

Theorizing as a Liberatory Practice? The Emancipatory Promise of Knowledge Co-Creation With (Forced) Migrants

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Abstract

This thematic issue consists of empirical and theoretical contributions from South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands that address how academic theorizing is co-created by and co-creates processes of emancipation and transformation for differently positioned and impacted individuals and collectivities. We invited knowledge co-creators (both inside and outside academia) aiming to improve social inclusion and justice for refugees/forced migrants to engage with the question of how theory and practice are co-created as an engaged, collaborative, reflective, and critical act between scholars and social movements, activists, artists, societal partners, and other individuals or communities. The contributions in this thematic issue highlight (1) how transformative co-creation allows for a plurality of perspectives, stories, and experiences to be acknowledged in the creation of knowledge and solutions, (2) how the creation of more diverse, inclusive, and transformative knowledge and solutions challenges exclusionary, reductive or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants, and (3) what the conditions are for transformative co-creation.

Keywords

critical theory; co-creation; emancipation; engaged scholarship; inclusion; reflection; refugees/forced migrants; social justice; theorizing; transformation

1. Introduction

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (hooks, 1991, p. 1)

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire, 1970, p. 47)

Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systematic politicized practices of teaching and learning. (Mohanty, 1990, p. 185)

Theorizing is often considered a privileged act reserved for academics. However, knowledge is rarely a product of an individual “genius”; instead, it is grounded in and fueled by lived experiences and narratives of resistance, transformation, and hope. Knowledge emerges from engagement with collective sources, through collaborations with others. This thematic issue engages with the transformative, emancipatory potential of critical theory for differently positioned individuals, communities, collectives, and organizations. Many people have addressed how social theorizing can be a liberatory practice, a tool for healing (hooks, 1991). Throughout history, activists, students, scholars, politicians, and marginalized and oppressed communities have contributed to and utilized socio-political theorizing and writing to understand how their personal biographies are conditioned by their socio-structural, historical positionings (Wright Mills, 1959). This understanding, or “sociological imagination” (Wright Mills, 1959), can help to rethink the role of academia in relation to other societal actors by focusing on situational, everyday, place-based practices as opportunities for emancipations from below. This shift in focus creates the possibility to see new horizontal alliances in which deeper forms of solidarity coalitions are taking place based on reciprocal caring and learning relationships. It thereby recognizes the necessity of micro/meso alliances for resistance against processes and practices of social inequality, marginalization, and stigmatization that are embedded in socio-political macro-structures and are sustained and legitimated by normalized discursive practices.

This thematic issue consists of empirical and theoretical contributions from South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands that address how academic theorizing is co-created by and co-creates processes of emancipation and transformation for differently positioned and impacted individuals and collectivities. We invited knowledge co-creators (both inside and outside academia) who aim to improve social inclusion and justice for refugees/forced migrants to engage with the question of how theory and practice are co-created as an engaged, collaborative, reflective, and critical act between scholars and social movements, activists, artists, societal partners, and other individuals or communities. This thematic issue’s understanding of knowledge co-creation is rooted in an engaged, relational, reciprocal approach that recognizes the mutual interdependence of theory and practice. Through co-creative research, in which scholars create knowledge with and for, instead of about, people, different actors seek to contribute to addressing people’s struggles, needs, interests, and desires (Tuck, 2009). This entails acknowledging how these actors learn, work with, resist, transform, and even reproduce (hegemonic) theories and practices.

2. Overview of Contributions

2.1. Co-Creation as a Transformative Approach

In this thematic issue, Drop et al. (2024), Hamzah and Aparna (2024), Ocadiz Arriaga and Dyer-Williams (2024), and van Houte and Rast (2024) highlight how co-creation, and especially the use of unconventional/creative methods, allows for a plurality of voices, perspectives, stories, and experiences to emerge and be acknowledged in the production of transformative knowledge and solutions.

Drop et al. (2024) examine how creative co-creation in education and research can help transcend the “us versus them” divide that refugee students face, especially in educational contexts. They argue that play, storytelling, and constructing artifacts enable “alterity,” that is, approaching the other from the other’s perspective, and that connecting and shifting positions creates sameness while allowing space for difference. The authors stress creative co-creation in education and research can promote joy, sharing, reflection, agency, responsivity, and community building.

Hamzah and Aparna (2024) call for creating space for their writing selves to lead the way in unpacking the various forms of oppression they encounter in everyday life. They emphasize the importance of honoring knowledge in stories, thus challenging the fear that their experiences might be fragmented in analysis. By writing in conversation as a liberatory practice, these authors weave their experiences in a relational manner, building a coalition against multiple forms of oppression, while resisting fitting in with standards and norms that erase their epistemic and epistemological plurality. In doing so, they aim to bring attention to hidden forms of daily violence and paradoxes, challenging emancipatory practices within spaces that are open to, but not inclusive towards, diverse students, scholars, scholarships, and knowledges.

Ocadiz Arriaga and Dyer-Williams (2024) deepen feminist approaches to pleasure by showing the importance of co-creating “sensuous knowledge” (see also Salami, 2020). They argue for the importance of building safe(r) spaces to cook, eat, and share stories with migrant communities to unsettle the oppressive forces that marginalize such communities. They further rely on African feminists who have “developed contextualized and critical approaches to mending the relationship between knowledge and power-in-action, necessitating meaningful and reciprocal collaboration with communities that experience marginalisation and oppression” (Ocadiz Arriaga & Dyer-Williams, 2024, p. 1). The authors show how this positioning enabled them to (re)center the lived experiences of women and LGBTQI+ migrants of different national backgrounds, paying particular attention to their bodily and psychological capacities for sensing and sharing pleasure through food practices.

Van Houte and Rast (2024) explore how applied theatre can serve as a co-creative method for knowledge production in refugee-receiving societies. The authors argue that understanding relational processes of living together and interrogating structural mechanisms of exclusion necessitate a shift toward relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in other words, convivial—methods of knowledge production. They conclude that this kind of knowledge co-creation requires researchers to “hold space” for unique voices to come forward to then negotiate knowledge together.

2.2. Conditions for Transformative Co-Creation

León et al. (2024), Freedman et al. (2024), Koskimaki and Mukafuku (2024), and Idrees et al. (2024) engage with conditions that are necessary for transformative co-creation.

León et al. (2024) elaborate on their experiences of engaging with (as authors and/or editors of) an anthology centering undocumented scholars’ work with undocumented communities. They argue that, guided by a politics of care (Valenzuela, 2017), an agentic use of time is essential to facilitate liberatory research practices in the face of pressing academic timelines and institutionalized ethics. Slowing time is a necessary condition in the process of theorizing the wounds caused by the harmful experiences of being an

undocumented migrant. In addition, the authors highlight undocumented scholars' ethical and responsive approach to working with undocumented communities to elevate their shared commitment in their liberatory engagement.

Freedman et al. (2024) reflect on the potential of and conditions for co-producing knowledge in the face of the challenges that academic and funding structures bring as well as those due to hierarchical relations both within their team and between themselves as researchers and young refugee women. They highlight the potential of knowledge co-creation in the "interstices," the unexpected moments of mutual learning that arise during the research process. Consequently, they advocate for taking a more flexible and organic approach to knowledge co-creation, allowing space for "interstices" and mutual learning.

Koskimaki and Mukafuku (2024) reflect on how theorizing and building deeper alliances with academic and community spaces may generate a more liberatory praxis with and for forced migrants in urban South Africa. According to the authors, this necessitates acknowledging the challenges forced migrants face both within the community and the academy. Precarity, distrust, and trauma may hinder forced migrants' participation in both community organization and engaged academic research. However, the authors also emphasize the agency and hope that forced migrants display by creating opportunities for transformative change, often through everyday practices of solidarity.

Idrees et al. (2024) examine the transformative potential of body mapping, especially in research with marginalized groups such as forced migrants. They acknowledge the critique that body mapping, when applied without cultural sensitivity and deep contextual learning, risks reinforcing rather than dismantling existing power dynamics. The authors therefore held a workshop in South Africa, where the method originated, creating a space for intercultural exchange and knowledge co-creation with local experts to refine the method. They argue that body mapping, when contextually grounded and sensitive to marginalized populations, can be a powerful tool through which bodies, spaces, and emotions interact to reshape power dynamics between researchers and participants, thereby promoting knowledge co-creation, shared learning, collective healing, and relational resistance.

2.3. Challenging Exclusionary Notions

Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024), Cairo et al. (2024), and Kisubi Mbasalaki and Kizito (2024) discuss how co-creation contributes to the creation of knowledge and solutions that challenge exclusionary, reductive, or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants. By highlighting refugees' agency, resilience, and complex experiences, co-creation advances more diverse, inclusive, and transformative understandings.

Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) elaborate on how the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) collaborates with refugee partners to theorize and co-create knowledge that is grounded in the lived experiences of refugees and that challenges the roles historically assigned to refugees solely through a lens of precarity and gratitude. The authors introduce the concepts of refugee "livability," referring to mundane, creative, and fearless expressions of agency despite the challenges of forced migration, and "ungratefulness," challenging the expectation that refugees should feel grateful for the aid they receive. They argue that these examples of "epistemic disobedience" challenge the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees, illustrating the liberatory and transformative potential of theoretical work co-created through sustained engagement with refugee partners.

Cairo et al. (2024) reflect on their explorative journey as researchers who ended up becoming part of the communities they researched. On the basis of their experiences, they criticize normative liberal approaches to solidarity. Instead, they advocate thinking about *solidarity otherwise*: “holding space” for diverse stories of solidarity and acknowledging the plurality of expressions of relationality and reciprocity as well as the multiplicity of spaces and temporalities in which these expressions take place.

Kisubi Mbasalaki and Kizito (2024) reflect on the potential of centering forced African migrants’ voices in a documentary film as a process of knowledge co-creation. They show how such an approach empowers migrants by providing space for their perspectives and thereby countering biases and misconceptions perpetuated by xenophobic discourses. Such an approach also helps to highlight the complex lived experiences of forced migrants, which might entail facing challenges and dangers and exposing structural injustices as well as having diverse narratives of home, belonging, and identity. In this way, a co-creative approach can destabilize singular, reductive, and dehumanizing images of forced African migrants.

3. Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions in this thematic issue highlight how co-creation as a transformative approach allows for a plurality of perspectives, stories, and experiences to be acknowledged in the creation of knowledge and solutions, how the creation of more diverse, inclusive, and transformative knowledge and solutions challenges exclusionary, reductive or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants, and what the conditions are for transformative co-creation.

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