

Zeitschrift: Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology = Revue suisse d'anthropologie sociale et culturelle = Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Ethnologie

Band: 28 (2022)

Artikel: Anthropological knowledge and power relations : introduction

Autor: Leresche, Frédérique

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1036182>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 03.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POWER RELATIONS

Introduction

Frédérique Leresche

Abstract

This special issue provides an opportunity to reflect on the conditions for knowledge production by interpreting the social world in a way that recognizes the interconnected nature of power relations. Building on existing research that has emphasized the situated character of knowledge and its production, the contributing authors develop a reflexive understanding of sites of expression to better highlight how power relations shape research (including through an intersectional approach that considers interactions between dynamics of sex, class, race, ableism, age, etc.) and how individuals challenge, accept, and/or subvert power relations.

Keywords: *situated knowledge, power relations, intersectionality*

In the field of anthropology, a great number of methodological and epistemological insights have been based on the wide-ranging knowledge produced by people who find themselves in a subaltern position (Sarker 2015). As a result, such contributions tend to be ignored or even denigrated.

Consider the knowledge that can be traced to feminists, to othered and/or racialized groups, to Indigenous peoples... What sets these diverse voices apart is the way in which they question power. In the 1990s, the feminist contributors to *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995) responded to the ideas put forward by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) in *Writing Culture*, a collection of essays that challenged the objectivity of ethnographic research by emphasizing its situated and even fictional character. Meanwhile, researchers like Lila Abu-Lughod (1996) were developing more radical critiques of the binary opposition between the Self and the Other, often based on the argument that the construction of otherness is rooted in the history of colonialism. Later, Indigenous researchers set about the task of decolonizing research methodologies (Smith 2021). More recently, people who see themselves as part of the *Global South* (Santos 2016) and members of racialized groups have further developed these ideas (Parnell-Berry and Michel 2021).

However, heeding the emic dimension of domination does not automatically bring *minority* knowledge to the forefront since, “to gain theoretical and academic recognition,” such knowledge “must shed the stigma of activism and must therefore be withdrawn from those who gave voice to it in the first place” (Bentouhami-Molino 2017, 101). Beyond rethinking who should have a place at the table, the time has come to reconsider what is on

the menu (Bilge 2020). This would allow for a more fundamental shift in the criteria for determining not only what makes an idea *worthy of serious reflection* by researchers, but also what makes it interesting.

Among other key challenges, this would involve considering sites of knowledge production from an epistemological perspective (Bentouhami-Molino 2015; Grosfoguel 2007), with a view to highlighting their situated nature and reflecting on how perspectives migrate and come to be applied in other contexts. For instance, how have insights that originated in the Global South shed light on issues facing the Global North (Leresche 2019)?

This special issue seeks to build on existing research that has emphasized the situated character of knowledge and its production. The contributing authors develop a reflexive understanding of sites of expression to better show how power relations shape research (including through an intersectional approach that considers interactions between dynamics of sex, class, race, ableism, age, etc.) and how individuals challenge, accept, and / or subvert power relations.

This can be accomplished from a range of viewpoints, as reflected in the diverse theoretical and methodological contributions contained in the included articles. These viewpoints help determine both the research processes favored by the different authors (decolonial, intersectional, participatory, collaborative, etc.) and the various themes addressed, which cover issues related to publishing, representation, methodology, and the material conditions under which research is conducted.

The articles are rich in theoretical and methodological insights that reflect a shared effort to not only decompartmentalize and decolonize the discipline in a way that challenges established academic norms, but also develop practical tools for doing so. The contributors address topics that I discuss below in terms of three main concerns: research conditions (precarious employment and the pressure to publish); sites of expression and the authority to speak (Who can speak? For whom? How?); and researchers' family environments (interconnected private and professional spheres).

Furthermore, the process of producing and coordinating a special issue raised certain questions that intersect with those explored in the articles themselves. Accordingly, the final section of the introduction discusses the main concerns highlighted by the publication process.

Research Conditions: Precarious Employment and the Pressure to Publish

As I was writing this introduction, the Swiss Federal Council endorsed a postulate calling for younger academic researchers to receive support and enjoy equality of opportunity (Postulate 22.3390). A committee of researchers with first-hand experience of precarious employment at various Swiss universities had long been working toward this goal. The petition that led to the adoption of the postulate was designed to draw attention to various negative aspects of work in academia, especially the lack of permanent positions, the growth of inse-

cure and poorly paid jobs, the limited recognition for the work performed by researchers early in their careers, and the overly competitive research environment.

Of course, these are issues faced by young researchers the world over. For instance, the article by Cheshta Arora and Debarun Sarkar focuses on the situation in India. The authors clearly explain how debates on precarious employment in academia remain disconnected from that country's specific circumstances and have failed to spark the emergence of an alternative approach to knowledge production. In addition to the demanding publication requirements faced by applicants to Indian doctoral programs, the article also addresses the issue of translating articles into local languages.

My colleagues and I faced a related problem while planning this special issue: In what language should the articles and the introduction be published? Based in multilingual Switzerland, the journal normally issues calls for papers in French and German (two of the country's national languages), as well as in English (to reach an international audience). For the most part, the article proposals we received were written in English. The five published articles include four in English, one in French, and none in German. Obviously, the English language dominates much of the academic landscape. As a result, the choice of language becomes a political choice – and a particularly sensitive one, given how language and its descriptive power draw on the imagination, as well as on mental and emotional constructs (Thiong'o 1986). Accordingly, our way of conveying the world around us, of naming its components, says something about power relations, as so well explained in this issue's editorial on changing the journal's title.

The Authority to Speak: Who can speak? About whom? How?

The knowledge produced by researchers is shaped by the material conditions under which they produce it. In turn, these conditions depend on the researcher's position in social space. In her article, Karen Mogendorff takes a heuristic approach to analyzing matters of scientific recognition in a context where issues of ableism and gender intersect. She shows how the integration of persons with disabilities does not always guarantee them access to legitimacy in their field of expertise. In fact, it may even reinforce the categorization and hierarchization of knowledge. Working from the idea that knowledge is partial because of its situated character, the author demonstrates how knowledge production is also shaped by a person's more or less normative relationship to the human body. According to certain associated feminist theories, this relationship can also help determine what is perceptible, as well as which senses are used when perceiving and describing the social world.

Karen Mogendorff's article strongly resonates with the one on epistemic justice by the Capdroit team (Arnaud Béal, Chantal Bruno, Benoît Eyraud, Valérie Lemard, Jacques Lequien, and Isabel Miranda), although the latter text focuses on issues related to publishing. Whereas critical research (decolonial, participative, feminist, Indigenous, subaltern, etc.) has frequently raised the question of who speaks for whom and about what, few studies have considered the question of how. The article seeks to fill this gap by directly addressing

the attribution of authorship to individuals involved in a research project, whether as researchers or participants. It highlights how publishing involves the dual process of acknowledging a voice and acknowledging its authority.

Finally, Juliane Neuhaus contributes to these reflections on who speaks for whom (and how) with an article that analyzes relationships between researchers from Oceania and those based in the West (especially Switzerland). Building on an exhaustive genealogy of the decolonization of anthropology in Oceania, she proposes different pedagogical and methodological tools for fostering better dialogue within the field.

Interconnected Private and Professional Spheres

Clearly, professional contexts and sites of expression are key to understanding the circumstances under which research is conducted. However, there is also a need to consider the experiences of those involved across all aspects of their lives. Far from plying their trade in rarefied air, researchers remain rooted in individual realities shaped by the material and personal conditions that define the family or private environment.

This is what Madeleine Ayeh argues in her article on assessing the impact of parenthood on the research process. She illustrates the ambiguous nature of ethnographic authority by describing how shared experiences of parenthood have served as a catalyst for relationships, simultaneously facilitating access to the field and complicating efforts to organize research.

Taken together, the five articles provide some answers to the practical questions that feed debates on the conditions for knowledge production: What ethnographic practices best acknowledge collaboration between partners in the field (co-authoring, participative and collaborative research, linking private and professional concerns, etc.)? What are the limitations of such practices? Several contributors point out the potential advantages (and limitations) of alternative approaches, both theoretical and practical, to analyzing power relations in the context of knowledge production. They generally call for constant and close attention to the partial nature of research, even at the risk of circumscribing the applicability of conclusions.

Indeed, the articles all reveal how the ability to critique power relations in the context of the research process is limited by emerging hierarchies. The contributions from the Capdroit team and Karen Mogendorff offer skillful descriptions of how the participation of those directly concerned by a research project does not necessarily confer scientific legitimacy. In fact, it may even reinforce the distinction between legitimate (normalized) bodies and illegitimate ones. For their part, Cheshta Arora and Debarun Sarkar show how an emphasis on postcolonial criticism in India has impeded criticism of the frameworks responsible for the insecurity faced by doctoral students. Likewise, Juliane Neuhaus reveals how efforts to decolonize anthropology can produce exclusionary results if they fail to consider specific sites where expressions of criticism originate (in this case, Oceania). Moreover, Madeleine Ayeh provides a detailed description of how dependence on the family can be misused as a tool for securing field access.

Making and Breaking: Behind the Scenes of Preparing a Special Issue

This special issue aims to reflect on the conditions for knowledge production by interpreting the social world in a way that acknowledges the interconnected nature of power relations. This objective remained front-of-mind throughout the different stages of production. In fact, it seems impossible to probe the conditions for knowledge production and the means of decolonizing associated processes without reflecting on the conditions under which a special issue such as this one can be produced. Since we¹ had asked prospective authors to pay special attention to reconfigurations of power underway in the context of their own research, we decided to engage in a similarly reflexive exercise as a way of identifying the limitations of the publication process. This section provides a chronological description of the various steps involved, starting from the time when the article proposals were received. The account provided is therefore incomplete, insofar as it overlooks earlier stages of the process (the call for coordinators, the planning and preparation of a proposal, the assessment process, and the preparation of a call for submissions).

First, we had to decide which articles to publish. We received a total of 39 submissions from a mix of graduate students, professors, postdoctoral scholars, research assistants, and individuals from outside academia. Beyond their close alignment with the terms set out in the call for papers, the proposed articles consistently promised to provide new answers and explore new questions. As a result, we were forced to expand our selection criteria.

Naturally, we considered research topics, the geographic areas under study, and where the prospective contributors were based. Indeed, we saw sites of production as an essential consideration in the context of a special issue on the conditions for knowledge production. And yet, we only received proposals from Europe and Canada, along with a single one from India. Could it be that a journal's distribution networks reproduce a hierarchy of sites associated with "legitimate" knowledge production? Or does a journal's international reputation determine the level of interest it attracts from scholars? Looking at the situation in India, Cheshta Arora and Debarun Sarkar come to the latter conclusion.

Sites of expression also reflect an individual's position in social space. Accordingly, we also considered gender, ableism, academic age, professional status, and ethnicity when selecting contributors. To the extent that our choices were subjective, they also remain debatable. Furthermore, they highlight our roles as editors and coordinators, roles that endowed us with the power to decide who would be given a voice.

Our next task involved recruiting experts to review the articles. We were careful to recognize the capacity of individuals who do not necessarily enjoy stable academic employment to play such a role. The work of young researchers is an important source of fresh insights and recognizing the critical expertise of emerging scholars could constitute an approach to decolonizing the field. On the other hand, asking people already affected by precarious employment to carry out unpaid and unacknowledged work (since they must remain anon-

¹ Here, the use of the first-person plural reflects the fact that many individuals were involved in the process of reflection, to varying extents and at different times.

ymous, external experts cannot list such experience on a CV) would mean upholding an unfair system of knowledge construction.²

The journal relies on a process of double-blind peer review involving two external experts, in addition to a review by a member of the scientific committee. That makes for three expert assessments per article, meaning that the publication of an issue like this one, containing five articles, depends on the unpaid work of fifteen people. That is in addition to the work performed by the journal's editors and guest editors.

So why does the publication process require the mobilization of such extensive resources?

Coordinating a special issue on power relations in anthropology provided an opportunity to open new perspectives on not only the conditions for knowledge production, but also a certain form of care ethics. All the articles included in this issue refer to dependent relationships variously based on social norms or on academic, political, or family dynamics. The publication process therefore involved adopting a care perspective whose "ethical and political dimensions are inseparable, insofar as it produces a truly critical analysis of hidden or overlooked social relationships based on dependence and vulnerability" (Laugier 2013, 165)

We sought to address the issues raised in the course of our work as best we could, although satisfactory answers sometimes proved evasive. Perhaps publishing the articles constitutes an end in itself, given that it represents the culmination of a larger care process that is necessary for the development of scientific knowledge (through the sharing of time, experiences, attention, and ideas), and whose existence depends on it being brought to light.

But one question remain ... A person's ability to disseminate the results of their research by writing an article, a book, a thesis, a paper, etc. depends on having the means to do so. In other words, such a person must find themselves in an environment conducive to the writing and editing process. However, not everyone enjoys equal access to the necessary resources, time, energy, mental focus, computer equipment, online journals, etc. Not everyone is in a position to have their voice heard and acknowledged as legitimate. In such a context, how can researchers be expected to secure the means to challenge the conditions for knowledge production and seek new insights, when the circumstances under which they produce knowledge (including material, symbolic, moral, and political circumstances) prevent them from taking epistemological risks?

Acknowledgements


I would like to thank Anne Lavanchy for sharing her generous and helpful observations; the current and former editors in chief for their unwavering support: Isabelle Zinn, Laura Affolter, David Loher, Joanna Menet, Matthieu Bolay, and Filipe Calvao; and Nathalie Garbely for her patience and careful proofreading.

² At the same time, it is important to recognize that various other unacknowledged and often unpaid tasks are already being performed by those in the early stages of their careers.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila.** 1996. "Writing Against Culture." In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard G. Fox, 137–162. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Behar, Ruth, et Deborah A. Gordon** (eds.). 1995. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Bentouhami-Molino, Hourya.** 2017. "Audre Lorde, la poésie n'est pas un luxe." *Ballast* 6(1): 90–103. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ball.006.0090>
- Bentouhami-Molino, Hourya.** 2015. *Race, cultures et identités. Une approche féministe postcoloniale*. Philosophies. Paris: PUF.
- Bilge, Sirma.** 2020. "We've joined the table but we're still on the menu", *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Racisms*, edited by John Solomos, 317–331. Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY.
- Clifford, James and George Marcus.** 1986. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grosfoguel, Ramón.** 2007. "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn". *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3): 211–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514>
- Laugier, Sandra.** 2013. "Veena Das, Wittgenstein et Stanley Cavell. Le care, l'ordinaire et la folie". In *Face aux désastres. Une conversation à quatre voix sur la folie, le care et les grandes détresses collectives*, edited by Anne M. Lovell, Stefania Pandolfo, Veena Das, and Sandra Laugier, 161–192. Paris: Les Éditions d'Ithaque.
- Leresche, Frédérique.** 2019. "La critique portée par le non-recours aux droits sociaux: propositions pour développer une approche subalterne." *SociologieS* [En ligne] mis en ligne le 23 mai 2019. <http://journals.openedition.org/sociologies/11438>
- Parnell-Berry, Bel, and Noemi Vanessa Michel.** 2021. "Editing as Anti-Racism." *ISRF Bulletin* 23: 63–70.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa.** 2016. *Épistémologies du Sud, Mouvements citoyens et polémique sur la science*, translated by Jean-Louis Laville. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Sarker, Sonita.** 2015. "Subalternity In and Out of Time, In and Out of History." In *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, edited by David Kreps, 91–110. Ashgate: Farnham & Burlington.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai.** 2021. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Third edition. London: Zed.
- Thiong'o, Ngugiwa.** 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey-Heinemann.

Author

Frédérique Leresche  is an actor and an anthropologist. Her research focuses on social rights and the relationship between individuals and the state. She has a special interest in agency-based strategies and the capacity for individuals to subvert norms.

frederique.leresche@hefr.ch

*School of Social Work, HES-SO (University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland), Fribourg
Haute École de travail social de Fribourg, HES-SO*