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# **Post-colonialism: Informing Adult Education Research in Developing Countries**

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**Abstract:** *Adult education in post-independence developing countries resides within the context of national and local conditions which are connected to the legacy of colonialism. Adult education has been an integral part of development and decolonization in these countries and post-colonialism provides a valuable theoretical frame for adult education researchers working in these contexts.*

## **Introduction**

Adult education in developing countries in the post-colonial period has been influenced by national conditions such as history, culture, politics, economics, and geography (Farred, 2001; Giroux, 1992). In former colonial developing countries, adult education is influenced by these national conditions which are implicated on all levels by the colonial experience. Colonialism inundated the cultures and societies of both the colonized people and the colonizers (London, 2003; Memmi, 1967). Therefore, in a discussion of adult education in post-independence developing countries, a direct reference to the colonial experience is necessary. Colonialism is a term that has multiple meanings and is problematic in that it is “transhistorical and unspecific” (Slemon, 1995, p.106). Colonialism refers to many kinds of foreign domination and cultural control as well as economic control (London, 2003; Slemon, 1995).

The contextual dimension of adult education influences practice as well as informs the research discourse when designing and conducting studies, analyzing data, and arriving at findings and conclusions. When working and researching in post-independence developing countries, this means it is crucial for the adult educator to consider the colonial experience and post-independence efforts at decolonization in all aspects of research. Post-colonialism provides a valuable perspective for disassembling, critiquing, and understanding the context and impact of adult education in developing countries.

## **Post-colonial Theory**

Post-colonial theory critiques the legacy of colonialism and imperialism as they are expressed in social relations that uphold privilege and oppression between the centers of power in the North and the margins of power in the South (Said, 1978). Post-colonialism is associated with critical theory, post-modernism and post-structuralism (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffins, 1995; Childs & Williams, 1997; Sidaway, 2000) because, like these theories, it foregrounds issues of power, difference, agency, subjectivity, hybridity, and resistance (Slater & Bell, 2002). Post-colonialism encompasses critiques of neo-colonialism, development, imperialism and globalization (Farred, 2001).

### *Historical Positioning*

“Post-colonial” discourse can refer to the period following colonialism, meaning “after-colonialism or after-independence,” however the post-colonial critique encompasses the impact of the colonial experience and therefore reaches back in time

before a country's independence (Ashcroft et al, 1995). When used as a historical reference to the end of colonial rule, "post-colonial" implies a country that is no longer under colonial rule but is still strongly influenced as a society by the colonial experience (Ashcroft, et al, 1995; Farred, 2001; Sidaway, 2000; Tiffin, 1987). When employed with this meaning, "post-colonial" immediately entails the experience of colonialism regardless of the current condition of a country, however, the differences in colonial experiences have led to very different post-independence outcomes for former colonial countries.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Aside from defining the post-colonial as a historical reference, it is usually used to name and highlight continued domination and pressure exerted on former colonial countries after independence (Ashcroft et al, 1995). There is some debate in the literature as to whether post-colonialism can be categorized as a theory, or rather as a sub-set of post-modernism and post-structuralism (Slemon, 1994). In parallel with post-modernism and post-structuralism, post-colonialism aims to react against the specific constructs of colonialism through a critical deconstruction of colonialism, its aftermath, its inherited meanings, and areas of privilege (Crotty, 1998).

Post-colonialism as a discursive practice is resistant to colonialism, colonial ideologies and their contemporary forms that continue power imbalances (Mulenga, 2001; Said, 1978). In this sense "post-colonial" is used to "represent the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges through a diverse range of societies" (Ashcroft et al, 1995, p.3). These continuing suppressions are twofold: the activities of the former colonial powers in the post-independence period, and the continued influence of the colonial apparatus within the former colonies as a residue of that historical experience (Mulenga, 2001; Sidaway, 2000). Aspects of colonialism which become internalized and expressed by the society after independence, make the country post-colonial (Mulenga, 2001; Sidaway, 2000). This is often despite the concerted efforts of many post-colonial countries to purge or overcome the colonial experience.

Post-colonial theory critiques the legacy of colonialism and imperialism as they are expressed in social relations that uphold privilege and oppression between the centers of power in the North and the margins of power in the South (Said, 1978). Post-colonialism encompasses an exploratory as well as critical discussion of experiences common to colonialism such as: "migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses" (Ashcroft et al, 1995, p.2). Post-colonialism foregrounds issues of power, difference, agency, subjectivity, hybridity, and resistance (Slater & Bell, 2002). Authors such as Spivak and Bhabha question the traditional thinking about the role of the political left, center and right, and point out that theories such as Marxism have played a role in colonialism (Mulenga, 2001).

Post-colonialism is directed at challenging the colonizer's version of events and examining current issues so that previously colonized societies and individuals can redefine themselves outside, and in opposition to, categories of the colonizer (Memmi, 1965; Tiffin, 1987). This decolonization of the culture and individual is an on-going process of reclaiming, creating and recreating the local identity (Tiffin, 1987). This is a strategy whereby the dominant discourse is mapped, and the underlying assumptions are exposed and dismantled from the perspective of the colonial subjectification of the local culture and society (Tiffin, 1987). Post-colonialism recognizes the interactive nature of

power relations between the center and the periphery such that the colonizing country and society is also indelibly altered by the interaction (Childs & Williams, 1997; Fox, 1999; Slater & Bell, 2002; Tiffin, 1987).

Since the widespread achievement of independence of the countries of the South, the central function of the post-colonial perspective is the continued examination and critique of Northern discourses of development and the continued relevance of the colonial conceptions. Post-colonialism encompasses critiques of neo-colonialism, development, imperialism and globalization (Farred, 2001). The dualities of developing/developed, recipient /donor, North/South, periphery/center, third world/first world, primitive/civilized are all inadequate labels that attempt to categorize power relations between countries by framing them in a deficit model (Prasad, 1992). This work of examining and critiquing the colonial experience is crucial for a society to overcome colonialism and redefine itself (Mulenga, 2001; Tiffin, 1987). In an on-going sense, post-colonialism describes the reframing process which is “a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction” (Ashcroft et al, 1995, p.2) that occurs after the physical withdrawal of the colonial power. However, postcolonial societies continue to mirror colonial practices in many ways. “Internal colonialism” refers to ways in which colonial dynamics of center and periphery are continued within a post-colonial country, between cultural or language groups or between rural and urban populations (Bray, 1993).

### **Adult Education in Post-independence Developing Countries**

In the post-independence period, adult education has contributed to the efforts of many countries to address the profound impact of colonialism on their societies. Many countries are still striving to meet the basic learning needs of adults in an effort to empower social development while reflecting the aspects of post-colonialism that entail agency and resistance to the residue of colonialism. Adult education from a transformative perspective is recognized as an important element in improving equity within societies, especially in developing countries (Arnove, Torres, Franz, & Morse, 1997; Freire, 1970a).

Large-scale adult literacy campaigns have been a common approach to increasing social empowerment for individuals in developing countries (Arnove et al, 1997; Freire, 1970). In addition to increasing literacy rates, the stated goals of such campaigns are often linked to national development (Arnove & Graff, 1992; Arnove et al, 1997). Campaigns with these stated goals see literacy as a means to another end that may be social, economic, or political (Arnove & Graff, 1992). Increasing literacy in these contexts is often defined in terms of the stated social and development goals of empowerment and decolonization (Arnove et al, 1997).

Much of adult education in developing countries, as elsewhere, is conducted in a planned and hierarchical manner by governments or program planners, administrators and teachers, rather than involving the learners themselves (Maruatona, 2002). This approach is often oriented toward integrating people into the structure, values and functions of the existing society, thus adult education can also be a form of indoctrination into the dominant and often stratified society that reflects former colonial power structures (Freire, 1970).

The conventional approach to adult education programs is problematic in a number of ways. Adult education programs, including literacy programs, that are structured around conventional goals often reinforce social inequities (Maruatona, 2002). These inequalities are seen between urban and rural, male and female, young and old populations (Fiske, 1997). Ethnic and racial differences in educational access and achievement are also significant in some developing countries (Arnové & Graff, 1992). These patterns of disparity reflect inequities in access to education and to resources that continue to parallel inequities established during the colonial period (Fiske, 1997).

In contrast to the conventional literacy approach, transformative literacy programs focus on critical reflection and problem solving (Maruatona, 2002). Improving adult literacy education from a transformative perspective is recognized as an important element in improving equity within societies, especially in developing countries (Arnové et al, 1997; Fiske, 1997; Freire, 1970). A period of optimism began after independence in post-colonial developing countries in which many national literacy campaigns were launched to address inequities perpetuated by colonialism (Arnové & Graff, 1992; Freire, 1970). During this period, the trend was to emphasize literacy for social justice and self-actualization, as well as for economic growth and improved national health (Arnové & Graff, 1992; Freire, 1970). Transformative adult literacy seeks to raise the awareness of the oppressed and non-literate population about the social conditions of their lives and most importantly their ability to change that reality through their own actions (Freire, 1970). The aim of transformative learning is not integration into the dominant society but rather empowering marginalized people to transform their society.

Adult education has played, and continues to play, an important role in the efforts of many developing countries to address issues of power, inequity and social transformation in overcoming the colonial experience. However, conventional adult education has also served to reinforce social norms and inequities that reflect the remaining influence of the colonial experience on post-independence societies. Thus, the role of adult education in these post-colonial contexts is varied and subject to scrutiny.

### **Post-colonialism as a Tool for Adult Education Research in Developing Countries**

The colonial experience infuses the context of post-independence developing countries, and adult education has an important role in the decolonization and social restructuring process of post-colonial societies, but can also serve to reinforce social inequities. The adult education field needs to attend closely to how these issues intersect with research in these post-independence developing country contexts. Post-colonialism provides a valuable discourse and lens through which to view research in and about developing countries. Post-colonialism can inform the research process from the design stage, through to data collection and analysis, writing up findings, and forming conclusions and implications.

Research problems and questions can reflect varying degrees of a critical deconstruction of colonialism, its aftermath, its inherited meanings, and areas of privilege. Research questions that investigate issues of power, privilege, difference, marginalization, oppression, agency, subjectivity, hybridity, and/or resistance also intersect with post-colonialism. These issues may be investigated in the context of broader global North-South concerns such as neo-colonialism, development, imperialism

and globalization, or may be investigated in terms of more localized internal colonialism within a country or region.

In the data collection phase, researchers can use post-colonialism to inform sample selection by reflecting on whose perspectives are accessed and privileged in the data. Post-colonialism can aid reflection and awareness of positionality at the research site as well as help in anticipating perceptions and problems that may arise as a researcher in a post-colonial context, whether the researcher is a Northern outsider, or is from the country and context where the research is taking place. It is important to reiterate that from a post-colonial perspective, both the former colonizer and the former colonized individuals and societies continue to be impacted by the colonial experience. Data analysis can be informed in part or wholly through the post-colonial lens. Examples in the literature that use post-colonialism as the theoretical frame for data analysis are most easily found in related fields such as comparative education and development education but have also appeared in adult education literature.

### **Summary**

Adult education resides within the context of national and local conditions, which informs and influences the shape it takes. In the case of post-independence developing countries, the context is effected on all levels by the past colonial experience. Post-colonialism offers a valuable frame through which to view research and practice in adult education in these developing countries. Post-colonialism entails a historical and political positioning that considers the colonial period as well as the period of decolonization and independence. Post-colonialism offers a theoretical frame closely related to critical theory, post-modernism and post-structuralism in a reaction against colonialism through its critical deconstruction. Issues of power, privilege, difference, marginalization, oppression, agency, subjectivity, and resistance, among others, are highlighted through the post-colonial lens. Adult education has played a key role in the post-independence period of many developing countries, through both transformative and conventional education models. Thus, the role of adult education practice in these countries varies and must be investigated through further research. Post-colonialism provides a valuable perspective for furthering research into adult education in these contexts and can frame the research design, data collection and analysis, and shape the findings, conclusions and implications.

Generally, post-colonialism is a theoretical frame that is used in reference to former-colonial developing countries, however, because both the colonizer and the colonized are impacted by the legacy of colonialism, it follows that post-colonialism has broader applications beyond former colonial countries.

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