

Research Integrity and Research Fairness: Harmonious or in Conflict?

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Article abstract

Dominant initiatives focusing on research integrity are changing the research landscape by leading to the development and application of rules, guidelines and standards that researchers across borders have to abide by. There is an increasing attention within these initiatives to the importance of research fairness for conducting responsible research. However, some stakeholders view research fairness as separate and sometimes even conflicting with research integrity. To make sense of these accounts, I explore the relationship between research integrity and research fairness. I argue that dominant research integrity initiatives are currently at odds with research fairness. This is because these initiatives largely ignore anticolonial views about research and thereby perpetuate coloniality in research. Furthermore, dominant initiatives only engage superficially with aspects of fairness that are least controversial and current. Moreover, these research integrity initiatives impose Eurocentric ideals about responsible research to other countries, thereby contributing to “ethical imperialism”. Considering the wide reach of dominant research integrity initiatives and their influence on research, it is therefore urgent to develop an anticolonial research integrity agenda that takes fairness seriously.

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ARTICLE (ÉVALUÉ PAR LES PAIRS / PEER-REVIEWED)

Research Integrity and Research Fairness: Harmonious or in Conflict?

Krishma Labib^a

Résumé

Les initiatives dominantes axées sur l'intégrité de la recherche modifient le paysage de la recherche en conduisant à l'élaboration et à l'application de règles, de lignes directrices et de normes auxquelles les chercheurs doivent se conformer au-delà des frontières. Ces initiatives accordent une attention croissante à l'importance de l'équité dans la recherche pour mener une recherche responsable. Toutefois, certaines parties prenantes considèrent que l'équité dans la recherche est distincte de l'intégrité de la recherche et qu'elle entre parfois en conflit avec elle. Afin de donner un sens à ces comptes rendus, j'explore la relation entre l'intégrité et l'équité de la recherche. Je soutiens que les initiatives dominantes en matière d'intégrité de la recherche sont actuellement en contradiction avec l'équité de la recherche. En effet, ces initiatives ignorent largement les points de vue anticoloniaux sur la recherche et perpétuent ainsi la colonialité dans la recherche. En outre, les initiatives dominantes ne s'engagent que superficiellement dans les aspects de l'équité qui sont les moins controversés et les moins actuels. En outre, ces initiatives d'intégrité de la recherche imposent à d'autres pays des idéaux eurocentriques sur la recherche responsable, contribuant ainsi à l'« impérialisme éthique ». Compte tenu de la vaste portée des initiatives dominantes en matière d'intégrité de la recherche et de leur influence sur la recherche, il est donc urgent d'élaborer un programme d'intégrité de la recherche anticolonial qui prenne l'équité au sérieux.

Mots-clés

intégrité de la recherche, équité, colonialité, injustice épistémique, impérialisme éthique

Abstract

Dominant initiatives focusing on research integrity are changing the research landscape by leading to the development and application of rules, guidelines and standards that researchers across borders have to abide by. There is an increasing attention within these initiatives to the importance of research fairness for conducting responsible research. However, some stakeholders view research fairness as separate and sometimes even conflicting with research integrity. To make sense of these accounts, I explore the relationship between research integrity and research fairness. I argue that dominant research integrity initiatives are currently at odds with research fairness. This is because these initiatives largely ignore anticolonial views about research and thereby perpetuate coloniality in research. Furthermore, dominant initiatives only engage superficially with aspects of fairness that are least controversial and current. Moreover, these research integrity initiatives impose Eurocentric ideals about responsible research to other countries, thereby contributing to "ethical imperialism". Considering the wide reach of dominant research integrity initiatives and their influence on research, it is therefore urgent to develop an anticolonial research integrity agenda that takes fairness seriously.

Keywords

research integrity, fairness, coloniality, epistemic injustice, ethical imperialism

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INTRODUCTION

Research integrity (RI) is often defined as doing research in line with high ethical, professional and methodological standards (1). Another way to think about it, which does not delve into potentially contentious questions regarding who determines these standards and who is excluded, is that doing research with integrity is doing research well. In this view, RI relates to behaviours that enable good research (2). As such, research ethics concerns, such as informed consent, are interrelated and overlap with RI ones (3).

In 2021, Evans and I pleaded for the research integrity (RI) community to take gender and diversity considerations seriously as an important element of fostering RI. This seems to have been a timely plea, as since then a number of papers and initiatives have taken place in the field of RI focusing on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). For instance, racial and ethnic bias, fairness and equity were key topics covered by the 2024 World Conference for Research Integrity (WCRI) (5). One of the results of the 2022 WCRI was the Cape Town Statement on fairness, equity and diversity in research (6). The next World Conference on Research Integrity, to be held in Vancouver in 2026, features "Indigenous ways of being" as a key theme (7). Additionally, the revised version of the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity published in 2023 (8) has added recommendations related to this topic "reflecting greater awareness in the research community of mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion and the responsibility of all actors to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion". The UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) has introduced a webinar series on EDI and linked to various initiatives to improve EDI in research (9).

Recognition that healthy research cultures are key to responsible research practices (10) in particular has had an influence on the increased discussion of EDI issues in the context of RI. For instance, the future Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity will likely place a greater emphasis on fostering a positive research culture (11), and issues of EDI might be addressed

explicitly there. In the UK, much work has already been done on fostering a healthy research culture in different research institutions, with EDI being considered as a key factor to address (12).

In 2024, Sempa and colleagues conducted a mixed-method empirical study exploring the alignment of RI and research fairness in the field of global health. Their conclusions from the outcome of this study were that RI aligns well with research fairness “as only science that is conducted with fairness can be considered responsible and conducted with integrity” (13). Based on this, they argue that institutions should promote RI in a way that addresses biases, privileges and inequities in research. While the study was focused on the field of global health, their conclusions can be assumed to be applicable to a wider range of research fields.

While the concepts of equity, diversity, inclusion, research fairness, and research justice have slightly different meanings depending on who uses them and how, I will use the term “research fairness” or RF to refer to all of these collectively; this term is more often referred to in the RI literature than justice (6,13). The reason to treat all these concepts collectively is because they are often used together by RI initiatives, with the belief that they lead to similar goals (6,13). While partially overlapping, these concepts might sometimes not align perfectly. However, studying the exact relationship between these concepts falls outside the scope of this paper.

Taking into account the consideration of RF in RI initiatives in the past years, it seems that RI and RF are interrelated, and that to foster RI, it is necessary to foster RF as well. At the same time, there are also conflicting indications suggesting that RI is not harmonious with RF. In my own empirical work engaging with different RI stakeholders across Europe, I have frequently received criticism about trying to include RF concerns in RI initiatives, with arguments indicating that RF is separate from RI (14,15). In some cases, stakeholders explicitly mentioned that promoting RF should not come at the expense of doing high quality research, suggesting that in some regards, RF and RI can clash. This line of reasoning is also mirrored in RI policy documents, such as the Hong Kong Principles for assessing researchers (16); during the development of this document, hundreds of research stakeholders were consulted for input, yet none raised issues related to RF as important to consider for RI when assessing researchers (17).

In this paper, I aim to make sense of these conflicting accounts by exploring the question: what is the relationship between RI and RF? My main line of argument will be that dominant RI initiatives are currently in conflict with RF, since they reproduce rather than tackle existing injustice. I do this in four steps. First, I argue that by ignoring works done by anticolonial¹ scholars, current dominant approaches to RI do not take research RF seriously. Next, I discuss how the increasing engagement of those in the field of RI with topics such as EDI constitutes a superficial interest in RF and shies away from the most important discussions. To illustrate this point further, I zoom in on the case of epistemic injustice in Afghanistan as a question of integrity which RI initiatives ignore. I then argue that this superficial engagement with RF makes RI initiatives particularly problematic considering that many are guilty of “ethical imperialism”. Finally, I conclude by stressing the need to develop an anticolonial RI agenda so as to prevent those of us interested in fostering integrity in research from perpetuating injustice.

Before I delve into the contents of the paper, I would like to make a few disclaimers about my aims. First, I write this paper in the position of an Afghanistani RI researcher who is becoming increasingly concerned with the field’s ignorance of the relationship between past and present colonialism and research. Secondly, I do not seek to convince RI experts who are not interested in the topic of RF or do not see coloniality as an important problem in research. Rather, I am focused on provoking engagement with potential critical allies among the RI movement who want to pursue RI in a more fair and anticolonial manner. Thirdly, colonialism takes many different shapes and forms in different parts of the world. Since this paper — barring the example on Afghanistan in one section — is not focused on a specific country, I do not elaborate on the different forms, but rather use the term “colonial interest” and “colonial endeavour” to refer broadly to all efforts at domination and control of non-Europeans by Euro-Americans, be they direct (as with settler colonialism) or indirect (as with neocolonialism or with Euro-American backed internal colonialism outside of Europe, such as can be seen in Afghanistan). Not focusing on one country limits my analysis from being precise regarding the specifics of colonialism in different regions but is necessary to discuss the global implications of the field of RI. I recognize that this paper touches on a lot of issues related to colonialism in research. The main aim is to shed light on the neglect of RF by dominant RI initiatives, rather than to flesh out all these issues. I thus only allude to these issues to achieve the paper’s aims — I hope that in the future, more RI initiatives will take RF seriously and further explore some of the issues that are alluded to here.

Fourthly, I do not attempt to educate readers about everything there is to know about anticolonial, decolonial or postcolonial scholarship, even if such a thing were possible and I was the right person to do so. Rather, I highlight and link to some of this literature to make my case so that I can focus on constructive engagement rather than the “emotional labor”² (18) of convincing the inconvincible. Finally, my criticism about the relationship between RI and RF is specifically about dominant, Euro-American initiatives focusing on RI, rather than RI as a concept itself. I recognize that there are many ways to foster RI that do take RF seriously, and in fact believe that truly fostering RI requires addressing RF.

¹ I use the terms ‘anticolonial’, ‘decolonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ interchangeably, despite them having different approaches and origins.

² Referring to the emotional burden people from minority backgrounds often experience as a result of being expected to explain to and convince white people about issues related to injustice and inequity, when white people refuse to do the work of “seeing” and addressing these issues themselves.

THE FIELD'S IGNORANCE OF ANTICOLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP

In this section, I first discuss the dominant narrative about RI to show its ignorance of anticolonial scholarship, and then assess the implications for RF, arguing that that this leads to a conflict between dominant RI initiatives and RF.

The dominant RI narrative

The rationale often used to support RI initiatives relates to the idea that RI is necessary to improve trust in research; if researchers conduct research responsibly (i.e., following well-considered and appropriate methods), then research can be considered trustworthy. As the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity states: "The value and benefits of research are vitally dependent on the integrity of research" (19). This view assumes that research, when done well, has value and is beneficial. This is illustrated in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (8), which states that:

Research is the quest for knowledge obtained through systematic study, thinking, observation, and experimentation. While different disciplines may use different approaches, they each share the motivation to increase our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live.

This discourse can also be seen in different countries' codes of conduct on RI. For instance, the Canadian Tri-Agency Framework on the Responsible Conduct of Research (20) frames research as "...a natural extension of this desire to understand and to improve the world in which we live, and its results have both enriched and improved our lives and human society as a whole".

Research — or at least research when done ideally — is framed in this discourse as an endeavour that can bring value to the world, which shows that the dominant narrative in the field of RI frames research as an innocent and societally beneficial concept. Furthermore, the general approach in the field of RI is to view good research as that which is free from "pressure from commissioning parties and from ideological, economic, or political interests" (8), despite acknowledging that funders, both public and industry, can have an influence on research agendas (21). This is reflected in the frequent mention of Mertonian norms as central to good research practice, and the conceptualization of breaches of these norms as breaches of RI (22-24). The Mertonian norms of communism (common ownership of research), universalism (impersonal and objective research), disinterestedness (research free from personal bias), and organized scepticism (the need for critical discussion in the research community) (25), are thus often considered from the perspective of RI as ideals to strive towards (26). Specifically, the norms of universalism and disinterestedness imply that good research should always aim at 'objectivity' rather than addressing potentially 'biased' political interests of researchers. The view of research taken by those dominant RI initiatives thus assumes that research — when done well — is, in addition to innocent and beneficial, also apolitical.

Implications of the dominant RI narrative for RF

Claiming that research is innocent and apolitical assumes that any potential harm caused by research is incidental, or — using a metaphor often mentioned in the field of RI — caused by bad apples (i.e., unethical researchers), spoiled barrels (i.e., unethical institutions) or even infested orchards (i.e., problems in the research system such as perverse incentives) (27). This assumes that if all research stakeholders abide by standards of RI that are spelled out in codes of conduct on RI (8) — namely, the apples, barrels and orchards are clean — then research cannot be harmful. Yet, this view largely ignores that the view on what 'harm' is in research, and the resulting formulation of RI standards, have been developed in a colonial and inequitable world in which certain stakeholders' voices have been included, while others have been excluded. Given this, the assumption that good research is neutral assumes that the interests of the minority who has determined what RI is — i.e., those holding positions of power in research, who largely overlap with the demographic of white cis-gendered males from economically wealthy countries benefiting from colonialism — are not political but rather the objective standards to which all researchers should aspire.

The result of the assumption that 'neutral' and 'objective' is what falls in line with the interests of those in positions of powers, implies that only interests that deviate from that are thus considered as political; it is only those deviating views that confront and question the established global order from which the powerful benefit. As such, when the field of RI promotes ideal research as being apolitical, it asks researchers to work within rather than question or topple the inequity present in the world. Going back to the apples, barrels and orchards analogy, the problem with research — rather than merely being bad apples, spoiled barrels and infested orchards — is that the establishment of the barrels and orchards, in which the apples are situated, is deeply entangled with the stealing and killing that characterizes Euro-American colonialism, both as cause and consequence. In other words, the barrels and orchards in their current form are both a result of colonialism but also justification for and enabling of colonialism. As such, these structures maintain and reproduce the current organization of the global order, albeit with possibilities for minor changes within the orchard so long as this does not topple the overall global order.

This assessment might sound both extreme and abstract, but opening up to anticolonial scholarship allows us to see what this means in practice. One of the most highly cited accounts about the relationship between research and colonialism comes from Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who states that:

The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary...it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. It angers us when practices linked to the last century, and the centuries before that, are still employed to deny the validity of indigenous peoples' claim to existence, to land and territories, to the right of self-determination, to the survival of our languages and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living within our environments. (28, p.1)

Smith, here, argues that research is seen by Indigenous peoples as harmful. Her examples of the ways that research has harmed Indigenous peoples across the world highlight the relationship between colonialism and research.

Those working within dominant RI initiatives might respond to this quote by arguing that more responsible research (i.e., done ethically and with integrity) would ameliorate the kinds of harms that Smith outlines. They might argue that better informed consent procedures, ethics review, appropriate research design, careful inference and interpretation of data, training and supervision, and responsible data management would prevent the harms that Smith discusses. This response would reflect the current priorities and understandings of good research by dominant initiatives in RI (14,29). However, this does not get to the core of Smith's critique of research.

For example, if we zoom in on Smith's criticism of how researchers would measure the intellectual ability of Indigenous peoples by filling their skulls with millet seeds, we can see that this criticism is ultimately about the racist dehumanization of those who had their skulls measured as well as their communities. Measures such as informed consent procedures, even ones focused on community consent rather than individual consent, would not necessarily address the core issues of racism and dehumanization. It is possible — albeit more difficult — to be racist and dehumanize while conducting perfect informed consent procedures, since research participants and communities can be informed, even consent, but then be mistreated. As Tauri (30) discusses, current research governance frameworks privilege Eurocentric understandings of good, ethical research, such as informed consent. They are designed not so much with the goal to protect research participants but can rather serve "as a politics of containment that at once renders invisible the importance of relationships in Indigenous research, while asserting the right of the institution to determine the 'correct' way that research should be conducted" (30). Therefore, in a colonialist or neo-colonialist world, trying to prevent racist dehumanization in research merely through appeal to the Eurocentric³ process of informed consent will not suffice. While I have elaborated specifically on how the procedure of informed consent fails to fully address the racist dehumanization in this example, a similar analysis could be done for other accepted dimensions of RI by dominant initiatives, including ethics review, appropriate research design, careful inference and interpretation of data, training and supervision, and responsible data management. None of these priorities focused on in dominant research ethics or RI initiatives is committed to challenging the coloniality of research in which racism is ingrained⁴. Rather, what is needed is to challenge the source of the dehumanization, namely the colonialist or neo-colonialist world itself.

The role of research in colonialism has been widely discussed by anticolonial scholars. For instance, Tsosie (31) discusses how canonical philosophers such as Mill, Locke, Hobbes, and Hegel played a key role in the justification of settler colonialists stealing lands from natives in different parts of the world. More specifically, these philosophers — albeit with some nuanced differences — all differentiated between white European settlers as rational, to be contrasted with the ignorant and savage natives. The philosophers used this distinction in the humanity of the two groups to argue that Europeans had a right to plunder the lands of the "savages" for the sake of progress and development. Tsosie (31) argues that not only philosophy, but also the sciences contributed to this justification by emphasizing this difference in superiority between Europeans and natives. For instance, fields such as evolutionary biology, craniology, and anthropology treated Europeans as the results of natural selection and as such, superior to Africans who were considered less evolved and more primitive (31). In these accounts, natives in settler-colonial regions were seen as in-betweens who could reach superiority by becoming more akin to white Europeans (31). These distinctions were thus grounded in research and used as a tool to justify colonialist violent actions against Africans, Indigenous, and other peoples in the world. Namely, the view that these "others" are not humans justified colonial conquests and subjugation of non-Europeans, through the idea that non-Europeans do not have to be treated as equals but need to be saved through European domination in order to become more civilized. The fact that colonialist justifications have been grounded in research, historically, is not surprising given Wynter's (32) account of the role of research in the modern world. Wynter argues that the sciences and humanities were not incidentally used by colonialists for pushing their political agendas forward. Rather, modern sciences and humanities are themselves a political project that has been born out of a social order devised by the white "European Man" in which he places himself as the pinnacle of humankind. As such, the sciences are not only firmly grounded in the assumption of difference between the perfect white European Man as opposed to the 'Other', they

³ Eurocentric refers to the focusing on the interests and views of Europeans and European diaspora.

⁴ It is nonetheless good to see that some guidelines on dealing with ancient human remains (e.g., [the Norwegian guidelines](#)) do not reduce the issue of respect in cases like this to only procedural concerns like informed consent, but rather explicitly frame the importance of respect particularly for research participants and human remains from marginalized backgrounds, thus touching on the issue of dehumanization and racism.

grew due to a need to further cement and reproduce this distinction. Wynter, like Tsosie, gives the example of evolutionary biology as a clear example of this political agenda.

The legacies of colonialism for knowledge production are ever-present. Hegemonic modern academia is undeniably Eurocentric. This can be seen in the fact that the richest and most influential funders, publishers and institutions are all situated in the Global North⁵. That is not to say that knowledge production does not take place in or by people of the Global South; the Global South has always engaged in knowledge production activities. Rather, the problem, as Francoise Verges (33) puts it, is that hegemonic modern academia simultaneously treats non-Eurocentric forms of knowledges and knowledge production as non-existent, while appropriating and extracting these knowledges in the form of 'data' to further colonial interests. As such, marginalized peoples are often not accepted as valid authorities by the academic world to produce knowledge as intellectuals; yet their knowledge is appropriated as Euro-American researchers collect and use their knowledge as 'data' which they can misinterpret and commodify to further the capitalist global order. By doing so, researchers simultaneously appropriate, distort, marginalize and erase other ways of knowing. This leads to what has been referred to as epistemic alienation for the marginalized — “the distortion of one’s native way of thinking, and of seeing and speaking of one’s own reality” (34, p.32), and epistemicides — “the killing or attempted killing of knowledge systems that are different from modern by global scientific institutions and practices” (35, p.92).

Taking all of this into account, when Smith is criticizing research for being harmful, her point is not to say there are bad apples, spoiled barrels or infested orchards. Rather, she is arguing that research has been part and parcel of the colonial endeavour. As such, Smith’s critique relates to how research has led to physical injustices such as the stealing of lands and lives, but also epistemic injustices such as epistemic alienation and epistemicides. It is thus, not better informed consent procedures, methodological approaches, or supervision skills, that can ameliorate the harms that research poses on oppressed peoples. Instead, what is required is to address the coloniality of the research endeavour. Yet, the field of RI addresses the former, while largely ignoring the latter.

If the RI community is convinced that “only science that is conducted with RF can be considered responsible and conducted with integrity” (13), then discussions about colonialism, epistemic alienation, and epistemicide would be front and centre in RI initiatives. Instead, even RI initiatives focused on RF and led by those located in countries in the Global South — such as the Cape Town Statement on fairness, equity and diversity in research⁶ — largely ignore the coloniality of research (6). Granted, the article introducing the Cape Town Statement does discuss ‘injustice’ in collaborations by stating that “high-income countries reap greater benefits from global collaborations than do LMIC [low and middle income country] collaborators” and also mentions that equity is important to address “a long history of colonial exploitation and inequitable use of Earth’s resources”⁷ (6). However, these two issues are discussed separately from each other, abstracting the reasons for and decontextualizing unjust collaborations, while the issue of colonialism is mentioned once in passing towards the end of the article rather than highlighting from the start how injustice, research and colonialism are interlinked and reinforce each other. Furthermore, these terms are mostly absent from the Cape Town Statement itself. The statement does promote ‘epistemic justice’ explicitly and defines it as “ensuring that the value of knowledge is not based on biases related to gender, race, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, etcetera” (36). However, this is done without even mentioning that epistemic *injustice* is a problem in research. Yet, as Medina (37) points out, to take the coloniality of research seriously, it is important to examine carefully the kinds of particular and concrete injustices imposed on societies by the politics of knowledge production. Medina argues that “the priority of real [epistemic] injustices over ideal justice is crucial” since conceptualizing some ideal justice can prevent us from seeing and taking seriously the actual present systematic injustices present in the world “minimizing the importance of the epistemic obstacles and problems” (p.12-13) that oppressed people experience. Taking into account Medina’s argument, when the Cape Town Statement addresses epistemic justice as a positive ideal to strive for, it avoids commitment to actually confronting real injustices that are present everywhere in research.

It is not surprising that RI initiatives ignore the coloniality of research, when taking into account the colonial context in which RI initiatives find themselves. Lanzarotta (38) argues that bioethics as a field is situated within a colonialist framework and seeks to reproduce it, by deflecting from questions of justice and fairness to universalizing Eurocentric understandings of the ethical. As such, when bioethics structures and processes, which are meant to safeguard societies and participants from harm in research, are developed by and for the colonialist endeavour, they contribute towards legitimizing and perpetuating harm caused by colonialism rather than ameliorating it. In the case of RI, this can be seen in the way that initiatives ignore RF concerns discussed by anticolonial scholars. Through ignorance, dominant RI initiatives, rather than being aligned with RF, are complicit in and reproduce the coloniality of research.

To summarize, the dominant narrative in RI initiatives is that research is apolitical, innocent and beneficial, which ignores the coloniality of research and its harms. By ignoring colonial injustice related to research, and thus reproducing it, dominant RI are in conflict with RF. This is the case, even when they claim to promote RF. In the next section, I address how RI initiatives

⁵ I use the term ‘Global North’ to refer to countries profiting from global neoliberalism, capitalism and colonialism, while with ‘Global South’ I refer to countries marginalized and oppressed by global neoliberalism, capitalism and colonialism, as well as individuals within ‘Global North’ countries that are marginalized and oppressed by these structures. I acknowledge that these terms do not account for the diversity of countries both in the Global North and the Global South, but I use the term as a heuristic tool to differentiate differences in power in research broadly.

⁶ Although the Statement is led by members of the European diaspora, who are first and last author.

⁷ This choice of words is itself problematic in that it reflects the assumption that marginalized peoples want to ‘exploit’ the Earth’s resources.

that refer to RF explicitly could still be at odds with RF by focusing on RF superficially and ideally rather than actually confronting injustice.

‘SANITIZING’ INJUSTICE

While teaching about RI and research ethics, I have been challenged multiple times by course participants who question the silence of the field of RI when it comes to colonialism in research, by asking: “*How can we talk about integrity or ethics while condoning genocide?*” Many of my collaborators would respond to the PhD candidates by saying that the field of RI aims to make research more trustworthy and that issues of RF, while important, do not fall under the scope of the field. The problem with such responses is that they refuse to acknowledge research’s role in colonialism and the resulting harms, and how this leads to biases in knowledge production. They also deflect accountability for their role in perpetuating injustice. Since RI is about doing good research, the only way to do research with integrity is to also have RF. The observation that in reality, dominant RI initiatives neglect and conflict with RF shows that these initiatives have a distorted, Eurocentric understanding of “good research” which privileges Eurocentric priorities about research, such as transparency and reproducibility, over those of equity and justice.

Increasingly, this is changing, but still in an unsatisfactory way. During the last World Conference on Research Integrity, RF was addressed extensively, both in sessions focused on implementing the Cape Town Statement, but also in a plenary addressing “Tackling racial and ethnic bias when translating research into policy” (39). Two of the talks in the latter were given by minority women scholars who addressed the role of race construction in colonialism, and how research plays into the phenomenon (40,41). Unlike the majority of dominant RI initiatives, these scholars actually addressed the coloniality of research. While a welcome change to see such critical talks taking centre stage in the field of RI, I think it is important to acknowledge that they are still rare and address the colonial legacies of research rather than current realities.

It seems that the field of RI, as it is reaching out to stakeholders outside of the Euro-American context, is accepting that RF concerns are important for the research endeavour. However, while opening up to this the field ‘sanitizes’ injustice, as Wynter (32) would say, by focusing on issues related to RF that are least controversial and current. By narrowly framing RF as EDI concerns, the field is able to engage in “diversity ideology”, in which racial difference and participation is lauded and applauded with the purpose of having “whites...maintain dominance in multiracial spaces” (42, p.890), but failing to point at the roots of the systemic problem. In other words, the field of RI seems to be opening up to the idea of RF as being integral to it, so long as this does not force the field to question the colonial framework in which it is situated. This is not unique to the field of RI. As Hasan (43) argues, postcolonial literature itself is guilty of this phenomenon; for example, while largely influenced by the work of Edward Said on Orientalism, which was to a large extent grounded in Said’s resistance as a Palestinian to Zionist Israeli colonialism, postcolonial scholars often ignore current injustices inflicted by colonialism, including the case of Palestine. Hasan argues that “full of rage for nineteenth-century European colonialism, postcolonial theorists often exercise extreme liberty to use pejorative terms to castigate past colonisers and agreeable expressions to show sympathy to their victims” but ignore current violence and injustice, and so “advance their academic career” while “scarcely benefit[ing] humanity” (p.8). The field of RI, as it is paying increasing attention to RF, is following the same approach of ‘sanitizing’ injustice to incorporate RF in a way that does not question the global order.

Yet, as an Afghanistani woman and a former refugee, looking at the state of the world I wonder what the use is of fostering RI if it is narrowly defined as cleaning the apples, barrels and orchard. If the aim of the orchard including the barrels and apples is to lead to increased militarization and border surveillance — with these being research priorities in Europe in the coming years (44,45) — why should we be interested in cleaning them up? Should we not rather work on deconstructing and reconstructing the orchard, barrels and apples?

If ‘integrity’ is about following moral values, even in difficult circumstances, then fostering RI should be more than just addressing issues related to reproducibility. Instead, the past and present injustices caused by research should also be addressed. This involves necessarily becoming political. Advocating for apolitical research neutrality is equivalent to accepting and reproducing that order, regardless of how unjust it is. As Said (46) writes about the neutrality of research, it is not possible to disentangle individuals from the social context in which they are embedded. Euro-American researchers from countries benefiting from colonialism cannot escape imperialist powers that “impart on their civil societies a state of urgency, a direct political infusion as it were, where and whenever matters pertaining to their imperial interests abroad are concerned” (p.11). What Said is referring to here is how current events and state and commercial interests inherently shape the research agenda, compromising research freedom. Research agendas do not just come from a vacuum of researchers’ intellectual interests. Research funders, such as government, industry, and charities, predetermine research agendas with their calls, based on explicitly political, commercial or other societal interests. All these interests have an inherent political dimension, since they have a particular normative understanding of what research should aim for and contribute towards. Even fettered, i.e., researcher-defined, research projects resulting from open calls are political, in the sense that the researcher’s interests and ideas are also influenced by developments in research around them, which are largely determined by other actors. As such, research always serves political goals.

Therefore, as Said argues, advocating for ‘nonpolitical’ knowledge as ‘true’ knowledge “obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced” (p.10). The “adjective of ‘political’ is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of pretended suprapolitical objectivity” (p.10); in other words, while all

research is political, when certain research projects challenge the global order and thereby work against the political interests of powerful institutions, it is possible to use the label of 'political' to discredit them. Therefore, it is not possible for research to be apolitical or objective, since it is always political in some way and to some extent, with certain projects being more or less explicitly so. The pretence of 'apolitical' research is used to take a specific political position in research, namely that of accepting and endorsing the established order. To confront inequity and injustice, it is important to expose this pretence and advocate from a different political angle, which challenges the inequity and injustice present within this order.

To summarize, in this section, I have argued that while dominant RI initiatives are increasingly referring to RF as an important goal to strive towards, they are only engaging superficially with RF concerns that are least current and controversial. To illustrate this with an example, in the next section, I zoom in on a current case of epistemic injustice in research, which is completely neglected by RI initiatives.

AN EXAMPLE: EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN AFGHANISTAN AS A RESEARCH INTEGRITY ISSUE

With this example I focus here on one of many current cases of epistemic injustice in my home country, Afghanistan. This case highlights how questions of injustice and RI actually interrelate and therefore show that if the field of RI was more harmonious as opposed to in conflict with RF, such questions would be at the forefront of the RI field's agenda. Ebtikar (47) writes the following about epistemic injustice in Afghanistan:

The knowledge that we have of Afghanistan...is catered to an Anglo-American public and grounded firmly in previous imperialist epistemologies. The ethical and intellectual grounds for power, control, and domination are premised on outdated ethnographies, maps, understanding of languages and customs, ethnicities, and so on. This biased and erroneous form of knowledge production theorizes and philosophizes peoples and societies, which at times may seem almost unrecognizable to its inhabitants, to become universal objective truths... the people who are written into these bodies of literature have little to no access to them. Knowledge is produced by, and for, individuals within exclusive spaces, many of whom serve as gatekeepers and regulators. Local histories and knowledge production have been given little value, and few experts of [Afghanistan's] heritage are ever consulted... As I am writing, the people of Afghanistan are dying... [The US] along with a few glorified Afghan elites, have rebranded the Taliban from a terror group to a legitimate political group with shared grievances. To change public perceptions about the Taliban, several research institutes in Washington began to highlight how the group has transformed...

As Ebtikar points out, Eurocentric research (which is dominant in the academic literature) about Afghanistan has been and continues to be used as a tool for colonialist endeavours by Euro-America. Despite the Taliban being recognized in academic discourse as radical Islamists with horrendous human rights records immediately post 9-11-2001 when the US saw them as a threat and invaded Afghanistan (48), as the policy of the US shifted, so too did the narratives about them in the academic literature. When the group became less of a threat to US foreign policy and more of an instrument, research institutions changed the narrative to refer to certain factions of the Taliban as 'moderate' and 'reformed' and advocated for the need to negotiate with them (49-51).

This narrative was then used to justify the Doha talks with the Taliban, in which the US is considered to have essentially handed over power of Afghanistan to the formally recognized terrorist group (52). This has led to the suffering of 40 million people in the country who are currently living under what could be termed as "gender apartheid", as well as multi-ethnic cleansings and forced displacements (53-55). Despite it becoming increasingly difficult to justify any part of the Taliban as moderate or worth negotiating with, some — sometimes powerful agents — continue to push this narrative in media and policy (56,57). While the dominant research narratives mirror those of Euro-America's political interests, local knowledge and experiences about the country are deemed as untrustworthy and invalid. When local knowledge is given a platform, it is often the voice of intellectuals who form the small but powerful group of oppressors from the country, rather than the voice of the oppressed (58). As such, knowledge production about Afghanistan is not only influenced by injustice but also reproduces it. This example shows how research has not only historically (in the "bad old days of colonialism") been political, un-innocent, and harmful, but how it continues to be used to fuel and maintain violence in the world.

The case of Afghanistan shows that colonialism and the manifestation of clear political agendas cause biases in the research endeavour, by creating distorted narratives about people, places and politics. If fostering RI is about doing good research and addressing biases, then the field of RI should be interested in addressing past and current colonialism. Instead, the field of RI reduces questions of bias to those related to clinical trials and publishing, such as publication and selection bias — the types of bias that are least likely to influence the global political order. While it could be argued that RI is not concerned with questions related to the epistemic biases in knowledge production concerning Afghanistan, because that knowledge production is mostly carried out by semi-political institutes and NGOs rather than universities, the fact that this research is carried out by such institutes constitutes the epistemic bias problem. As Monsutti (59) argues, the "agendas and terminology of UN agencies, international NGOs, governmental bodies, and armed forces have thus come to percolate the entire political economy of research in Afghanistan" (p.275). The colonial induced violence present in the country has "hindered the development of independent social sciences in Afghanistan" (p. 275). As explained by the recently established Afghanistan Research Network, this is because curtailing of freedom of speech and physical violence in the country prevent those from Afghanistan from being able to conduct research on the country, while Western experts are allowed to do so despite being monitored by the

authorities (60). Furthermore, as Said articulates in *Orientalism* (46), the trend of having Western social scientists focus on dubiously collected statistics rather than the lived realities and histories of the people of the Near East, is part and parcel of the modern colonialist agenda in the region. Taken together, violence and oppression in Afghanistan are interlinked with the research economy related to the country, thereby supporting epistemic injustice and bias in knowledge produced about the country. Yet, the field of RI ignores such biases in Afghanistan and elsewhere since the field is concerned primarily with issues that directly speak to Eurocentric interests in research.

RI AND ETHICAL IMPERIALISM

As argued in earlier sections, while dominant RI initiatives claim to improve the trustworthiness of research, they operate within and reproduce a colonialist research framework that ignores the role of research in injustice and colonialism. While dominant RI initiatives are increasingly showing themselves as becoming engaged with issues of research RF, these efforts only show a superficial engagement with RF concerns that are least controversial, current or effective in terms of challenging the global social order. This is particularly problematic considering that Euro-American RI initiatives are not limited by the geographic context in which they originate.

Funders and publishers increasingly set requirements for potential applications related to RI (61). While the biggest and most influential funders and publishers are located in the Global North, their reach is much wider with the Global South also dependent on their infrastructure. As such, RI standards and requirements originating from the Global North are imposed on the Global South. This phenomenon can be referred to as a type of “ethical imperialism”, a term that was originally coined by Schrag (62) to refer to how biomedical standards of research ethics are imposed on the social sciences, but also equally — if not more — applies when discussing the geographical reach of RI initiatives.

In my own experience of collaborating on a European project which aimed to develop RI tools for European institutions (21), I often received comments and questions on whether the tools could be generalizable beyond Europe. I felt this as pressure from collaborators, audience members at presentations, and reviewers to promise that the tools are applicable in all research settings across the globe. I found this to be very strange considering that the tools were developed together with stakeholders situated within the European context; promising the applicability of the tools elsewhere would apply a product developed based on European values and attitudes on countries in other contexts and thereby contribute towards ethical imperialism. Yet, considering that the European Commission — the project’s research funder — is keen to “spread European values beyond its borders” (63), it should not have been surprising to see such expectations about the project. Many other Euro-American RI initiatives are likely to be ridden with the same type of ethical imperialism.

This is a problem for two reasons. First, since the standards of RI that are often imposed on the Global South originate in the Global North, they are not tailored to the Global South’s priorities regarding knowledge production. As such, they incentivize Global South researchers to define good research, not on their own terms, but on the terms of Global North countries. In this way the concerns related to integrity that are most important for the research occurring in local contexts in the Global South, such as epistemic biases, are ignored, and instead the Global North’s definition and agenda for RI are upheld. This limits the freedom of researchers outside of Euro-America in how they can approach research, as it forces them to abide by Eurocentric standards.

Secondly, since these standards originate from the Global North and are appropriate for Eurocentric approaches to knowledge production, the Global South will always fail to meet these standards in as optimally a way as demanded by the Global North (64). For instance, during conferences, I often heard RI stakeholders from different regions in the Global South discuss how it was important for their institutions to meet “world standards” with regard to the responsible conduct of research so as to be eligible for funding. “World standard” in this context was used as a synonym for meeting the standards set by Euro-American players in research. These views reflect the narrative that Global North countries are word leaders when it comes to doing good research, whereas those in the Global South need to “build capacity” and “catch up”. Such a narrative is not surprising, given that the definition of “good research” set by RI initiatives is highly Eurocentric. This distorted narrative of “world leaders” versus “those needing to catch up with regard to responsible research” reproduces marginalization of knowledge produced in Global South countries as being inferior. In making this claim, I am not oblivious to the fact that due to colonialism, many countries in the Global South do have less resources to do research. Rather, my argument is that the point about resources should not be conflated with a mistaken view that knowledge production activities in the Global South should be measured against a Eurocentric yardstick regarding ethics and integrity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I argued that despite recent attempts to align RI objectives with RF, dominant RI initiatives at present are in conflict rather than harmonious with RF. Dominant RI initiatives largely ignore anticolonial views about research. They only superficially engage with certain elements of RF that are less contentious, staying clear of RF concerns that are related to current colonial events. While engaging in RF only superficially, dominant RI initiatives impose their Eurocentric views on responsible research across different regions in the world, thereby committing “ethical imperialism” and reproducing injustice in research.

RI initiatives have a large impact on the global research order, by introducing policies and requirements that funders, publishers and research institutions impose on all researchers. Given that RI initiatives are changing the research landscape rapidly, there is urgent need for an anticolonial RI agenda. This agenda should be a radical one that does not engage in “diversity ideology” (42), but rather openly and explicitly challenges the relationship between research and the current colonial global order, with the aim to fight epistemic injustice. Such an agenda would require, for instance, engaging in discussions about challenging the barrels and orchards of research, when depending on them for our livelihoods as researchers, as well as what it means to be a part of the problematic structure of apples, barrels and orchards as a marginalized researcher. With this article, I hope to bring this urgency to light and find critical allies who are interested in building such an agenda. I recognize that this might be a difficult task that is met with much resistance from dominant RI initiatives. Going against the global social order is not easy. Yet, considering the contribution of research towards injustice in the world, including genocide, terrorism and violence, it is necessary.

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