

# ‘Way Too White’: Navigating Our Colonial Legacies Through Critical Discussions on Positionality and Power Dynamics With Palestinian Feminist Scholars

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Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2025, Vol. 13(1), 5–20, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.15113>

Received: 2024-07-15 • Accepted: 2024-12-04 • Published (VoR): 2025-02-14

Handling Editor: Puleng Segalo, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

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## Abstract

Particularly in recent years, interest in decolonizing knowledge production is increasing considerably. Debates have raised within various academic disciplines on the role of the researcher's positionality in the research and knowledge production process. Reflexivity and positionality have become keywords within feminist and anti-oppressive research, forcing scholars to confront a critical analysis of how knowledge is shaped and influenced by their positionality (in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality and other axes of social difference). Yet, there still strongly prevails the dominance of knowledge production by Western countries, which often maintain racialized representations of the populations of the rest of the world with them. Hence, in the present exploratory study we focused on practices of reflexivity during the research process as fundamental steps to support efforts to decolonize knowledge through examining researchers' positionality, power and privilege in relation to their research settings, contents and participants. Through 21 research-discussion with feminist activists and researchers who had experience with cross-cultural and anti-oppressive research and anti-oppressive research methodologies, we delved into a reflective research process. The present study offers critical and methodological insights on how to protect one's research, and research process, from turning into relations of oppression, domination or control, especially when doing fieldwork in a cross-cultural setting.

## Keywords

reflexivity, positioning, anti-oppressive research, feminist methodology, decoloniality

## المخلص

في السنوات الأخيرة على وجه الخصوص، تزايد الاهتمام بإنهاء الاستعمار في إنتاج المعرفة بشكل كبير. وقد أثرت مناقشات داخل مختلف التخصصات الأكاديمية حول دور موقف الباحث في عملية البحث وإنتاج المعرفة. أصبحت الاعتكسية والموقعية كلمات رئيسية في البحث النسوي والمناهض للقمع، مما أجبر العلماء على مواجهة تحليل نقدي لكيفية تشكيل المعرفة وتأثيرها على موقفهم (من حيث العرق والطبقة والجنس والجنسانية وغيرها من محاور الاختلاف الاجتماعي). ومع ذلك، لا تزال هيمنة إنتاج المعرفة من جانب الدول الغربية، التي غالباً ما تحافظ على تمثيلات عنصرية لسكان بقية العالم معها، سائدة بقوة. ومن ثم، ركزنا في الدراسة الاستكشافية الحالية على ممارسات الاعتكاس أثناء عملية البحث كخطوات أساسية لدعم الجهود الرامية إلى إزالة الاستعمار من المعرفة من خلال فحص موقف الباحثين وقوتهم وامتيازاتهم فيما يتعلق بإعدادات بحثهم ومحتوياته والمشاركين فيه. من خلال 21 مناقشة بحثية مع ناشطات وأبحاث نسويات لديهن خبرة في البحث عبر الثقافات والمناهض للقمع ومنهجيات البحث المناهضة للقمع، خضنا في عملية بحث تأملية. تقدم الدراسة الحالية رؤى نقدية ومنهجية حول كيفية حماية البحث والعملية البحثية من التحول إلى علاقات قمع أو هيمنة أو سيطرة، خاصة عند القيام بالعمل الميداني في بيئة عبر الثقافات. التأملية، القومض، البحث المناهض للقمع.

## الكلمات البالة

المنهجية النسوية، فك الاستعمار



## Riassunto

Negli ultimi anni, l'interesse per la decolonizzazione di processi di ricerca e conoscenza è cresciuto considerevolmente. All'interno di diverse discipline accademiche, si sono sviluppati dibattiti sul ruolo della posizionalità del ricercatore nel processo di ricerca e di produzione del sapere. Riflessività e posizionalità sono diventate parole chiave nella ricerca femminista e anti-oppressiva, spingendo i ricercatori a confrontarsi con un'analisi critica di come il sapere venga plasmato e influenzato dalla propria posizionalità (in termini di razza, classe, genere, sessualità e altri assi di differenza sociale). Tuttavia continua a prevalere fortemente il dominio della produzione di conoscenza da parte dei paesi occidentali, che spesso mantengono rappresentazioni razzializzate delle popolazioni del resto del mondo. In questo studio esplorativo ci siamo concentrati sulle pratiche di riflessività da attivare durante il processo di ricerca come prassi fondamentale per sostenere gli sforzi di decolonizzazione della conoscenza, esaminando posizionalità, potere e privilegi dei ricercatori in relazione ai contesti di ricerca, ai contenuti e ai/partecipanti. Attraverso 21 'conversazioni di ricerca' con attiviste e ricercatrici femministe con esperienza in metodologie anti-oppressive, abbiamo approfondito un processo di ricerca riflessivo. Questo studio offre spunti critici e metodologici su come proteggere la propria ricerca, e il processo di ricerca stesso, dal rischio di trasformarsi in relazioni di oppressione, dominio o controllo, specialmente quando si svolge lavoro sul campo in contesti interculturali.

## Parole-chiave

riflessività, posizionamento, ricerca anti-oppressiva, metodologia femminista, decolonialità

### Non-Technical Summary

#### Background

In recent years, there has been growing interest in decolonizing the ways in which knowledge is produced. Central to this effort are debates about how a researcher's background and positionality shape the research process and the knowledge it generates. In fields of feminist and anti-oppressive research, to critically examine the researcher's assumptions, biases, and power has become an essential practice. Yet, the production of knowledge remains dominated by Western countries, which often perpetuate racialized and hierarchical representations of the world.

#### Why was this study done?

The study seeks to address the enduring colonial biases embedded in research practices, particularly in cross-cultural settings, and to promote research methods that are rooted in solidarity and liberation rather than control or hierarchy.

#### What did the researchers do and find?

The researchers engaged in a series of in-depth discussions with Palestinian feminist researchers and activists, around how researchers' positionality impacts their work, particularly when engaging with populations experiencing colonial and political violence. The study revealed that examining positionality can uncover hidden biases and hierarchies within research, helping to create more equitable and collaborative research relationships.

#### What do these findings mean?

The findings highlight the importance of ongoing reflexivity and critical self-examination in research. By reflecting on their positionality, researchers can become more aware of how their own identities and privileges influence the research process and outcomes. This is particularly urgent when working in colonized and oppressed contexts, such as Palestine, where academic research often risks reproducing the very structures of domination it seeks to critique. The study provides practical insights for building research practices rooted in solidarity, mutual respect, and decolonial approaches, emphasizing the importance of challenging colonial and imperialist narratives in both theory and practice.

This work is especially timely, given the ongoing genocidal violence in Palestine. The authors argue that decolonizing knowledge is not just a theoretical exercise but a moral and political imperative in the face of global systems of violence and inequality.

Was there a way I, as a White American researcher, could ever do work cross-culturally in Cambodia and not be colonizing? Could I take a critical approach and consider this culture that is not my own in a way that serves the local community and vulnerable populations well? At that moment, with the knot that churned in my stomach, I was not so sure.  
(Kelley, 2021, p. 3728)

"How can one be 'sisters' with those one oppresses? 'Sisters' are in the same family, with the same history. Shared experience leads to a way of knowing and seeing the world, and each other, that is itself shared."  
(Dixon, 2002, p. 104)

In this work, we present a journey of critical reflection on how research and knowledge production processes can act as tools of silencing, domination, and racialization, to pursue liberatory and decolonial research practices. As a group of scholars belonging to a part of the world characterized by predominantly white and colonial legacies, who have been working with colleagues from colonized regions for years, we present this critical reflection as a part of a process of deconstructing the colonialist, racist, and positivist psychological paradigms underlying our backgrounds, which have ingrained in us hierarchical perspectives of knowledge.

The term *positionality* – now widely used in the social sciences, with its first use attributed to Bronwyn Davies and Ron Harré (1990) – emerges to underscore the importance of dedicating space and reflection to a discursive examination of power relations within the research and knowledge production process. Recognizing that all knowledge is historically situated and socially constructed through interactions among individuals and the interests of dominant classes within society, the concept of positionality allows for reflection on the subjective and political aspects inherent in every research process (Brown & Strega, 2005; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). One example might be seen in the attention paid, especially in the last decade, to the *status sets* (Milligan, 2016) that the researcher(s) embodies (e.g., race/ethnicity, cultural background, skin color, sexual orientation, ability, gender – but also achieved characteristics such as education or social position) and how these intersect with and influence each stage of the research work, as well as the relationships the researcher establishes with their subject or object of study (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Muhammad et al., 2015; Nagar & Geiger, 2007). Indeed, focusing on positionality enables us to question the origins of our backgrounds, acknowledging their strong colonial tendencies that shape how we understand, perceive, and act in the world.

This reflection seems even more urgent and important in a historical moment like the present, where we bear witness to the impact of these racist, imperialist, and colonialist foundations of our states (referring to European and US-based part of the team), which enable the brutal violence of resurgent colonialism. Four out of the six authors of this work are white and have been raised in predominantly white contexts, educated as academics within epistemologies of the Global North deeply saturated with whiteness and racism. These authors come from three countries that, over the past six months, have shared narratives in support of this genocidal colonial violence. While the writing of this work began well before October 7, 2023, and the subsequent attack on the people of Gaza – which continues to this day and adds to the ongoing oppression Palestinians face in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and within Israel – we are submitting it on a time when one of the authors of this work and some of the colleagues who have enabled the thoughts gathered here are suspended in an alternative space-time of colonial war in Gaza, waiting for death while also fighting for their lives (Ihmoud, 2023). And while others – Palestinians from the diaspora, the West Bank, and Jerusalem – have lost their physical, psychological, and employment security for speaking out about and raising their voices against the ongoing genocide. Therefore, we find ourselves finalizing this work centered on reflections on our positionalities and our training steeped in racism and colonialism, as we read, day after day for over six months, the daily counts of Israel's ongoing atrocities in Gaza. On the 163rd day of genocide, at least 31,645 Palestinians have been killed and 73,676 have been injured by Israeli forces since October 7. More than 8,000 Palestinians are missing, likely under rubble. According to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 134 journalists and 771 healthcare professionals have been killed. More than 70% of all housing units in Gaza have been partially or entirely destroyed, leaving around two million people displaced in Rafah. An estimated 17,000 children in Gaza are alone and dealing with loss and grief in addition to appalling living conditions. Around 60,000 pregnant women and 700,000 children are exposed to serious health complications due to malnutrition, dehydration, and lack of medical facilities. UN experts tweeted that 80% of those facing famine globally are Gazans today. As we read about all 11 universities destroyed within the Gaza Strip, witnessing what has been described

as a true "scholasticide" (Nabulsi, 2009; Perugini, 2024), namely the systematic and intentional destruction of the local educational system and the mass killing of students, researchers, and teachers.

We thus believe it is even more urgent to question today how to build – or rebuild – alliances for projects and research practices characterized by solidarity and liberation, supporting each other in cultivating a resistant and decolonial perspective. In this work, we have started this process by asking questions and deconstructing our Euro-American, imperialist, and colonial reading within a decolonial feminist epistemological and theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts of positionality and reflexivity.

## Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Methodology and Theorization

Reflexivity and positionality push towards paradigms that challenge the notion of objectivity too often sought and pursued within the human sciences, instead emphasizing the importance of clarifying the connection between the researcher's (power) position within the field and the bias of any interpretation as a result (Acevedo et al., 2015; Collins, 1990). In recent decades, many scholars in the social sciences – particularly those engaged in feminist practices – have paid attention to how the biography and reflexivity of the researcher are relevant to the research process, highlighting how the illusion of objective forms of knowledge are but masks for the subjectivity of dominant groups and toxic masculinity (de Allen, 2023; Haraway, 1991; Sprague, 2016), and thus challenging universal claims to epistemological understanding.

For many years, decolonial feminist scholars have been exposing the presence of Eurocentric versions within the research process – especially when working cross-culturally – that replicate colonialist, racist, or sexist ideologies (McLeod et al., 2020; Segalo, 2022; Segalo & Fine, 2020). For example, in her seminal work 'Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourse', Mohanty (1984, 2003) highlighted how Western white feminism had long replicated and supported an idea of an inherently superior West, as opposed to the world of the Global South. Indeed, the very notion of decoloniality (which refers to the process of challenging the cultural and epistemic legacies of colonialism, particularly in the context of knowledge, history, aesthetic and culture) emphasizes the concept of positionality, as it highlights the need to continue to reflect – even and especially within research processes – on coloniality, and thus on past and ongoing power relations between the Global South and North (Bulhan, 2015; McLeod et al., 2020; Mohanty, 2013).

Therefore, positionality and reflexivity are advocated to locate knowledge and defend against the false neutrality and universality of academic knowledge (Beebeejaun, 2022). While positionality requires researchers to acknowledge and locate their powers, views, values, and beliefs concerning the research process, reflexivity is an ongoing and obligatory process in any research project as it enables the researcher to identify, construct, and critique their position within the research process (Manohar et al., 2017). Therefore, reflexivity, which is intended as the researcher's acknowledgment and revelation of their self in the research in an attempt to understand their role or influence on it, informs positionality (Cohen et al., 2011). It is a self-analysis of how one's perspective and position may have influenced the research design, process, and interpretation of research findings (Cavazzoni et al., 2023; Manohar et al., 2017). It implies a reflection on the process and power relations within the research process and highlights the responsibility of the researcher in collecting and interpreting data (Sultana, 2007).

However, although the need to examine, critique, and deconstruct values and power relations is at the core of many critical practices (Collins, 1990; Fine, 2012), several scholars argue that little is still being done to untangle power relations within research processes (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990). An essential step in feminist reflexivity is to move beyond self-referential rhetoric toward the researcher's responsibility for interpretations (Gill, 1995). Some feminist scholars have warned of the danger of waves of commitment to positionality as a self-indulgent practice of a certain kind of research 'tick-box exercise', without critical insight and reflection being applied to the work. A description of who the researcher is and where they come from is not enough if it does not lead to reflection on the power dynamics in which they are embedded (Beebeejaun, 2022; Sultana, 2007). Exercises in self-reflexivity are reduced to mere 'navel-gazing' and serve as 'badges' worn by researchers to prove their legitimacy (Kelley, 2021; Patai, 1994; Wolf, 1996). On the other hand, these concerns seem to have led to a situation of paralysis in which scholars have felt pressured to avoid fieldwork in international and cross-cultural contexts for fear of appearing oppressive and

perpetuating forms of colonialism and to engage more in textual work and analysis (Mukherjee, 2017; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Sultana, 2007).

## Palestine as a Crucial Context for Decolonial and Feminist Reflection on Positionality

For over seventy-five years, as a colonial entity, the Israeli occupation in Palestine has constituted a persistent political and social structure that enforces a daily and constant denial of health, well-being, and life for the Palestinian people (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonialism functions as a system of power that perpetuates the repression of Indigenous populations and employ practices such as labor exploitation, land fragmentation, settlement expansion, displacement, movement restrictions, continuous political harassment, and military interventions. These measures create a daily reality that is uncertain and intolerable for the native population (Makkawi, 2017; Veronese et al., 2022).

As in other context where colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy intersect, reflecting on the significance of positionality and reflexivity is essential to interrogate the racist and colonialist dynamics embedded within research processes (e.g., Abu-Lughod et al., 2023; Mohanty, 1984; Razack, 2002; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Sheehi, 2024; Thobani, 2007). Engaging in a reflexive examination of our own positionality enables us to challenge the often overly homogeneous perspectives through which experiences are interpreted, and to reveal how colonial practices have shaped the modern world and Eurocentric forms of knowledge production – marginalizing other ways of knowing and being in the world (Asher, 2017; Tlostanova et al., 2019).

We have therefore chosen to focus on the Palestinian context because, beyond being the setting in which each of us either lives or dedicates most of our study, passion, and work, it is a context that is, unfortunately, profoundly relevant to these reflections. This year, amidst genocidal attacks on Gaza, we have observed how such critical reflections remain alarmingly absent, particularly within Western feminist movements, where we have instead witnessed the resurgence of Orientalist and colonial tropes. Over the past months, it has become clear that universalist, Western-centric feminism continues to dominate, with the narratives of middle-class white women remaining at the forefront (Alasah, 2024; Aldossari, 2023; PFC, 2023; Makama et al., 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian et al., 2022). This form of feminism has historically neglected intersecting oppressions of race, class, imperialism, and neocolonialism (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981) and has often served as a vehicle for colonial and imperial projects, legitimized under the guise of 'protecting' women (Abu-Lughod et al., 2022).

In this context, we believe that engaging in these critical reflections is, now more than ever, vital for resisting the silence and complicity of our states and institutions. These reflections represent a refusal to normalize the pervasive racism, colonialism, death, and destruction, and an effort to reclaim solidarity, community, and processes of resistance, mobilization, and psychological healing.

## The Study

Understanding that critical and liberatory research requires a process of awareness and the ability to interrogate one's subjectivity, which Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981, 2018) describes as a process of *decolonization of the mind*<sup>1</sup>, in this work we sought to describe a potential example of such a process. Indeed, starting from these premises and driven by the internal urgency to distance ourselves from colonial and neo-liberal narratives prevalent in our Western countries today, we present a series of insights to reflect on the colonialism and orientalism embedded within some of our research and intervention practices, still often deemed 'way too white'. These insights emerged from a series of research conversations activated with Palestinian feminist researchers and activists (from Gaza, the West Bank, or diasporic), whose primary goal was to explore the daily lives and survival practices of women in Palestine (see Cavazzoni et al., 2023, for more information). It was during the discussion on survival and resilient practices that the issue of our 'way too white' perspective within our research group was raised, prompting the need for continuous reflection and deconstruction.

1) Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) asserts that "colonialism's most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationships to the world" (p. 17). The decolonization of the mind refers to a process to end the universalism in the guise of westernized canons that attribute truth only to Western form of knowledge production (Andersen, 2018).

Recognizing that most of the literature on mental health has been formulated by and for Euro-American contexts (Ali-Faisal, 2020; Bhatia, 2017), we believe that reflecting on our positionalities – of our bodies and our thoughts – is necessary to enable us to build alliances and working relationships based on solidarity that are not reproductions of imposition, domination, and oppression (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019; Segalo & Fine, 2020).

Drawing from the social identity map outlined by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019)<sup>2</sup> to help researchers make explicit their social identities and positionality, we begin by self-locating as six researchers (five women and one man): two Italian, one from the US, one Palestinian from Gaza, one Palestinian from Jerusalem, and one Canadian currently residing in the UK. Five members are affiliated with public tertiary institutions (four professors and one post-doctoral researcher) and work in the fields of education, psychology, and mental health. One is an independent scholar and researcher who has been collaborating with the Italian team for many years. In various ways – sometimes combined – all six of us have worked for several years on the mental health, well-being, and human rights of populations living under colonial oppression and political violence, with particular attention to Palestine. Each of us has been actively committed, in our own ways, to exposing and denouncing the oppression and illegal occupation endured by the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli government, and to standing in solidarity for a free and decolonized Palestine. To address potential power dynamics within the team, specific steps were taken to promote equity and mitigate hierarchical influence (between countries and between different contracts). Authors were paired for joint tasks, deliberately avoiding pairings with authors from the same institutions, to prevent team interactions from falling into hierarchical power dynamics. This arrangement encouraged open dialogue and allowed the younger researchers, in particular, to contribute freely, helping to maintain a collaborative atmosphere. Moreover, our diverse backgrounds and experiences significantly shaped the research, discussion, and writing process. The diverse composition of the group – and long-standing trust among members – fostered open discussions on how each team member's positionality and privilege intersected with our work. This process guided us to consistently reflect on and interrogate our assumptions throughout the study. As discussed above, the context where these reflections are situated is Palestine since we believe that Palestine painfully offers a colonial context in which practices of oppression, colonization, and knowledge domination can be constantly observed and explored within academic research (Giacaman, 2023). Even more today, the colonial political violence of Israel – as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and colleagues (2022) remind us – compels us to reassess our responsibilities against colonized militarism and decolonization.

## Method

This work thus presents insights based on a series of *research conversations* (Herda, 1999), which were unstructured and aimed to elicit thoughts and reflections on Palestinian women's experiences of oppression and colonial occupation, as well as their practices of critical consciousness. The term *research conversations* is used instead of interview to better grasp the aspects of mutuality, reciprocity, freedom, and spontaneity in the research encounter (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The intention is to structure an exchange that it is experienced more like a conversation or discussion than a structured interview, one that is less directive and more focused on learning from the other. Indeed, dialogue is meant to replace unilateral questions and answers, which may make the process of thematization more challenging, but it also seeks to disrupt and blur the power dynamics inherent in traditional research methodologies. As Gadamer (1976) suggests, this kind of dialogue is akin to play, where through unexpected and unplanned turns, participants find themselves shifted from their initial perspectives (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 286). According to Gilligan and Sullivan (1995), this attempt at dialogue rather than interview can help interrupt, disturb, or dissolve the status quo—an approach that is especially valuable when working in colonized and cross-cultural contexts.

The conversations were conducted online by one of the authors with 21 Palestinian researchers aged between 25 and 65 years old. All interviewees were self-identified women, researchers involved in anti-oppressive work and feminist

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<sup>2</sup> The Social Identity Map is a flexible starting point to guide researchers to be reflexive about their positionality and their social location. It involves a reflection on the identification of social identities, on how these positions impact our life, and the details that may be tied to the particularities of our social identity. To see more: Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691987007>

methodologies in the fields of education, psychology, mental health, and human rights. The selection of participants was motivated by the study's goal of capturing nuanced, gendered perspectives on oppressive structures within academic and social contexts. With an awareness that the intersections of colonial and patriarchal oppression affect both men and women, we chose to focus on women participants because they are often underrepresented in feminist and decolonial literature (Giacaman & Johnson, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). Therefore, this focus aims to address that gap by centering firsthand women's insights into the intersections of gender, academic work, and sociopolitical struggles in Palestine.

Following guidelines for key informant interviews, purposive snowball sampling was used (Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Snowball sampling was deemed appropriate to facilitate access to a close-knit community of scholars whose perspectives are often marginalized, thus ensuring a richer and more contextually grounded discussions. A list of potential participants was obtained following a literature review and through the authors' prior knowledge. In addition, at the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would recommend a key informant to be contacted following an ethnographic snowball sampling approach (Jackson, 2003). Participants were contacted and invited by e-mail and were provided with an information sheet explaining the nature of the discussion and asking for their consent to participate. The interviews were conducted via a virtual platform to allow for face-to-face interaction. Each interview lasted between 35 and 75 minutes, was conducted in English or Arabic with an Arabic-English translator, and was recorded and transcribed *ad verbatim* after consent was obtained. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (No. of approval 623) of the University of Milano-Bicocca.

For the present work, we focused on the sections where the discussions revolved around the themes of reflexivity and positionality of Western researchers, as well as the experiences of liberatory and anti-oppressive research practices with researchers from various parts of the world. A qualitative and experiential approach was adopted to guide the data analysis to examine in-depth opinions, doubts, attitudes, and perspectives on these issues (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Recognizing the influence of positionality on data interpretation, each author independently re-read the transcripts, engaging in an intentional process of reflexivity by considering how their own background, identity, and reactions shaped their understanding of the material. As researchers working within predominantly white and Western academic contexts, we acknowledge the potential for colonial biases and the need for heightened reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). This involved a conscious reflection on how our whiteness and affiliation with Western institutions might affect our interpretation of narratives provided by Palestinian participants. Each author documented their initial reactions, biases, and interpretations alongside the primary themes identified, allowing us to critically examine our assumptions and preconceptions (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). We then convened for joint discussions to collectively review and challenge the identified areas, observing how our assumptions and viewpoints influenced our understanding of participants' words. These discussions served as a space to negotiate power dynamics, where we continuously interrogated how our positionalities and the broader structures of academic knowledge production might impact our comprehension and representation of Palestinian voices. By making power dynamics an explicit part of our analytical discussions, we sought to decenter our authority as researchers, thereby fostering a more collaborative and respectful analytical process. Nvivo 12 qualitative software was used to manage and facilitate data organization, documenting both individual reflections and collective interpretations.

In line with qualitative methodologies, our analysis prioritizes capturing the breadth and depth of participants' perspectives, rather than seeking representativeness or averaging opinions (Marshall, 1996). This approach supports a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and insights shared, highlighting the complexity inherent in feminist and anti-oppressive research within occupied contexts.

## Findings: Insights and Reflections

Upon reviewing the interviews and engaging in group discussions, two main areas emerged around which various thoughts revolved. In the first section – which was named *Positionality as a tool to explore the whiteness of the lenses and support the decolonization of the eyes* – reflections centered on how attention to positionality can act as a useful tool to support and initiate processes of critical awareness regarding our thoughts and our perspectives through which we

perceive and act in the world. In the second section – named *Positionality: as a tool to build alliances and to stand out* – reflections shifted on how attention to positionality can aid and support the reconstruction of authentic relationships among researchers and activists, and thus non-oppressive alliances.

## Positionality as a Tool to Explore the Whiteness of the Lenses and Support the Decolonization of the Eyes

The group deliberations initially focused on discussing how critical reflexivity and attentiveness to one's positionality might stimulate and underpin the process of deconstruction and decolonization within the researcher's mindset, fostering an awareness of their preconceptions, perspectives, and vested interests.

"I posit that this constitutes the pivotal query. In what manner does my positionality exert influence over my decisions, and, more crucially, the perspective through which I perceive phenomena? Pondering upon this matter could facilitate an understanding of how one's positional stance, and its attendant legacy, shapes the rapport one forges with the community within which one operates." (KI-19).

Engaging in research within cross-cultural milieus, particularly in nations historically subjected to colonization, despoliation, dispossession, and Orientalist categorization, underscores the significance of contemplating one's positionality as a preliminary step towards acknowledging the historical and political role played by one's nation in perpetuating the oppression of the population which with we work.

"What constitutes the researcher's motivation? Does the researcher acknowledge the complicity of their country, or the part of the world they come from, in the subjugation of the community they presently seek to investigate? Can they also discern the transgenerational inheritance inherent in their fieldwork rapport?" (KI-14).

The imperative of reflecting upon this historical and present legacy has been accentuated and deliberated, particularly concerning how this colonial legacy is deeply entrenched within cognitive processes and interpretive frameworks shaping our comprehension of the world, thereby informing the trajectory of our research interests and intervention endeavors. We find ourselves ensconced within particular paradigms that construe reality according to standards propagated and enforced by Western modernity (Tlostanova et al., 2019). Orientalist and racist narratives permeate our quotidian existence – a reality manifest in the expedited condemnation by Western governments and institutions of actions undertaken by Hamas on October 7, juxtaposed with their tepid or negligible response to Israel's actions both on and before October 7, extending back over the preceding 75 years. If this holds in everyday life outside academia, the presence of these narratives is equally pronounced within it, including within Western feminist literature (Ali-Faisal, 2020; Mohanty, 1984). Considering the Palestinian context, much of the literature produced by Western scholars confines the narrative of Palestinian women to analyses of internal patriarchy, portraying them exclusively as voiceless objects lacking agency (Abdo, 2023; Cavazzoni et al., 2023; Richter-Devroe, 2018). These feminisms, labeled as liberal and colonial, dangerously uphold uncritical narratives and perilous representations, ultimately becoming complicit in justifying military invasions, occupation, and imperial projects. Indeed, decolonial theories underscore the critical importance of challenging Western representations of the "other", demonstrating how knowledge produced within and by the West is deeply imbued with colonial power dynamics (Lugones, 2010; Said, 1978). Engaging in reflection on positionality can aid in striving to view the world through noncolonial lenses (Johnson-Odim, 1996), aligning with an epistemic, political, and cultural movement that allows emancipation from these limitations, highlighting their inseparability from racism, hetero-patriarchy, economic exploitation, and discrimination within non-European knowledge systems (Tlostanova et al., 2019).

Following these reflections, the issue of distrust and suspicion among indigenous Palestinian researchers and activists towards Eurocentric and Western researchers became clear and indisputable.



"Despite the centrality of terms like intersectionality or interlocked forms of oppression, research in psychology exploring the interconnections between colonial, racial, and gender violence is scarce. Anglo/Eurocentric analyses persist, replicating racist, colonialist, and orientalist ideologies" (KI-6).

Indeed, despite the emphasis on the need to understand gender-based oppression in connection to other social locations or identities concerning dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, ability, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 2017), feminist psychological analyses of intersectionality remain centered on the United States, failing to apply the intersectional framework to majority world spaces (Patil, 2013). Moreover, interviewees described several experiences in research groups or Western intervention projects where there was a tendency to exclude structural, historical, and political components when investigating the well-being and mental health of populations.

"They come here to describe the traumatic conditions of our children, and when they come back, you will find their articles on nutrition problems, poor family conditions, violent educational methods, and so on. Nothing about the structural conditions that create the traumatic conditions for our children. Nothing about politics..." (KI-12).

This trend was highlighted by multiple voices in our interviews. It is then easy to understand the difficulties these projects face in addressing the deep-seated and structural causes. Similarly, in projects aimed at contrasting gender-based violence (GBV), attention is usually exclusively focused on the Palestinian patriarchal society, with no mention of the structural colonial and racist occupation to which all women, like men, are subjected in Palestine – demonstrating the racist and colonial principles of Western research.

"I'll be honest. I disdain the clinical help of psychologists who come here to work or train in gender-based violence and separate women's oppression by patriarchy from the general oppression of Palestinian women caused by settler colonialism." (K-13)

"European, American funding... they don't fund you to be politically active against oppression, against land confiscation, human rights violations, house demolitions. They fund you if you want to criticize your man if you want to criticize your religion, your society. To still show that you are inferior, undeveloped, patriarchal, dependent." (K-18)

In a recent study, Shalhoub-Kevorkian and colleagues (2022) discuss a similar phenomenon, highlighting how studies consistently tend to omit occupation as a material factor in women's oppression, demonstrating a great reluctance among feminist colleagues and Western scholars to acknowledge the settler-occupation and its effects. Such reluctance and silence can only be seen as complicit with the brutality of the Israeli regime. In discussing this phenomenon, Abu-Lughod (2013) lucidly highlights how European and American activists and feminists mobilize for Palestinian or Arab women only because they are oppressed by Muslim men, thus reinforcing a sense of superiority. It is this sense of superiority that often motivates Western women to sign and circulate petitions. Using the gender perspective alone to understand inequalities and gender-based violence is very dangerous precisely because it serves to demonize the other – as we see today – forgetting that the same gender equality measure is developed and designed following Western ways of knowing and serves to legitimize neo-colonial forms of domination (Makama et al., 2019).

"The risk we see in this research, unfortunately even in 'feminist' research, is the culturalization and orientalizing of the roots of gender discrimination, making it impossible to trace and undermine its foundations." (KI-2).

In these projects, a common missing denominator is the possibility of letting local activists, operators, and victims of gender-based violence decide what the problem is, choose the language to describe it, and determine the solutions. This would mean addressing aid policy in terms of offering "care" that effectively responds to people's needs, rather than working with prepackaged "best global practices." (Abu-Lughod et al., 2022). For instance, removing State impunity for racial or ethnic violence, or recognizing the material difficulties caused by the siege, citizenship laws, inadequate funding in refugee camps, and border controls could, in some cases, be more crucial (Abu-Lughod et al., 2022).

These examples have been highlighted to emphasize how academic research, as well as support interventions, often risk perpetuating exploitation and colonialism, making psychology or "feminism" a tool for perpetuating stigma, oppression, and white supremacy (Chawla & Atay, 2018; Columba Fernández, 2018; Kelley, 2021; Tanous, 2022). In this regard, building trust and contextual understanding with Western researchers has been emphasized as crucial to laying the groundwork for liberatory, decolonial, and anti-oppressive research actions.

"I think we cannot work alone. Naturally, I have to trust you. This trust comes from how you position yourself in your research, but we must invest in people who live in the west and east, south and north to work together" (KI-12).

## Positionality: As a Tool to Build Alliances and to Stand Out

Starting from the imperative of building relationships and trust alliances among researchers at a global level, the second area of discussion focused on how researchers' positionality manifests and unfolds in their research work, and how it can therefore sustain the (re)construction of liberatory and decolonial working practices. While it is essential to consider positionality and reflexivity in terms of the researcher's perspective, discussions emphasized how often these elements appear in publications in the form of a brief descriptive rather than critical and reflexive statement, thus being too vaguely outlined to comprehend a process of decolonial deconstruction.

"Within feminist literature, positioning oneself means going beyond a statement of biographical information that tells me where you come from" (KI-1).

"I often read that a person is white, European, and perhaps a woman. But what information does that give me? Have they worked to decolonize the mind?" (KI-3).

It was indeed emphasized how in research, especially in the psychological one which we focused on, the few times researchers' positionality is commented upon, it is often from a biographical perspective. Positionality should be taken into account at every stage of the research process: from how questions are framed, to the choice of topic, to how methodology, theory, and possible interpretations are considered. However Western researchers seem more often concerned with reproducing field strategies inscribed in their academic canons, struggling to recognize, and therefore listen to, diverse epistemological perspectives. While biographical/geographical positionality can be useful for understanding if the author has been socialized within a historical-social context of whiteness (Fernández et al., 2021), it is also emphasized that this does not provide information on whether authors have developed a conscious and critical perspective on this, nor on how these identities intersect with institutional, geopolitical, and material aspects (Nagar & Ali, 2003; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Sultana, 2007).

"One hears about author positionality. But it is not critical, it is not within a complex reflection on how this identity relates to structural dynamics, power, and oppression" (KI-11).

The risk of focusing solely on biographical identities does not allow us to distinguish between the ethical, ontological, and epistemological aspects of fieldwork dilemmas. It does not adequately address how our ability to align our theoretical priorities with the concerns of the communities we seek to promote and support struggles with the opportunities, constraints, and values embedded in our academic institutions (Nagar & Ali, 2003).

Furthermore, positionality and reflexivity should be critical – and can therefore be defined as such – if they can also be coherent. This coherence introduces, within interviews, the issue of political positioning, both of the research and the researcher:

"No research is neutral and is never just research. We're talking about Palestine, for example. Anyone can talk about Palestine. I don't believe in depoliticized research or depoliticized work in any process. Are you in favor of BDS? Will you not publish in Israeli journals? Will you refuse funding from the Israeli state? Will you refuse to do academic projects with Israeli institutions that must be part of them?" (KI-17).

"This part is also important. For example, this person writes – have they been involved in recent years in supporting the struggles and demands of the Palestinian population? Have they worked to promote knowledge on the issues they work on? Have they supported petitions?" (KI-3).

Critical, feminist, indigenous, and postcolonial approaches in recent decades have strongly questioned the concept of research neutrality, highlighting the inherent political aspect of all knowledge and research. There is no "knowledge without interests" (Reinharz, 1985, p. 17). This needs to be recognized, as concepts like neutrality and objectivity have long been used to justify the ideological nature of research, aiming to legitimize specific power and privilege structures based on class, race, and gender (de Jong, 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Wahab, & Al-Issa, 2022; Sheehi & Sheehi, 2020).

"Within colonizing cultures, it is the ideologies themselves that have ensured the separation of the personal from the political and of research from politics. We find ourselves as if something could be separated from the historical and cultural context" (KI-18).

Understanding, from the analysis of positionality – both explicitly stated in the usual paragraph and implicitly within the work, in the text, in the words, in the reference literature, and in the journals where one publishes – is fundamental for reconstructing trust relationships and thus for working towards decolonial theorization, methodologies, practices and intervention.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this work, we have attempted to embark on a reflective journey regarding one of the many ways in which we can discuss, incorporate, and enrich ourselves with reflections on positionality within decolonial feminist research. We have sought to highlight the importance of addressing these topics to avoid perpetuating relationships of oppression and domination within our writing and research endeavors. In this regard, an examination of the researcher's positionality is crucial for challenging the notion of knowledge objectivity and recognizing the subjective and political aspects of every research process. Stemming from a critical discussion of our work – Western white scholars working in Palestine alongside Palestinian colleagues – in this article, we have tried to outline the issues that arise when conducting research in a colonized and oppressed context and to reflect critically and reflexively on our positionality.

There are several considerations we can make regarding the limitations of this work. Firstly, the reflections presented here come from individual and online interviews. We believe that the virtual medium allowed us to reach participants who would otherwise have been difficult to access, but it has also limited the potential richness of responses. Additionally, group discussions with participants instead of individual interviews might have elicited more nuanced reflections. Moreover, it could be worth conducting these discussions with colleagues from other parts of the world, to further diversified perspectives. Another limitation lies in the fact that all interviews were conducted by a single author. This choice was based on the availability of resources, particularly in time that this author had during the interview period, as well as the fact that the initiative for this work originated from this author's interests. If we had been able to involve multiple authors in the conversations, it could have allowed for deeper reflection and potentially different insights shaped by each researcher's positionality. Despite these limitations, this is as a reflective work that aims to open space for further discussion rather than to provide an exhaustive analysis.

Driven by the intention not to succumb to paralysis due to our identities, we might define this work as a shared process of conscientization (Freire, 1989) – of critical awareness – necessary for every researcher operating in oppressed and colonized spaces (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). What emerges from these discussions is a constant urge to problematize, think, reflect, and criticize every phase of our research process. Critique does not reside in particular concepts or words but in the uncritical way in which they are often too frequently employed. Radical critical reflexivity is needed, constantly questioning many of the foundations of our disciplines, which in our case are entrenched in a socio-historical and political context of whiteness and patriarchal capitalism (de Ishtar, 2005; Kelley, 2021). If feminist practices and methodologies were the first to emphasize the importance of reflecting on and considering the researcher's positioning within their research idea and trajectory, they now caution against the misuse of researcher positionality. Reflexivity and positionality are not "a confession of salacious indiscretions" (England, 1994, p. 244) but a process of critique

(both personal and shared) and profound self-discovery. This process implies an interest in how our history has shaped our worldviews, values, and beliefs that we often take for granted as common sense. Indeed, insights gained through critical self-reflection are emancipatory, as researchers can become aware of the sources of their current values, taken-for-granted worldviews, or ways of being that position them within entrenched social or institutional hierarchies (Lin, 2015).

We believe this process is even more crucial in a historical moment like this one, where we bear witness to genocidal colonial violence. In a recent video, a researcher and colleague from Gaza who was also among the interviewees, globally asked:

"Feminists – where the hell have you been? Tell me one name of the 8,000 Palestinian women whom Israel killed in the last four months in Gaza. 1 million women and girls are enduring the unimaginable pain of having their limbs amputated and having c-sections without any kind of anesthesia or after-delivery care. Of being widows, of having their kids killed in front of their eyes. You were silent last week about an objective UN report of Palestinian women being raped, undressed, sexually harassed, put in cages, stripped naked, and forced to be photographed in undesirable situations. If you know all of that, and you don't move, how could you be a feminist?"

Indeed, it is difficult to think about rebuilding alliances and liberatory practices while witnessing a genocide against our colleagues, by our own states. We might think that the first step to do so – also following the reflections presented here – is through a constant collective and radical self-examination of the biases and colonial logic underlying our formations and thoughts (Bardwell-Jones & McLaren, 2020). We can start rebuilding alliances only by working on our gaze, narratives and roles, forcing ourselves to question the dangerous colonial narratives that make us complicit in these imperial wars.

In a recent work, scholar Paramaditha (2022) reports the response of Roda Wanimbo to a similar question, regarding how to find and restore transnational feminist solidarity: "Am I able to give my time to listen, and after I listen, am I able to step out of my comfort zone, take the chance to reconstruct my belief in building this network and solidarity?" (p. 37).

We thus believe it is crucial to start by asking ourselves this question and to ask if we are ready to learn from other women who resist coloniality. Are we capable of listening? Today, we believe we can do so by listening and learning from our colleagues, and from all Palestinian people who are showing us – once again – how to survive this genocide, showing us which path to take to work towards a decolonization of our theories, our perspectives, our practices. We believe that working on the colonialism of our minds and our work is a fundamental step towards imagining a world without colonial violence. As the scholar Devin Atallah (2022) writes, "decolonial love can be a passage towards knowledge and towards seeking a community of resistance." (p. 81).

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**Funding:** The authors have no funding to report.

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**Acknowledgments:** We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and expertise, making this work possible. We are equally thankful to the editor and the reviewers for their invaluable contributions, which have allowed this work to see publication. This is especially meaningful as the article was previously rejected by other journals—including feminist ones—for being labeled as taking a position deemed too biased. Finally, all our thoughts are with Palestine, which has been enduring genocidal attacks for over a year now. This work is dedicated to the resilience and resistance of its people.

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**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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**Ethics Statement:** The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (No. of approval 623) of the University of Milano-Bicocca.

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**Data Availability:** The data are not available as the conversations contain personal and sensitive information. To protect privacy and in accordance with agreements made with the interviewed individuals, this information cannot be shared.

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