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Stine Agnete Sand

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How should the non-Indigenous speak? A discussion of decolonizing academia, positioning, and freedom of speech



Stine Agnete Sand 

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT

How can we engage in Indigenous research that allows multiple perspectives and knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity? Answering calls for decolonization of the academy and the need for researchers to do their homework, I use my position as an ‘inbetweeneer’ in a Sámi, Indigenous context, experiences with peer reviewers as gatekeepers, and theoretical and methodological discussions about Indigenous research, to reflect upon this question. The review processes are seldomly discussed, although reviewers have the power to decide whether research gets published or not. Questions remain on how research should be carried out and who can speak, especially in a Sámi-Norwegian context where Indigenous identity and being Sámi or not by no means are easy questions, due to colonialism and Norwegianization processes. There is confusion regarding *how* to do research, and what positioning means. I argue that Indigenous methodology raises a dilemma because it one the one hand offers criticism of previous western, ‘dirty’ research, urging non-Indigenous researchers to involve and ‘do their homework’, while simultaneously emphasizing that research should be done by and for Indigenous peoples, with their worldviews as a starting point. Discussions on positionality show that the outsider/insider dichotomy is problematic and that for some scholars, being Indigenous is a precondition for doing valid and important research. Non-Indigenous researchers may be associated with a colonial sin, or shame. Being morally inferior, I argue, makes it difficult for the researcher both to involve, and to have critical approaches. Doing homework should involve being able, and allowed, to engage with Indigenous peoples and societies and go beyond the colonial gaze coloured by the us/them, and victim/sinner dichotomies. Secondly, I also call upon universities, that are now institutionalizing Indigenous perspectives, to take responsibility and offer support to the individual researchers in their struggle to ‘do things right’.

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CONTACT Stine Agnete Sand  stine.sand@uit.no  Follums vei, 9509 Alta

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KEYWORDS Decolonization of academia; positioning; freedom of speech; Sámi research; Indigenous methodology; outsider insider dichotomy

Introduction

Research with an Indigenous focus has received increased interest due to discussions concerning freedom of speech and decolonizing of the academy. Scholars now call for research that challenges existing, often referred to as Western and Eurocentric research and syllabus, and that institutions and researchers acknowledge colonial history and allow for Indigenous voices and worldviews (Rigney 1999, p. 263, Smith 1999, Porsanger 2004). However, discussions concerning decolonizing the academy have also triggered a debate where some argue that identity politics and ideology overshadow knowledge and science. There are critical voices who warn against research activism, arguing that it may lead to conformity, and hinder academic diversity and freedom of speech (Iversen 2020, Christensen 2021, Hjelm 2021). Identity politics is a broad term, often used to address activism and discussions related to racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity. Recently, a report on academic freedom of speech in Norway revealed that some researchers avoid controversial research topics, such as critical race theory and structural racism because the researchers are afraid of moral condemnation (NOU 2022, p. 60).

Discussions about academic freedom and decolonizing the academy have fuelled debates globally, from South Africa to the US. Still, questions remain on how research should be carried out, especially in a Sámi¹-Norwegian context where Indigenous identity and being Sámi or not by no means are easy questions, due to colonialism and Norwegianization processes. For instance, the podcast *Samenes historie (the history of the Sámi*, broadcast on the Norwegian broadcasting corporation in November 2021), where both Sámi and non-Sámi researchers contributed, resulted in a discussion about Sámi perspectives and who should be allowed to speak on behalf of the Sámi (Somby and Ravna 2021). How can we engage in research that allows multiple perspectives and knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity? This is a crucial question because it goes to the core of what academic research and institutions stand for and depend on: trust, and that research should be free, open, and independent. There are some consequences when a field becomes political and activist, that we need to be aware of. It is undoubtedly a problem if researchers choose to stay silent, avoiding conflicts and risking their career because of reprisals from colleagues and/or institutions.

The Norwegian report on academic freedom of speech states that knowledge-based, critical thinking is crucial and that academic institutions and we as researchers need to learn about freedom of speech, to avoid censorship and silencing, which often happens in subtle ways (NOU 2022). One of these subtle ways of exercising censorship is the anonymous review process,

where reviewers have power to affect the writing process, but also decide whether research gets published or not. These review processes are seldom addressed, and I will use my position as an ‘inbetweener’ to discuss peer reviews that I have received when writing about Sámi and Indigenous film and journalism, and debates within the academy, to discuss positioning and the insider/outsider dichotomy in an Indigenous context. I also reflect upon reviewers as gatekeepers in the academic writing- and publishing process, including consequences of activist perspectives in academic research, and academic institutions’ role as promoters of Indigenous perspectives.

Through my own experiences as an ‘inbetweener’, I will address on-going theoretical and methodological discussions about Indigenous research. There is still much to be said regarding the many important questions that are now being raised as a response to colonial processes, questions that address identity struggles, reconciliation, and the power to define and speak, both within Indigenous communities and in intercultural relations. The article is, as I will show, also a response to academic calls for decolonial perspectives in research that addresses Indigenous peoples, cultures, and societies, and the quest for positionality.

Following this, I refer to the Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen, who wants the academy to take responsibility; she wants us as researchers to do our homework. Inspired by Gayatri Spivak, Kuokkanen criticizes academia for a lack of interest into Indigenous perspectives (2010, p. 67):

Spivak (1990) urges ‘the holders of hegemonic discourse’ to ‘de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other rather than simply say, ‘O. K., sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the [other]’(p. 121). Instead of taking a position of the ‘politically correct’ dominant who argue that they can no longer speak, one has to examine the historical circumstances and articulate one’s own participation in the formation that created this and other forms of silencing (Spivak 1990). One simply has to take a risk since ‘to say “I won’t criticize” is salving your conscience and allowing you not to do any homework’ (Spivak 1990, pp. 62–63).

I read this as a call to us as academics – that we need to challenge ourselves instead of standing on the outside, not interfering. But *how* should we as researchers involve? There is much insecurity regarding how to engage and talk about Indigenous matters, if you are non-Indigenous, or perhaps an ‘inbetweener’. I will therefore, as part of my homework, discuss and problematize academic research- and review processes and how we can speak about Indigenous issues.

From colonization to ‘institutionalized sámification’ of the academy

In Sápmi, on-going discussions about freedom of speech, representation, and academic research are rooted in colonial history. Although the Norwegian

state's assimilation policy ended during the 1950s and 1960s, our country is still dealing with the aftereffects. Norwegianization meant that the Sámi only learned Norwegian at school, and as a result, many lost their language, but also their identity as a Sámi. Some parents chose not to speak Sámi to their children. In a society where the Sámi were looked down upon, parents thought it would be better for the children to grow up as Norwegians. Racism, to hide your ethnicity, or simply to reject your Sámi identity, are some of the consequences of the Norwegianization process. However, although the Sámi are dealing with a troubled past, we are witnessing a blooming of Sámi culture in for instance music, film, and art. With the processes of cultural empowerment taking place in Sápmi, media stories are increasingly told by Sámi themselves. A new generation use media to speak up and express themselves, challenging existing stereotypes and advancing Sámi perspectives in the public sphere. This paradigm shift within Sámi society also affects the interethnic relationship between the Sámi and the majority. Discussions concerning who can speak and whether 'outsiders' should speak about Indigenous issues, take place frequently.

As part of an increased awareness of Indigenous matters and as a response to previous colonial processes, the academic institutions in Northern Norway are increasing their focus on Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. A cornerstone for Sámi academic research, Sámi allaskuvla/Sámi University of Applied Sciences (SUAS) in Guovdageaidnu, Troms and Finnmark county, is a meeting place for Sámi students and researchers across Sápmi. SUAS was established in 1989 and it has a national responsibility for Sámi higher education, including education within teaching and journalism. The college attempts to develop Sámi as an academic language and established an academic journal in the North Sámi language, *Sámi dieđalaš áigečála*, together with UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, in 1994. UiT is also increasing the emphasis on Sámi research and education. The Secretariat for The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which mandate was to examine the Norwegianization process and its consequences, was established at UiT, as well as The Centre for Sámi Studies (Sesam), a resource centre for Sámi and Indigenous research, education, and knowledge production. Nord University in Nordland County has national responsibility for conducting research and offering education in the Southern and Lule Sámi languages and culture. Furthermore, Nord University has set up a dedicated Centre for Sámi studies.

To conclude, the academic institutions in Northern Norway are now actively dealing with colonial history, by including Sámi perspectives in strategies, syllabus, and research. I suggest the term 'institutionalized Sámi-fication' to describe this process, meaning that the institutions acknowledge and adjust to the needs of the Sámi, implementing Sámi perspectives at all levels, from the top (strategies and documents) to the bottom (how these perspectives are implemented in research, planning, and teaching).

However, although Sámi perspectives are becoming institutionalized, it is still up to the individual researcher how to engage, in teaching, development of courses, syllabus, and in research. It places the researcher in a lonely and exposed situation, especially since research on Indigenous matters is debated. A study from Sweden, which explored discussions of research ethics in 57 research proposals and among 160 scholars within the Sámi research field, reveals that there is great uncertainty regarding ethics and that there are no clear and helpful instruments for how to accomplish research related to the Sámi (Drugge 2016, p. 270). While the universities are now trying to do their homework and acknowledging their responsibilities as institutions in a Sámi area, to secure the individual researcher with sufficient support to be able to 'do things right', should also be a prioritized topic in the future.

An Indigenous paradigm shift: challenging western epistemes

Within the academy, many Sámi, but also non-Sámi researchers, question western epistemes and research that has been carried out by non-Sámi researchers. Students and researchers have called for diversity, decolonial thinking and revisions of reading lists that have been, it is argued, too focused on western epistemologies (Engblad 2021).

How to 'indigenize' academia has become an important topic not only in Sápmi. In Canada, many universities try to indigenize through increasing the number of Indigenous students, by working to reconcile Indigenous and European knowledge, and transforming and balancing power relations between Indigenous peoples and Canadians (Gaudry and Lorenz 2018). Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the Māori researcher behind the book *Decolonizing methodologies*, links what she describes as 'dirty research' to colonialism and western researchers who focus on Indigenous peoples, cultures, and societies from the outside, marginalizing Indigenous voices (Smith 1999). In the book *Recognition, reconciliation and restoration*, the editors are concerned about colonial and decolonial processes, stating that 'an indigenous research paradigm is needed' (Henriksen *et al.* 2019, p. 10). They refer to Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 1) who describe the paradigm as 'ethical, performative, healing, transformative, decolonizing, and participatory. It must be committed to dialogue, community, self-determination, and cultural autonomy'. Participatory knowledge production means that research should happen in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, and their needs must be acknowledged. Indigenous methodology also promotes the importance of an insiders' knowledge, meaning research by and for Indigenous peoples (Smith 1999, Evans *et al.* 2009, p. 894)

Rauna Kuokkanen, who is a Sámi researcher from the Finnish side of Sápmi, has written extensively on Sámi research and what she describes as an

Indigenous paradigm from a Sámi perspective. She has also challenged the academy to do its homework and take responsibility towards Indigenous epistemes, arguing that the academy is characterized by 'epistemic ignorance' (Kuokkanen 2000, 2008, 2010). Her use of the concept epistemic ignorance is influenced by Gayatri Spivak's discussion of 'sanctioned ignorance' (Spivak 1999), and it 'refers to ways in which academic theories and practices ignore, marginalize and exclude other than dominant Western European epistemic and intellectual traditions' (Kuokkanen 2008, p. 63). According to Kuokkanen, the academy fails to recognize Indigenous epistemes grounded on different conceptions of the world and ways of knowing, and thus Indigenous peoples cannot speak: 'indigenous scholars and students, in educational institutions which are predominantly Western European in their intellectual and philosophical traditions, are faced with a set of values, views and expectations that differ in several critical ways from their own' (2008, p. 62). Referring to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 1), Kuokkanen argues that, as part of a decolonial process, an important research principle is to 'give back', to conduct research that has positive outcomes and is relevant to Indigenous peoples (2010, p. 66). She also argues that Sámi and other Indigenous scholars must be careful so that their knowledge will not be stolen or appropriated, including to 'ensure that our knowledge is addressed and discussed by ourselves' (Kuokkanen 2000, p. 420).

However, Indigenous methodology does not give any clear answers to how it can or should be expressed in research, in contrast to 'western' theory and methodology. It raises a dilemma because it on the one hand offers criticism of previous western, 'dirty' research, urging non-Indigenous researchers to involve and 'do their homework', while simultaneously emphasising that research should be done by and for Indigenous peoples, with their worldviews as a starting point. What role can, or should, a non-Indigenous researcher have in the on-going processes of decolonization, knowledge building and -exchange in a cross-cultural context? In the following, I will reflect upon position and experiences from review processes.

Positioning and thick description

Positioning relates to how identity gives you a platform to speak from. I follow Haraway who claims that identity is never finished or whole and that positions are mobile: it is therefore possible 'to see together without claiming to be another' (1988, p. 586). Examples from one's life story are used to situate and position oneself as a researcher, which means not only to describe, but to go deeper, daring to use personal experiences to say something of relevance to a broader audience. I find positioning to be closely related to 'thick description' and the importance of addressing the

context, the situation under which the interpretations are made. I am inspired by Denzin, who links ‘thick description’ to ‘thick interpretation’:

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (Denzin 1989, p. 83).

I believe that situatedness, subjectivity, and context, can be relevant to explore in certain research processes, and offer insight into unique experiences. A uniquely situated researcher may offer knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Writing is a way of knowing, discovery, and analysis, not always separable from the content. As Donna Haraway argues, ‘science is a contestable text and a power field; the content is the form’ (1988, p. 577). I will now position myself as an ‘inbetweener’, the position from which I speak in the following analysis.

An account on being an inbetweener

I grew up in a small town in eastern Norway in the late 1970s and 80s. I can’t remember any acquaintance with the Sámi from my upbringing, although I vaguely recall watching the tv-series *Ante*, about a young, Sámi boy from a reindeer herding family. We used to travel to Northern Norway every summer to visit my grandparents in Balsfjord (in Sámi: Báhccavuotna), Troms and Finnmark county. I knew that most of the Sámi also lived ‘up there’ in the north. Once, we stopped at a Sámi shop near the road. A Sámi woman sold dolls wearing *gákti* (Sámi traditional clothes), and my mother bought me one. This was the first time I met a Sámi person (that I know of), and I remember being curious. When we visited my grandparents, I never heard anything about our family being Sámi. At school, we learned very little about the Sámi. A boy in my class sometimes called me Sámi, because my parents were from Northern Norway, and because of what he described as a ‘Sámi’ look. It was not meant as a compliment.

Many years later, in 2006, I moved to Finnmark in Northern Norway. I have three Sámi children and their father is Sámi, coming from a reindeer herding family. Throughout the fourteen years of marriage, I was part of a *siida*, an ancient, Sámi community system consisting of several families, who help each other with herding the reindeer. I sometimes took part in this work, including herding, and marking of the reindeer calves. My children speak Sámi and have attended a Sámi kindergarten and they have also been pupils in a Sámi class, with a Sámi syllabus. I understand and speak some

Sámi and have been part of a Sámi environment at kindergarten, work, school, social gatherings and so on. As a researcher and filmmaker, I have actively engaged in research and various disseminations, writing, and talking about Sámi media, and I have worked at SUAS' Master in Indigenous journalism for two and a half years. Together, these experiences have formed my connection and knowledge concerning Sámi society, culture, and people.

After two years in Finnmark, I started working for the Finnmark University College in 2008, which became part of UiT in 2013. When I was new to academia, a colleague challenged me to write about my experiences as a journalist/filmmaker (Eira 2015). I had previously produced films about Indigenous, Sámi women for the national public service broadcaster NRK. I struggled with writing the article, not just because writing articles was new to me, but because I had to address how I as a majority person had chosen to represent the two Indigenous women in my films. Was I any better than previous filmmakers, who had been criticized for being outsiders, gazing at the exotic Others? Were my images better, more nuanced? In the article, I acknowledged my affiliation with the Sámi, and my goal, which was to show two remarkable, strong women who worked among men, one as a reindeer herder, the other as a fisher woman. However, I also problematized being an outsider, but in a position to define these women. Although habitus is not unchangeable, I found that my habitus as a journalist exerted the greatest influence on my film work and not my habitus as a person with connections to both the majority and minority.

Many people who have a family who comes from Northern Norway, have Sámi roots. After I moved to Finnmark, this topic came up from time to time—many people, including Sámi, have asked whether I have Sámi roots because of how I look. I have regarded myself as Norwegian, but because I live in a Sámi area and know that my family comes from Northern Norway, I started asking questions. I knew that my grandmother and my grandmother's sister on my mother's side were 'readers'² and that they could stop blood, which is a Sámi healing practice. They had learned it from their mother. My father, who is interested in genealogy, found out that my mother's parents had Sámi background and that many of the small villages in Balsfjord are Sámi. For instance, there is an old reindeer fence on the property of my uncle and aunt. I am not sure whether, or how, this knowledge changes anything on my behalf— it is probably a process without a start or an end. However, working as an academic within the field of Indigenous media has made the topic unavoidable.

'Not acceptable to dismiss indigenous worldviews'. Reviewers as gatekeepers

As a scholar, you should be evaluated by your peers, and not by the state or by academic institutions. Other researchers with similar competencies as the

producers of the work, evaluate the quality of the research. However, the process is not very transparent and usually takes place behind closed curtains, and there are no general, specific review criteria. This hidden part of science means that essential parts of the scientific discussion are invisible to the general audience. I will in the following use examples from the writing processes of two articles that I have been involved in, and review processes related to these. Both articles deal with Indigenous media.

In 2021, I wrote an article together with two other researchers, one being Indigenous, the other one speaks a minority language (Ni Bhroin *et al.* 2021). It was a review article of other researcher's writings on Indigenous media, and we presented our methods, including how we had carried out the search- and review process, *without* addressing ourselves and our positionality. We discussed back and forth whether we should write about ourselves. Since we were not out in the field doing for instance observations or interviews, but doing a review of other researcher's articles, we decided not to elaborate on our positions and Indigenous methodology. We hoped that if a reviewer would criticize us, the reviewer would ask us to elaborate and not just reject the article. We submitted the article to an acknowledged media studies journal, and it was sent to review.

One of the reviewers had critical remarks, but not specifically on our positionality. This reviewer did not reject the article but recommended that we should rewrite and resubmit. The other reviewer was also positive towards the article, commenting that it was 'well constructed and well written and that aspects of the research have the potential to make a good contribution to the field, but in its current form it is fundamentally flawed'. In the next paragraph, the reviewer went on and explained why it was flawed:

The authors state blithely on page 4 that 'Indigenous methodology and epistemology is beyond the scope of this paper'. This goes to the crux of what I see as a first principle problem with the manuscript. It is simply not acceptable to dismiss Indigenous worldviews in one sentence – especially when your topic is Indigenous!

The reviewer referred to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) work on Indigenous methodologies, and continued:

Smith is at pains to show why research is a 'dirty word' among many Indigenous peoples because of the inherent racism in dismissing their worldviews and asserting 'scientific, objective' research approaches that 'classify' Indigenous people and Indigenous culture (exactly what the authors are doing in this manuscript by adopting the position that they implicitly have the right and can 'define' Indigenous journalism while totalizing Indigenous people throughout the world in one grand sweep of a journal article). There is no reflexivity about the researcher-Indigenous relationship to be found in the manuscript. While 'objectivity' is discussed briefly the authors have not considered their inherently 'objective' Western method.

The authors are advised to read Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007), which also involves re-thinking the nature of social-scientific knowledge (epistemology, methods and forms of communication) in a context of respect for intellectual traditions from the global periphery. Indigenous researchers including Smith (1999) and Rigney (1999) who work within a critical studies paradigm argue that Indigenous people want research and its design to contribute to their self-determination and liberation struggle as defined and controlled by their communities (Rigney 1999, p. 109). A question for the authors then is how does their piece of research serve those aims? And if this is not research useful to Indigenous people, then how can the authors justify it, given the points outlined above?

The reviewer asked us to adopt a much more reflexive approach and 'resisting the colonization impulse to "classify from the outside" ...' The reviewer problematizes that we use 'western' methods, that we come from the outside, and that the research does not specifically address Indigenous involvement or say how it will contribute to self-determination. Based on the critical remarks from reviewer two, the editor rejected our article.

We decided to rewrite the article to avoid that it would be interpreted as being written by non-Indigenous, 'colonial' scholars. In a short section with the subtitle 'Epistemology', we wrote about our connections to Indigenous and minority communities, including how we considered our backgrounds and experiences a strength, ensuring a sensitive and reflexive approach to our analyses and collaboration. Our rewritten article was accepted, and two of the three reviewers commented on positionality: 'The authors' approach, in particular their reflection on their own positioning, is important for this research field' (reviewer one). Reviewer number two wrote: 'A laudable aspect in the methods section is positionality on the part of the researchers, esp. in a context of Indigenous research'. The article was published.

When writing a new article about Indigenous film, I struggled. Based on the experience from the previous review process, I knew that when writing about Indigenous matters, you may meet activist reviewers who ask you to use certain theories and approaches. After 15 years in a Sámi area, including the acknowledgement of my own Sámi affiliation on my mother's side of the family, to describe my relationship with the Indigenous community, was not easy. Would my now newly discovered, biological connection to the Sámi mean that I was more allowed to speak? And why? I remember reflecting on whether I should write that I had a Sámi background, then I could perhaps avoid critical remarks regarding positionality. It was an absurd thought, because I believe that it is my experience, knowledge, and interest throughout these years, and not my biological connection, that give me, as a scientist, a voice, and a platform to speak and contribute from. Actively taking part in a dialogical space means being in a continuous process, which demands the ability to listen and learn. Allowing for dialogue and epistemic diversity also involves ruptures, including willingness to challenge your

values, prejudices, and (lack of) knowledge. I did not add my family history to the article or elaborate on my connections to the Sámi (Sand 2022). I decided that my research and my methodological approach would show that I had done 'my homework', including reading interviews with the director, analysis and reviews of the film, theories on colonialism and racism, and research done by Sámi scholars. I submitted the article.

The first reviewer did not comment on position, or ask me to use specific, decolonial perspectives. But the second reviewer wrote, 'I wonder why this author chooses to only use postcolonial theory when de and anti-colonial theory continue to be urged by Indigenous scholars. If Sámi lands were post-colonial, they would be given back entirely to Sámi peoples'. The reviewer also addressed my methods: 'Particularly with work on Indigenous foci, it is important to situate the reflexivity of the author, the methods (decolonizing or mainstream qualitative) etc.'. I checked with the journal, and in terms of self-reflexivity, that was a perspective pursued by the reviewer and not the policy of the journal. However, I still had to find a way to meet the requests. I wanted the article to get published, but I had critical remarks regarding the comments from the second reviewer. I was also afraid that the reviewer would reject the article if I argued against his or her requests. Instead of writing my personal history, I wrote that I was not an 'outsider' with little knowledge of Sámi culture. I added that I live in a Sámi area, and that many people who live here experience the results of colonization, including struggles concerning identity, but also reconciliation- and empowerment processes.

The reviewer accepted my revisions. I also added Sámi research to my analysis, urged by the same reviewer who wondered why I chose to use post-colonial theory. Postcolonial theory, or the concept -post, is debated, because it implies that colonialism is over, which is obviously not true since the after-effects of colonialism are still taking place worldwide. Still, many Sámi researchers refer to postcolonial theory because it deals with the results of colonialism, such as othering and internalized racism. It would therefore be wrong *not* to categorize postcolonial theory as de-colonial, as the reviewer implies. In my view, this point shows how political and debated this field is – the reviewer implies that postcolonial theory is not de- or anti-colonial, even though many Sámi researchers refer to postcolonial theory specifically in a decolonial context (Kuokkanen 2006, Dankertsen 2019).

Research by and for Indigenous peoples? A discussion of positioning

An important reason why the first article was rejected, was our lack of positionality. The reviewer wanted us to adopt a much more reflexive approach and resist to 'classify from the outside'. Other researchers have also addressed

positionality and problematized their role as Norwegian researchers writing about the Indigenous Sámi. The Norwegian scholar Eyvind Skille writes:

when Indigenous research methodology is ‘research by and for Indigenous peoples, using techniques and methods from the traditions of those peoples’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, p. x; Evans *et al.* 2009, p. 894; emphasis added), the position of a non-Indigenous researcher in the study of Indigenous peoples is contested. When Indigenous scholars are lifted, prioritized, focused or centred, one possible implication is smaller chances for an ethnic Norwegian scholar’ (Skille 2021, p. 6).

Skille has experienced different views upon his position, including being excluded by Sámi scholars because he did not speak the Sámi language, while others have been positive. He interprets that as not being considered culturally skilled and asks; ‘can researchers like me be considered as insiders, or deemed to be outsiders?’ (Skille 2021, p. 9). He refers to Torjer Olsen, who writes ‘Indigeneity and non-indigeneity are not binaries. There is space in between – in the cultural interface’ (Olsen 2018, p. 6).

Moe and Hedlund, two Norwegian researchers writing about the South Sámi and welfare services, problematize ‘whether a researcher can provide valid knowledge of “the others” without belonging to that category themselves’ (2019, p. 221). As researchers, they were anxious to be associated with previous colonization processes, and they argue that Norwegian researchers need to ‘free themselves from the previous sins of their ancestors’ (Moe and Hedlund 2019, p. 220). Olsen problematizes that even though non-Indigenous researchers may have good will and academic skills, non-Indigenous researchers ‘can be seen as symptoms of the colonial aftermath (...) They (we) remain colonisers’ (Olsen 2018, pp. 209–210).

These discussions on positionality, as reflected in research and review processes that I have been involved in, imply that, for some scholars, being Indigenous is an important precondition for doing valid and important research. Furthermore, it reveals that non-Indigenous research can be seen as problematic, and that non-Indigenous researchers may be associated with a colonial sin, or shame, both by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.

It is worrying if the insider-outsider dichotomy overshadows other important aspects of research, including challenging blind spots, group thinking and conformity in perspectives, as researchers continue to problematize their own position and whether they are ‘allowed’ to do research on Indigenous matters. It places the *researcher* in focus, and thus there is a risk of ‘writing out’ Indigenous peoples, agency, and perspectives by placing them in a colonial discourse that emphasizes the Indigenous as victims and the majority as sinners. This colonial discourse leaves little room for knowledge exchange because it reduces research to a matter of ethnicity and representations. Doing homework should involve being able, and allowed, to involve with

Indigenous peoples and societies and go beyond the colonial gaze coloured by the us/them, and victim/sinner dichotomies.

A second problem with the quest for positionality is that it implicitly means that you are more allowed to speak if you are Indigenous and that the research is better, coming from inside. This discussion about positions can contribute to a gap between majority researchers and Indigenous researchers, which can construct unnatural ethnic borders. As my own experiences reveal, the outsider-insider dichotomy is by no means straightforward in a Sámi- Norwegian context. My identity is a product of, and indebted to, cultural encounters. 'The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (Haraway 1988, p. 586). Whether you are Sámi or not is not always either/or, but often a constructive, toilsome process. Being Sámi is not only a matter of blood and biology, but also about self-ascription (Bjørklund 2016).

Indigenous or not, every researcher speaks from a position. It affects how you view and understand the world, research interests, how you approach the field of research and the choice of theories and methods. In many contexts, it can be ethically important to discuss your position and whether such positions affect research results. Nevertheless, it is *how* we carry out our research, such as the choice of research question and methods, how we use and interpret our findings, choice of theory, that determine the validity and relevance of the research results. I believe that as a trained researcher, one should be capable of doing important and relevant research that involves Indigenous peoples even though you are not Indigenous yourself. After all, researchers should, as Spivak and Kuokkanen point out, do their homework when writing about Indigenous issues. In my view, this means to acknowledge your lack of knowledge, being able to listen and learn, being honest, and explain how you have carried out your research.

We must also ask ourselves what positionality implies. For instance, do we need to be personal, describing our affiliation each time we write about Indigenous matters? My point is not that we never should discuss positionality, it is obviously relevant in many forms of research. But I think we need to ask ourselves; why do we position ourselves? What does it imply and what do we want to obtain? Otherwise, we risk that these reflections just become a shallow practice that researchers do out of duty.

The frame of shame and sin and how to speak

Kuokkanen criticizes academics and their interest in Indigenous epistemes, or ways of knowing: 'The responsibility of academics cannot be limited to somewhat neutral description of who we are, as it has become the common

practice at least in the more self-reflective, critical academic circles' (2010, p. 68). However, I argue that these neutral descriptions may not only come from lack of interest, but from shame – that non-Indigenous researchers carry colonial sins with them and therefore wish to be careful when approaching Indigenous societies and peoples. Researchers are aware of previous 'dirty research' and do not want to contribute to further silencing of Indigenous voices. A second reason is fear – of not being Sámi enough, insecurity of whether the connection to the Sámi is 'good' enough to be allowed to speak, and an experience of being careful of what to say and adjusting to certain ways of doing research. I have, and have had, these reflections of insecurity when doing my research, but I will argue that this underlying fear is also expressed in several articles that discuss positioning and writing about Sámi issues (Drugge 2016, Olsen 2018, Moe and Hedlund 2019, Skille 2021).

When doing research that involves the Sámi, findings from Sweden show that there is widespread uncertainty among scholars on where to seek ethical guidance, 'over whether discussions of ethics are relevant in the first place, what they are supposed to include, how they are meant to be undertaken and what consequences can be expected from the presence or absence of ethics in indigenous research' (Drugge 2016, p. 263). There is a gap between the goals expressed in strategies, which emphasize Sámi perspectives, and the actual practice. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that researchers, who try to meet the call for decolonial approaches and positionality, end up with shallow, or what Kuokkanen (2010, p. 68) describes as 'neutral descriptions' of who they are. It is not necessarily a lack of good will, but insecurity regarding how to carry out research within the Sámi research field.

A possible consequence of fear of speaking and shame is lack of critical sense; the belief that you, as an outsider, are not allowed to criticize. The colonial history of Indigenous peoples means, in the words of the Sámi researcher Henry Minde, that their political claims are of 'a higher moral order' (2003, p. 101). Being morally inferior makes it difficult for non-Indigenous academics to criticize, because they belong to the majority and are associated with colonial sins. Renewed Indigenous identity emerging out of oppression and marginalization can result in exclusivism, intolerance, and discrimination (Niezen 2003, p. 214). The Māori researcher Brendan Hokowithu (2013, p. 113) warns against universalizing victimhood: 'as an Indigenous consciousness becomes globalized via Indigenous media, an uber oppressed/oppressor dialectic must not take center stage, although it is probable that it already has'.

To be regarded as a victim can be a powerful position because of moral superiority, including an Indigenous discourse that emphasizes how and whether the non-Indigenous should involve in research. My point is not that Indigenous worldviews and decolonial theories should be avoided, but if research should always be defined and controlled by Indigenous

communities (Rigney 1999, pp. 109–110), then the role of the researcher has changed from being an independent researcher to being a helper, or a tool. What happens to research if it should only serve certain interests? There is a risk that it will contribute to conformity and self-censorship, not allowing for critical perspectives and arguments. I do not deny the importance of researchers' trying to be open for new, and various Indigenous perspectives. What I resist, is forcing researchers to use certain theories and methodologies for the research to be published. Even though Indigenous peoples' voices undoubtedly have been marginalized, ideology should not overshadow the academic freedom of speech. We risk researchers who stay away from this field because it becomes too politicized. We need a variety of perspectives, also critical voices, from within, outside, and in-between, that actively engage in research. Otherwise, everyone will suffer, also Indigenous communities. I argue that it is possible to do important research that can contribute to decolonization and increased awareness of Indigenous peoples struggles, *without* being explicitly political. My argument is the same as the advocates for decolonizing the academy are pursuing; narrowness in theoretical perspectives is bad, diversity is good. Researchers on Indigenous topics should be allowed to not *only* use Indigenous methodology and theories. Simultaneously, syllabus should also include decolonial perspectives and not only research from white, western, and middle-aged men.

Conclusion: a call for a more critical approach

Academic freedom implies that the individual researcher should have the freedom to decide what to research, and how one will conduct the research (NOU 2022). My experiences show that in some cases, reviewers might try to decide this for you, based on an activist, decolonial position. A central task for reviewers and us as academics should be to cultivate and reward dissent and different opinions: Science can only be developed by someone being able and willing to challenge ways of thinking and assumed truths (NOU 2022). I believe that a reviewer should not demand that the author adapts a certain perspective or theory. The risk is lack of diversity; one-dimensional research where divergent opinions and understandings can be hindered by reviewers, who function as gatekeepers for the scholar to get her research published. Ideology, for instance to work towards, and having a decolonial agency, should not get in the way of diversity of opinions, including a multiplicity of theories, methods, and perspectives. We must overcome the contradiction that lies in the quest of Indigenous researcher's need to write for and about themselves on the one hand, which may *exclude* non-Indigenous researchers, and, on the other hand, the call for non-Indigenous researchers to engage, but only if they use certain perspectives. This *includes* the non-Indigenous researchers, but also bind them to having an activist approach.

Research and my own review processes reveal that there is much insecurity regarding the meaning of positions, and the difference between being an insider and outsider. As shown, knowledge, and to speak from a position, cannot always be connected to being Sámi or not, and although addressing positions is sometimes necessary, it is problematic if discussions of positioning in an Indigenous research context connect 'good' research to the insider, meaning research done by and for Indigenous peoples, while the position of an outsider means that the research is potentially problematic, and/or of lesser value. Position does not in *itself* imply the value of the research, it is possible to do good, and decolonial research even though you are not Indigenous.

I therefore argue in favour of a more critical approach towards activist review- and research processes. Research is never neutral; we all carry our values with us, and we should not aim for political homogeneity. Furthermore, we should be careful towards group thinking, and attempts to silence certain researchers who do not have the 'right' opinion. Otherwise, we risk researchers who choose not to speak, who are afraid of being labelled racist/white/privileged, or that they adjust their research, implementing certain methods and theories in accordance with what they think is necessary to get published. Lack of conformity and absence of ideological or political alignment are also important for society's trust in research and academic institutions. The discussion concerning decolonizing the academy and how to carry out research should not be the responsibility of the researcher alone, especially in contexts, such as in Northern Norway, where academic institutions increase their emphasis on Indigenous perspectives.

We should meet the call from Kuokkanen, Smith and other researchers with an Indigenous background, we must dare to challenge ourselves and do our homework, and that applies for all, whether we are Indigenous or not. However, I also ask for understanding; the possibility of 'going in' and engage can seem narrow, there is not always room for diverging meanings. It sometimes feels like walking a tightrope, easy to step on someone's toe. To give room for dialogue and epistemic diversity involves ruptures, including the will to challenge own values, prejudices and (lack of) knowledge. To participate actively in a dialogic space means being in a continuous process, which demands the ability to listen and learn, but also to meet each other with openness and acceptance of different perspectives – and we *all* bear the responsibility for that to happen.

Notes

1. The Indigenous Sámi people live across four states. Sápmi is a geographical area that include (mostly the Northern) parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. There are eleven languages, although Northern Sámi is the most

common. The Sámi has their own national day, Sámi álbmotbeaivi, on the 6th of February.

2. Little is written about 'guovlar/lesere' (readers). A reader is a healer who is believed to heal your illness, often reading religious texts and quotes from the Bible. It is affiliated with Sámi traditional healing practices.

Notes on contributor

Stine Agnete Sand works as a professor of media studies at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. She has a background as a journalist and documentary filmmaker, and has published on Indigenous media and Sámi film, regional film- and television, journalism, public service broadcasting, and media policy.

ORCID

Stine Agnete Sand  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8842-3272>

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