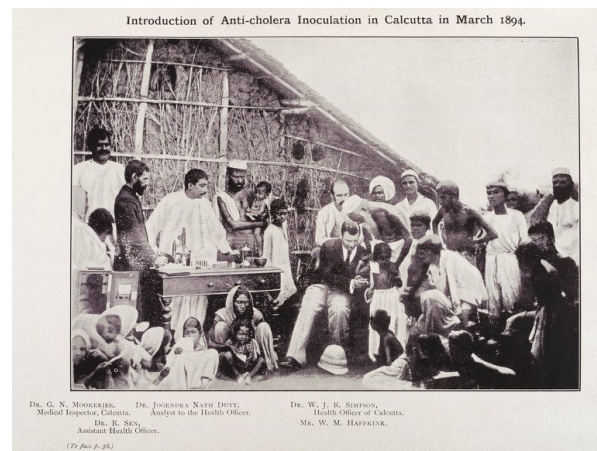


DEI Tip Sheet: Decolonizing international research collaborations

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Imagine you are a native American living in a forest and the only scientists you have met are European men who study your local river, but you know it better than they do? A quick look at how science is carried out shows how this often occurs; with scientific research in the developing world being led by academics working in western universities with topics that benefit Western society; for example, the pursuit of medicinal plants in tropical rainforests, are for cures that predominantly treat western illnesses such as cancer or obesity.¹ Even the taxonomy of life itself is placed within the European systems of knowledge (Linnaean taxonomy).

Decolonization is a movement to eliminate the disproportionate legacy of white European and North American thought in science and education.² Western science is inextricably entangled with colonialism as science started at a similar time and relied on the knowledge and exploitation of colonized people. When Europeans started to conquer different parts of the world, it was seen as the “white man’s burden” to introduce modernity and science. The colonial era may feel a long time ago, however, the legacies still exist today. International research collaborations need to decolonize practices and the scientific community manager is in a position to drive this forward.



- If community managers have an understanding of colonial legacies they are in a position to guide researchers to update practices. They can help build an equal scientific community. They can do this by encouraging and supporting members from non-western institutes to have their voices heard during meetings, support them attending workshops and conferences, and for them to be appropriately recognized on academic publications.
- International research collaborations that collaborate with local researchers will have a better understanding of the local issues and challenges.² This will mean their project will likely have a bigger impact and success. Community managers can help create dialogue between partners and to support the co-creation of work.

- Global geographic understanding that is based on the temperate environment has led to errors. It is important for researchers not to assume that methods that work in temperate parts of the world will work in other parts of the world. An example is the discovery of peat bogs in the Congo basin, which came as a surprise because their existence hadn't anticipated based on predominantly temperate sampling.

As scientific community managers, we can act to help decolonize scientific research in multiple ways:

- Co-create and co-develop research agendas with local collaborators and communities. What questions do they want answered? What are their concerns and how can local knowledge be used to develop creative problem-solving solutions?
- Use a Community Playbook as a method of documenting the scientific community and ensuring that all members have equal voice and contribution
- Recognize the contributions of collaborators as equal partners. There have been some positive examples of new authorship models whereby the paper is referenced by the project name, not one person^{3,4}
- Encourage researchers to critically reflect on how their backgrounds inflect the way they collect, interpret and describe data. One practice well-established in the humanities, but still rare in the sciences, is to write a positionality statement.

Reflection questions

- When working on international scientific projects, how many local scientists are involved in the collaboration or co-creation?
- Are the local scientists involved in the decision making & are they authors on the published work?
- Who has access to and interprets the resulting datasets, and who applies the knowledges?

Resources

Decolonizing scientific research practices is a developing area with limited resources but here are a few pointers:

- The Center for Scientific Collaboration and Community Engagement (CSCCE) [Community Playbook](#)
- National Co-ordinating Center for Public Engagement (NCCPE) [Resources](#)
- A case study by Toomey AH (2016) [What happens at the gap between knowledge and practice? Spaces of encounter and misencounter between environmental scientists and local people. Ecology and Society](#) doi: 10.5751/ES-08409-210228

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