing structures of power and the demands for decolonial transformation. This requires not only a willingness to confront our own biases and privileges but also a commitment to actively dismantle oppressive systems and advocate for more inclusive and equitable practices. Moreover, we underscore the significance of ongoing dialogue and engagement

with diverse perspectives, acknowledging the inherent complexities and contradictions that accompany efforts towards decolonization. We remind ourselves that the journey towards decolonizing psychological research and practice is multifaceted and ongoing, requiring continual interrogation of our assumptions, methodologies, and ethical frameworks, considering knowledge not through the binary lens of rationality versus emotionality or objectivity versus subjectivity, but through the interpretations that are continuous rather than dichotomous. As Paulo Freire stated “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomized” (Freire, 1970, p. 50).

We are aware that a profound transformation of science necessitates a paradigmatic political shift to dismantle centuries of Western domination and colonization of indigenous lands, bodies, and minds (Fanon, 1986). Engaging in the supposed decolonization of knowledge can deliberately become a discursive strategy of power, perpetuating new forms of colonization, subjugation, and domination, thereby reproducing inequalities and structural violence against the oppressed.

Furthermore, the very progress in science and knowledge hinges on the liberation of colonized and oppressed peoples. True technological advancements can only serve humanity when rooted in the acknowledgment and realization that the resistance of oppressed individuals in Palestine, Niger, and elsewhere in the Global South is not merely advantageous for them but presents a genuine opportunity for the liberation and flourishing of humanity as a whole. As white and Western psychologists, our role can only be that of allies, supporting the oppressed in leading the struggle for liberation and the evolution of the human species (Best, 2009; Malherbe, 2022).

In essence, the discourse presented in the text serves as a catalyst for critical reflection and action, challenging us to reconsider our roles within the field of psychology and encouraging us to work towards a more just and inclusive praxis. Through this process, we have begun to interrogate our roles and contemplate how to navigate them, all while remaining situated within a clinical and scientific context that often perpetuates the superiority of Western psychology as the norm.

The contribution of this study lies not in offering definitive findings, but in making visible the tensions that shape decolonial practice. At the same time, this dialogic process has already begun to shape how we approach our practice, particularly in becoming more attentive to relational accountability, shared knowledge production, and the conditions under which engagement may reproduce or unsettle power hierarchies. These reflections do not lead to resolution. As discussed throughout this paper, the tensions we encounter—around authorship, legitimacy, and the conditions of knowledge production—cannot be fully addressed within the current structures of academic work. However, remaining within these contradictions does not mean remaining inactive. Rather, it calls for situated and partial forms of engagement. In this sense, we do not propose solutions, but we identify directions that may guide our future practices. This includes creating conditions, where possible, for more sustained and relational forms of collaboration, and remaining attentive to how and when authorship becomes meaningful, problematic, or insufficient. It also involves experimenting with ways of sharing knowledge that are not limited to academic publication, and that may be more accessible or relevant to those involved in the work. At the same time, we recognise that even these attempts remain entangled within the very systems we seek to question. For this reason, our commitment is not to resolve these tensions, but to continue

engaging them in practice—remaining accountable to their implications, and open to being unsettled by them.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval Formal ethical approval was not sought for this study, as it is grounded in a duoethnographic reflection on the authors' own experiences and positionalities. However, the work is situated within a collective training context involving Nigerien colleagues. For this reason, ethical considerations have been addressed through an ethics of care, with particular attention to relational accountability, the anonymisation of shared materials, and the collective nature of the themes discussed.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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