

The Cycle of Decolonisation: A tool for applying anthropology to policy and practice and achieving social justice

*Anthropology as a discipline is not always one that is closely associated with social policy and directly contributing to domestic policymaking. In this post, **Suriyah Bi** describes how through founding [The Equality Act Review](#), she successfully united, researchers, those researched and politicians to drive policy change and how the cycle of decolonisation can be used as a method to bring marginalised voices to centre of political decision making.*

As an academic anthropologist, I have always been fascinated by narratives that were captured through ethnographic fieldwork. At the same time however, I have increasingly become frustrated with the way in which these narratives are more than often stored away in the audio files and extensive fieldwork notes, lacing journal articles and monograph chapters, rather than making a positive difference to the lives of the interlocuters they depend on.

Recentring the stories of those at the margins

In part as a response to these shortcomings, in 2018 I founded [The Equality Act Review](#) with the aim to strengthen the legislation and ensure that the most vulnerable were being provided the protection they required. In founding The Equality Act Review, I wanted to not only use my own positionality as a woman of the margins (particularly my experience of [Muslimness as marginality](#)) as way to practice reflexive anthropology, but also to recenter the marginalised through research, to influence policy, specifically around equality. In anthropological terms, this placed me at the crossroads of key notions such as, [insider anthropology](#), [organic intellectuals](#) and calls for anthropologist to turn their gaze inwards towards their own communities. It also called for a careful consideration of the power dynamics between researcher and researched and the ways in which we anthropologists should present the voices of those with limited agency. Finally, as a participant-activist in my own research, it raises questions about how exactly a researcher can [ethically employ](#) social research for social impact.

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A raw element of ethnographic research methods in anthropology are the narratives and lived experiences of interlocuters. What Clifford Geertz called '[thick description](#)', nuances of the complex dynamics within which as human beings we are embedded and which escape statistical measurement. One of the Equality Act Review's first research projects explored Muslim women's experiences of work and career development. A key finding was 47.2% of 425 survey respondents experienced islamophobia and discrimination in the workplace. However, it is only when we present interview extracts such as "*my colleague threatened she would burn my headscarf so that I would have to leave work without one*", that the economy of emotions is triggered. Too many of us have become numb to statistics, so when we come across a human story or experience, it captivates us, often jolting us into action. It is precisely this concentrated power in ethnographic research and the narratives we encounter through our interlocuters, which can be mobilised for positive social change.

The cycle of decolonisation

Within academia, the concept of decolonisation has become almost inseparable from debates around diversifying curricula and academic discourse. While this be applauded for creating seismic shifts in academic circles, it is however practiced in a singular and static way. If we were to reverse engineer this issue we might – trace the roots of the lack of diversity in academic discourse – we would find that this is inseparable from the issue of the lack of diversity in academia. Going a step further, we may consider the lack of diversity in academia as a result of under representation of diverse candidates at the PhD level. At this stage we can begin to ask questions such as ‘why are ethnic minorities pursuing postgraduate study at lower rates than undergraduate study?’, ‘What are the barriers Black and Ethnic Minority students face when studying for a PhD?’. Such a reverse engineering approach can help to identify meaningful causes, shift debates, and make space to design new policy approaches.

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How to make these leaps between social issue and social policy? A tried and tested methodology I employ at the Equality Act Review is based on what I have called the Cycle of Decolonisation, which involves a cyclical exchange between the community, anthropologists, and policymakers. In the example of Muslim women’s experiences of work and career development, using ethnographic fieldwork methods, I turned to exploring experiences of a community I belonged to, capturing narratives and lived experiences through a survey and semi-structured interviews. The research findings were presented in a report that was launched in Parliament with the support of parliamentarians, who listened to readings of anonymised ethnographic extracts from Muslim women readers within the corridors of power. The presence of Muslim women in a House of commons Committee room in such a large number, also translated the research findings into the power of presence.



Fig.1 Cycle of decolonisation exemplified in the empowered Employment research project at the Equality Act Review.

To ensure that the findings of the report were reciprocated back into the community of the researched (ie. Muslim women), I designed and delivered a twelve week skills workshop at SOAS University of London, free of charge for both student and non-student Muslim women. This further broke down the barriers of the academy, ensuring that our research translates into positive social impact for those that contributed to it. In an academy with an entrenched focus on the production of manuscripts and journal publications that are heavily focused on securing material benefits for us as academics, such benefits for interlocuters and contributors to academic research are all too often deprioritised.



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In this way then, the cycle of decolonisation has a threefold effect. First, by using ethnographic research methods it decolonises experiences and perceptions of marginalised groups by recentering their voices in places of power by using ethnographic research methods. It then decolonises access to and action of policy makers by decolonising the form of information policy makers encounter, in particular by shifting from statistical data to the thick description Geertz referred to. Finally, together policy makers and academics produce an output that delivers positive social change for the community in question, such as the skills workshops, which decolonises the structures and walls of both policy and academic spaces.

Anthropology for Policy and Practice

In order for decolonisation to be effective, anthropologists of both the margins and the centre should be encouraged to evaluate how best they can mobilise the stored political power of ethnographic data, to create a more just, equal, and fair society. No doubt as a discipline, we must start to consider what it means to practice ethical anthropology, and the cycle of decolonisation, quite poetically, can help us to decolonise our own discipline so that it can be a force for social change. On this journey, we can begin by viewing the field site as multiple and co-occurring, viewing ethnography as a political tool, and subverting the oriental 'gaze' by engaging in ethical action. Now more than ever before anthropology, as a discipline and a community, must connect to policy.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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