The importance of Intercultural and Decolonial perspectives in a Westernized University - A case study of an interrelated social work setting in Colombia.

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El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos. La patria que construimos es una donde quepan todos los pueblos y sus lenguas, que todos los pasos la caminen, que todos la rían, que la amanezcan todos. - Subcomandante Marcos

The world that we want is one where many worlds fit. The nation we construct is one where all communities and their languages will fit, where all steps will walk, where everyone will laugh, where all wake up. - Subcomandante Marcos

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Abstract

This study investigates the perspective of ‘Trabajo social intercultural y decolonial’ or ‘Intercultural and decolonial social work’ demonstrated by social workers and scholars of the University of Antioquia in Medellin, Colombia. A qualitative ethnographic and a methodologically plural approach are presented. The results show that the intercultural and decolonial perspective could be of relevant pragmatic value for orienting future studies and opportunities for implementation in social policy programs. Empirical insights gained through this perspective can be used for improving the understanding of this specific domain and the practices of social work in Colombia and on an international arena.

Keywords: Social work; Trabajo social intercultural y decolonial; Intercultural and decolonial social work; social work education, Colombia.
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Introduction

Social work is a university level degree and an academic discipline in Sweden as well as in many other countries. It is a rather young discipline that has been transformed from being an area which is merely studied to one having its own professional practice, culminating in what it is today; an interdisciplinary field which incorporates the study of both theory and research methods. Despite its young history and the on-going debates, both internally and externally on the post-colonial philosophies from the 1970s and onwards, social work is still influenced by ethnocentric European universality claims that pay little interest to what has been termed ‘locality specific and culturally relevant forms of social work’ (Dominelli & Hacket, 2011). This affects all areas of social work, from research to practice, and how professionals within the field often uncritically reproduce assumptions of basic human values of the modern liberal society concerning wealth, nature, history, progress, knowledge and what is considered to be a good life (Lander, 2000). Expressions often in tandem with the efficacy of modern scientific thought can be described as naturalizing social relations and that the notion of the so-called “modern society” should be the natural tendency of a developed society. From this perspective, the industrial liberal society is not only the desirable social order, but also the only one possible (Lander, 2000). Recently, however, researchers have called out for the development of new theories of social work and models of practice based on different values and skills from those which have been coming from the West (Dominelli & Hacket, 2011).

Also, The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)\(^1\) acknowledged at the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly meeting in July 2014, that social work should be informed not only by specific practice environments and Western theories, but also by indigenous knowledge. They agreed among the following:

Part of the legacy of colonialism is that Western theories and knowledges have been exclusively valued, and indigenous knowledges have been devalued, discounted, and hegemonized by Western theories and knowledge. The proposed definition attempts to halt and reverse that process by acknowledging that Indigenous peoples in each region, country or area carry their own values, ways of knowing, ways of transmitting their knowledge, and have made invaluable contributions to science. Social work seeks to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples around the world. In this way social work knowledge will be co-created and informed by Indigenous peoples, and more appropriately practised not only in local environments but also on an international level.

In view of these new endeavours internationally, this study seeks to find out how the process of incorporating indigenous knowledge into the education and mediation of social work becomes manifested in practice. In order to approach these ‘other’ views in social work, academics from Colombia have started to investigate what has come to be known as the ‘intercultural and

\(^1\) http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/ Retrieved: 26/10/17
decolonial perspective’ (see section: Central concepts and definitions). The grounding questions that have guided my research are:

- How are intercultural and decolonial perspectives understood and used in the academic field of social work?
- And what eventual contributions could they bring to the practice of social work?

**Setting the scene**

For the purpose of this study, I have investigated a setting which is locally and culturally specific that is composed of Colombian social work educators and students, who were currently in the process of learning why intercultural and decolonial social work is needed and how it can be investigated and implemented.

I began my study in Sweden broadly researching the topic regarding equal treatment and social recognition inside social work education in Colombia. Through my desk research I came in contact with Dr. Juan Velázquez, a researcher and teacher at Gothenburg University with a Colombian background who has specialized in alternative women’s movements in poor and racially excluded residential areas in three of Latin America’s big cities like Medellín (Colombia), Caracas (Venezuela) and Cochabamba (Bolivia).

He informed me that the term I might be looking for in the Latin American context is ‘interculturalidad’ (interculturality). I was recommended the research databases: www.scielo.org and www.redalyc.org where together with http://eshproxy.esh.se/ a database that I had access to through my university and www.google.com I got most of my information. I used the keywords: Trabajo social Intercultural y Decolonial* (Intercultural and Decolonial social work), Intercultural* Interculturalidad* Decolonial* Decolonialidad*.

This study finally came to have an exploratory aim with its primary ambition not to produce any formalized answers on the presence and adoption of indigenous knowledge but to receive a greater understanding of the use of intercultural and decolonial perspectives in social work in Colombia and on an international level.

Colombia is an interesting social and geographical place when it comes to accessing a perspective of intercultural and decolonial theories on social work. This may be due to its colonial history and the on-going power struggles that politically affect the country up to this day. Colombia is the fourth largest country in Latin America and has a population over 44 million inhabitants. Colombia is home to more than eighty indigenous populations living in a variety of ecological zones and has the second largest African-descendent population in Latin America after Brazil\(^2\), this demonstrates a country with great diversity, which is one of the main focuses in approaching intercultural and decolonial perspectives.

\(^2\) http://minorityrights.org/country/columbia/ Retrieved: 26/10/17
The transitioning for social work into an academic field took place in the 1970s in Colombia as well as in the rest of Latin America, where this development went under the name of ‘La Reconceptualización’ (The reconceptualization) - an academic and political movement that attempted to renew the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological frameworks of the profession. This movement originated in Chile and Argentina in the mid 1960s and then spread throughout the Latin American continent (Malagón B & E. Leal L, 2006).

The history of social work in a Latin American context presents important key issues. We often comprehend the history of the profession as an emergence inspired by Catholic-centred charity, centred above all, on the care of the poor and social assistance (Malagón B & E. Leal L, 2006). This historicity, which is often taken for granted, can lead us to the conclusion that voluntary philanthropic action was brought about through the process of conquest and colonization. This of course, not only questions the history of colonialism concerning social work in Colombia, but also puts into question how social difficulties were handled before the time of the conquistadors and how the silencing of indigenous knowledge played itself out; from those days until today?
Methodological approach

Even though theory guides us it is not theory but rather the methodological process that directs the completion of a study, the researcher, which is engaged in ethnography, ethics, and performance needs to employ both theory and method to be successful (Madison, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, qualitative methods of data collection have been used. This includes a review of earlier research on the intercultural and decolonial perspectives and debates, in-depth interviews and a participant observation of the educational practice in question.

A critical and multi-sited ethnography

Ethnography is established upon the attention to the everyday, the intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups (Marcus, 1995). This way of conducting qualitative research, combining interviewing, observation, and document analysis, is often described with the umbrella term ‘ethnographic methods’. (Kawulich, 2005; Malagón B & E. Leal L, 2006). For critical theory the method of use is critical ethnography. The origin of critical thought comes from a long tradition of ‘intellectual rebellion’ in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constitutes a political challenge (Thomas, 1993 cited in Madison, 2005). In my interviews the critical perspective is present and one informant states that intercultural and decolonial social work is about being ‘the rebels’ in the academia (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29 March 2017).

Social critique is radical and implies that freedom with the recognition of our social existence is not simply imposed on us by a mysterious power, but implies that we think about and act upon the world. We are able to change both our subjective interpretations and our objective conditions and transcending existing forces (Thomas, 1993 cited in Madison, 2005).

Critical ethnography relies on: Positionality; the acknowledgement of our own power and privilege as researchers, Dialogue and Otherness; the embodiment and interplay between human beings keeping conversations between the researcher and ‘the Other’ open and ongoing, Theory and Method; the critical ethnographer becomes the performance of critical theory and critical theory in action. Regardless of these critical pillars ethnography is criticized for its focus on social change but lacks focus on the researchers own positionality (Madison, 2005).

To do ethnographic research on social grounds that produce a particular type of discourse requires different practices than the one-sited fieldwork among a community, which that particular discourse affects. To bring these sites into the same frame of study is the important contribution with multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). In my approach; by moving between spaces and educational practices with my informants, I have thus been inspired by the concept of a multi-sited ethnography. A multi-sited ethnographic approach allows the research to follow a plot. It then takes a particular narrative on the cultural or educational practices and the
different manifestations they adopt. The task of the researcher is to follow and stay with the movement of a particular group and their cultural expressions. It is about following specific connections, associations, and relationships (Marcus, 1995). It is thus useful for a study of cultural articulations on notions of interculturality and decoloniality in a landscape where there have not yet been any strictly developed and formalised theoretical concepts.

Moreover, in qualitative research, there is the metaphor about the interviewer as the traveller. The traveller is traveling around, getting to know new people and places through conversation, as did I in Colombia. The Latin word ‘conversation’ means, “To walk together with” (Kvale, 1997). I found this combined ethnographical approach to my subject to be an accurate choice of method for my investigation since there is a saying in intercultural and decolonial perspective that says; “Para conocer hay que caminar mucho”, “to get to know you have to walk a lot”. The research process in qualitative research is regarded as a craftsmanship and there are no direct rules of method to follow but some guidelines do exist. The research interview is based on a casual everyday conversation but it remains professional. It is not a conversation between two equally empowered participants because the researcher is the one that defines and controls the situation. Qualitative interviews have been used as an acknowledged method for research within the field of humanities and philosophy for a considerably long time, more or less since the 1940s. Earlier on the social sciences were looking more towards methods used in natural sciences (Kvale, 1997).

I conducted four semi-structured interviews in Spanish with professors, academics and students from the University of Antioquia in Medellin. They are all part of an investigation group whose main concern is to study and work with intercultural and decolonial social work. Inspired by earlier research and by my theoretical approach I constructed an interview guide based on Kvale’s (1997) guidelines. When the time came to design interview questions and log data, the theory suggested the kinds of questions I asked and the categories of data that later took priority (Madison, 2005).

The themes developed into; Colonial history of social work, the construction of ‘the other’, decolonial social work and intercultural understanding. Out of these themes I fashioned about 20 questions shaped into preliminary questions, follow-up questions, specifying issues, direct questions, indirect questions and interpreting questions (Kvale, 1997). I later transcribed the interviews translating them into English directly from Spanish. I did not use a form that included social dimensions such as pauses, laughter, changing of voice etc. due to my intermediate level of Spanish language and Colombian social codes. To transcribe an interview is to transform the interview from one form to another and there is no right or wrong way of doing this. The print of a moral conversation into text is a matter of interpretation (Kvale, 1997). Therefore I wish to be transparent about this and I have chosen to interpret and translate my
interviews into text concentrating on the meaning discerning from the oral phrases using my self
and my zoom recorder as my only mediums.

What the traveller experiences is described qualitatively and is reconstructed into stories
brought home to tell her surroundings. The traveller is looking for potential meanings and
findings interpreting the stories. The stories are formed into new narratives and influence on its
new readers through its aesthetic form and persuasiveness. This metaphor tells about a post-
modern, social constructive scientific view (Kvale, 1997).

The University of Antioquia

Why did I choose the University of Antioquia to perform my case study?

I was living just outside of Medellin, Antioquia, up the mountain in an area called Santa
Elena. About 3 times a week I took the bus down to the center and then used the public
transport, ‘metro Medellín’, Colombia’s only metro system, to get to the University of
Antioquia. It took me about 40 minutes to get down and a bit longer to get back up again later in
the evening. The University of Antioquia has a beautiful campus; the campus is so big that it is
called the “University-City”. There are many departments and the university has a long history
of students studying with polemic convictions during the same period of time. People who later
became presidential candidates as well as people who would later join the famous Guerrilla
named FARC (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017). The University
of Antioquia is a public university; in Latin America that often means that within the tradition of
western thinking we can say that there is a right wing and left wing way of thinking, and the
idea about the public universities in general is that they use more of a left wing way of thinking
and critical perspective (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3rd May 2017). As a
Swedish student this interested me and I found it more interesting to conduct my case study at
this field site rather than at the Pontifical Bolivarian University that is another University in
Medellin which offers the social work degree. The latter is instead a private university, which
means that the study fee is higher and it also has a Christian catholic statute, it seemed more
interesting to me with this historically famous university site, which was farther away from
religious influence. More about how I gained entrance to the field (see section: Notes on
access).

Working from the notion that professors educating students within social work education in
Colombia are in a position to impact on values, influence attitudes, and positively influence
communities through their actions inside and outside the classroom (Carr, 2016), I departed in
my research looking for professors in the field of social work. Adopting this perspective, in my
review for earlier research, I discovered the investigation group in intercultural and decolonial
social work at the University of Antioquia. Professors transmitting ‘knowledge’ frame the
context in which content is debated, developed, understood, and analysed in problematic terms.
Knowledge is being constructed and produced within these contexts and therefore professors cannot depart from the influence they have on their students education and later their students role in society (Carr, 2016). As a social work student myself I found this field site very interesting and ‘familiar’. I chose my field site with regards of habitus and language barrier with the presumption that my intermediate level of Spanish would be less of an issue within the academia, this due to the notion that universities privilege western knowledge tradition and the hegemony of global English (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

My study takes place within and with the help of the academia and therefore I find it helpful to recognize a common view in intercultural and decolonial studies regarding the Westernized university. Ortiz & Castillo Guzmán (2008) argues that the university was born as a space for the exclusion of diversity, as its epistemic, pedagogical and cultural foundations are based on the socialization of the monocultural values of Western Eurocentrism, which until this day makes the university an inflexible institution not adaptable with the realities of cultural diversity (Ortiz & Castillo Guzmán, 2008). In this sense, universities have been institutions of colonial knowledge as the model of knowledge and the history of modern epistemology and universality as the exclusive space of legitimation of the production of knowledge (Ortiz & Castillo Guzmán, 2008). This epistemic hierarchy has its own discourse, Eurocentrism, that is institutionally globalized through the Westernized university, privileging the Western male canon of thought in nearly all disciplines of social sciences (Grosfougel, 2016).

Notes on access
When I first arrived to Medellin, Colombia I spent the first month or so preparing myself by primarily reading literature on the theme and the context in which I was in. Later I chose the field site to gain access to, the University of Antioquia, which I actually experienced to be more difficult than I thought. I sent many emails without receiving replies and as I was close to giving up and chose another field site to gain access to I finally received a reply. I had read one of Professor Esperanza Gómez Hernández texts on intercultural and decolonial social work Diversidades y Decolonialidad del saber en las Sciencias Sociales y el Trabajo Social (Gómez H., o.a., 2014) out of which I found her contacts. She showed to be an important key person and ground breaking in bringing the perspective into the field of social work in Colombia. After a whole month passing without getting access to my preferred field site, I finally entered the field and established social relations with its members. Once I gained access many more doors opened. I entered the University as often as I wanted to with my passport as a personal document. As I became known amongst the people interested in the perspective I adapted myself to the scene, and social role(s) and interacted with its members. Esperanza Gómez Hernández introduced me to people that later would become keys persons in my study. I was invited to classes as well as to meetings and received a hospitality that appeared very warm.
hearted to me. I watched, listened, and collected quality data that I later begun to analyze and evaluate by working hypotheses. I found my focus on specific aspects of the setting and used theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a nonrandom sample in which the researcher selects specific times, locations, or events to observe in order to evaluate theoretical ideas. The growing theoretical interest then guides the selection of sample cases and the researcher selects cases based on new insights that the sample could provide (Neuman, 2014). I was also guided by snowball sampling seeing as I was interested in interconnected networks; in my case networks of academics, community leaders and activists investigating the intercultural and decolonial perspective, as well as intertextuality (see section: Notes on coding). I conducted field interviews with member informants and when the time came to its end I disengaged and physically left the setting to return to Sweden to complete the analysis and to write the research report.
Empirical material

Interviewees

My empirical material includes four (4) in-depth interviews of about one hour long each with:

- Professor Esperanza Gómez Hernández, from the Department of Social Work, coordinator of the research group ‘Equipo de Docentes’ in Intercultural and Decolonial Studies, member of the research group ‘Grupo de investigación’; conducted on March 28, 2017 at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia.

- Associate professor and researcher, Gerardo Vásquez Arenas, from the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, teacher in the study of Economic Development, member of the research groups ‘Equipo de Docentes’ and ‘Grupo de investigación’; conducted in March 5, 2017 at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia.

- Associate professor, Vladimir Betancur Arias, lecturer in Economic Development specialized in anthropology, member of the research group ‘Grupo de investigación’; conducted March 29, 2017 at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia.

- Erika Paulina Uribe Cardona, graduate in social work, member of the research groups ‘Equipo de Docentes’ and ‘Grupo de investigación’; conducted March 5, 2017 at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia.

Participant Observation

In order to gain deeper understanding of the context and the decolonial and intercultural social work related perspective I participated and conducted empirical observation in classrooms, meetings with two investigation groups, in and outside of the academia as well as participating in field trips to the territories of the Nasa population in northern Cauca and the Embera Chami in Valparaiso, Antioquia.

Class participation

Participation in four (4) different classes of intercultural and decolonial social work.

  Intercultural social work with Professor Esperanza Gómez Hernández and Docent Vladimir Betancur Arias 15/03-2017 08:00 – 11:00 am at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia. A class about the diversity found in social work and presentations by the students on their minor investigation work about different diverse groups found in Colombia.

  Intercultural social work and anthropology with Docent Vladimir Betancur Arias 23/3-2017 04:00-08:00 pm at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia. A class regarding culture and identity, the questioning of something as reflexive as ‘who am I?’. All together we shared a ‘pampa mesa’, an ancestral celebration where you would spread out a blanket and each person would bring something to eat and to share with the others. During the ceremony we all discussed identity, our different backgrounds and what had led us to study social work.
Intercultural social work with Professor Esperanza Gómez Hernández and Docent Vladimir Betancur Arias 29/03-2017 08:00 – 11:00 am at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia. A class about the politics of difference, a hegemony of power and problems regarding multiculturalism and the multicultural society with the notion that multiculturalism fails to question the power.

Theory of economic development and decolonial perspective with Docent researcher Gerardo Vásquez Arenas 31/3 – 2017 10:00 am – 02:00 pm at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia. A class about capitalism's problems on our environment, the colonisation of our nature and the dilemma of trying to resolve the environmental crisis using the same system that implemented it, acting as a presentation of decolonial critique in economic development theory.

I participated as an invited international student and a guest in the classes, taking notes as well as modestly taking part in the discussions.

Equipo de Docentes (Team of researchers)
This investigation group is a proper social work group with whom they are bringing forward research in various departments of Antioquia, making questions about objects of study that they want to direct towards proper social work reflections. The investigation is specifically about intercultural and decolonial social work. They gather each Wednesday afternoon between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia. I participated four Wednesday afternoons and was allowed to record their discussion for personal use and deeper understanding. My participation was mostly in silence, taking notes and sometimes asking questions if something was unclear to me.

Grupo de investigación (Investigation group)
Participation with the intercultural and decolonial investigation group. This investigation group is inscribed at the faculty of social sciences and humanities. It is a work realized from different disciplines from the faculty as well as beyond the faculty. In this group there are self-taught people that are interested in the perspective from a personal as well as from a global point of view. The group includes both academics and non-academics for the purpose of diversity. In order to be ‘undisciplined’ it is important to have a group that goes beyond the border of classically established social sciences and humanities. They gather once a month at different locations two of which I participated in. I participated in the meetings on the 3<sup>th</sup> of April and 8<sup>th</sup> of May. At the meeting of the 8<sup>th</sup> of May I held a small presentation of my work until then, where I gave my insights and my knowledge of the perspective as well as answering questions posed by the members of the group.
The mother earth liberation gathering in North Cauca with the Nasa community

During my stay in Colombia I participated in two field trips, primarily to North Cauca and visited the Nasa community. I was invited to travel there together with professors from intercultural and decolonial social work from the University of Antioquia as well as participants from the intercultural and decolonial investigation group. This took place during the Easter holidays of the 10th – 15th of April 2017. We were there to participate in a ‘Minga’. The Minga is an invitation to join the community and to work, to unite, and to share, it has been done for decades. The minga for the Nasa people is historical and spiritual and this was a minga for the liberation of the earth mother, ‘La liberacion de la madre tierra’ (The liberation of mother earth), a struggle to liberate ancestral territories from the monoculture of sugar cane and the contamination generated by it, it is a process that seeks to recover territory, to protect the environment, and a struggle for dignity for the Nasa community. Together with my colleagues we participated in collective lectures about the context, guest lecturers from all over the country with different backgrounds and different ages held workshops and liberators; as the involute ones in the cause call them, held speeches. My gathered data consist mostly of media, photos and short video clips as well as sound recordings. No faces of the liberators are shown in the photos as they are under a great threat and liberators have been and continue to be assassinated for their participation in the liberation process and for their raising the voices of the Nasa community.

Student field trip to the community of Embera Chami in Valparaiso, Antioquia

The 6th - 7th of May 2017 I participated in a field trip with students from the Professor Esperanza Gómez Hernández and the academic Vladimir Betancur Arias’ class in intercultural social work at the University of Antioquia. We arrived there on the university’s own bus to spend time with the community of the Embera Chami in Valparaiso, Antioquia. We were a group of some 30 participants. The community elders showed us around and our visit had a clear intercultural aim to it. The social work students were able to ask questions and discuss directly with the community elders about their thoughts on interculturality, decolonialism and development. We were shown around in their territory, walking together, developing thoughts and concerns on the way. The community elders thought us their view on their situation and they invited us to meals in their homes as well as to participate in an ancestral ceremony.

3 https://www.cric-colombia.org/portal/las-mingas-de-liberacion-de-la-madre-tierra-es-un-mandato-espiritual/
Retrieved: 26/10/17

**Theoretical approach**

Theory is inevitable because it acts as guidance for both the meaning and vocabulary for the study. Accepting the significance of theoretical knowledge, it is important to comprehend the way in which theory at times is the same as method and at other times distinct from it. Theory is used in ethnography as either a methodological approach and/or an interpretive and analytical method. In other words, we often rely on theory, to interpret, describe and illuminate social phenomenon (Madison, 2005).

As (Madison, 2005) suggests I will use theory as an interpretive and analytical tool guiding my readers through the more narrative chapters (1-3) in which I will present my ethnographic findings from the fieldwork. As my topic for this thesis suggests these theories all stress decolonial and intercultural perspectives in social sciences.

**Earlier research**

Decolonial thinkers and researchers all suggest that there is a history of epistemic violence in our everyday use of academic concepts and that the relationship between colonialism, the narrative of modernity and the rationality of Eurocentrism has become the epistemological frame through which much of the world’s history has come to be understood. Argentinian born Dr. Walter Mignolo is famous for his thoughts on modernity/coloniality, geopolitics of knowledge, pluriversality, and the decolonial option⁵. Some of his words you can read below in my explanation of the concept of decoloniality. Peruvian sociologist Dr. Anibal Quijano famous for developing his theory on ’Colonialidad del Poder’ the ’Coloniality of Power’ ⁶. Dr. Ramon Grosfoguel, internationally recognized for his work on decolonization of knowledge and power⁷. He had an editorial participation on the book “Decolonizing the Westernized University- intervention in philosophy of education from within and without” that inspired my title. Dr. Catherine Walsh, with many publications on decoloniality and interculturality, and critical thought as well as Andean social movements⁸. Dr. Robert Aman lecturer in inclusive education and whose words on interculturality you can read below. Associate professor Julia Suárez-Krabbe from Roskilde University whose work “Race, Rights and Rebels - alternatives to human rights and developments from the global south” I have used recurrently in analyzing my results.

⁵ http://waltermignolo.com/about/ Retrieved: 26/10/17
⁷ http://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/people/faculty-profile/ramon-grosfoguel-1 Retrieved: 26/10/17
Central concepts and definitions

Global definition of the social work profession

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”.

Indigenous

Numbering between 370-500 million, indigenous peoples represent the greater part of the world’s cultural diversity. According to several indigenous philosophies homogenization is an impossible feat, which brings us to question the socially constructed category of ‘indigenous’ as the colonial power elites have been continuously defining them. This does not mean that the category is less real as it is creating possibilities of negation, transformation and rebellion (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016), hence the validity of the call for ‘interculturalidad’ and decolonization in this study.

Interculturalidad vs. Interculturality

According to Aman (2014) ‘interculturalidad’ arrived as a political tool to gain recognition by indigenous movements on the political arena in a strive for decolonization. Bolivia’s president Evo Morales, regarded as the country’s first president to come from the indigenous population emphasized the need to decolonize the educational system. This implied breaking down racial structures imposed by colonialism and implementing the teaching of the history and languages of the indigenous communities as an integral part of the knowledge systems in order to put an end to Eurocentrism. In the Andean region, ‘interculturalidad’ has been on the agenda of indigenous organizations since early 1990s. The Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador (The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) and Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (The National Federation of Peasants, Black and Indigenous Peoples) interpret the principle of ‘interculturalidad’ as the respect for the diversity of indigenous peoples, but also as a demand for unity in order to transform the present structures of society which, they argue, have been preserved from the time when an alien power established itself as ruler, imposed its own laws and its own educational system (Walsh, 2009, cited in Aman, 2014).

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11 Eurocentrism refers to the tendency of privileging the European thought as a universal model, an eye lens through which history and culture from non-Western communities is interpreted. Ignoring non-Western communities and regarding them as inferior to the West.
‘Interculturality’ and intercultural education on the other hand as the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural organizations (UNESCO) defines it consists of the three following principles:

Principle I Intercultural Education respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all.

Principle II Intercultural Education provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society.

Principle III Intercultural Education provides all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.

Aman (2014) argues that by not attending to colonial difference, ‘interculturality’ may in fact, contrary to its self-proclaimed goal of learning from ‘the other’, contribute to the repression of ‘the other’ by silencing those who have already been muted by the dual process of modernity and coloniality. Through my study I have understood that you cannot separate ‘interculturalidad’ from ‘decolonialidad’ since you cannot perform one without the other. This is my point of departure regarding central themes, when I refer to ‘interculturality’ I refer to it as it has been taught to me, already far away from the indigenous community, in an academic setting, but yet still farther away from the use of the concept that UNESCO is proposing.

Decolonial and Decolonize

The colonial difference is reproduced in invisibility. The claim is for decolonization to replace the very foundations of the social sciences. Decolonization is the double action of deconstruction and reconstruction (Outlaw, 1987 cited in Mignolo, 2002). According to more than one researcher postmodern and postcolonial criticism is important but not enough when it takes the form of a Eurocentric critique. Western expansion was not only economic and political but also educational and intellectual (Mignolo, 2002). This is a crucial factor in understanding the aims of my study. Through history the colonial difference has not been considered in its epistemic dimension. The foundation of knowledge that was and still is offered by the history of Western civilization has remained within the language frame of modernity and of the cultural values of Western civilization (Mignolo, 2002).

The task of decolonizing the mind is as important for the colonizer as it is for the colonized. For Europeans, decolonizing the colonial mind requires an encounter with the colonized and the experience of being judged by those they have denied. European philosophy brought forward colonialism and helped rationalize it through the philosophy of a history privileging Europe (Bernasconi, 1997, cited in Mignolo, 2002). There are several possibilities of making the colonial differences visible, their epistemic potential, and the alternative futures they allow us to imagine.
Analytical approach

Notes on coding

Researchers start with an initial sample of units to which they add units that cause the sample to grow in size until they reach a closure of measure. As an example researchers start with a text, examine its references, examine the cited works in its references and so on until snowball sampling naturally terminates when the process does not generate any new references. Underlying all snowball sampling is the idea of intertextuality, which implies that all units of texts are connected forming actual and virtual networks with natural boundaries (Krippendorff, 2013). This; in many ways, is my process but due to, from an ethnographic perspective, my short stay in Colombia I was limited to put an end to my empirical sampling in time for my return to Sweden. Regarding written text and literature I used the same technique finding myself in dense work, with texts both in English and Spanish which compelled me to limit my work within the imaginable margins of a thesis at this level, leaving untouched theories and authors for further investigation as well as to some extent using secondary references.

The more specific and thematic your interviews have been, the less complicated it will be to group and order your data (Madison, 2005). The thematic purpose was to comprehend proposal answers to my research question (Kvale, 1997) “How are intercultural and decolonial perspectives understood and used in the academic field of social work? And what eventual contributions could they bring to the practice of social work?” I used context analysis, an empirical and phenomenological analysis method (Krippendorff, 2013; Kvale, 1997).

I performed it in five steps. At first I read through my transcribed interviews that had come to be 40 pages in written interpreted text. After that I looked for key concepts and central themes, quoting them in the right-hand margin of my word document. Later I looked for dominating key concepts and opinions making them key words for further investigation and explanation. After that I compared the key concepts found in the interviews in order to chose themes that where frequent and that indicated a shared view of the concept of intercultural and decolonial perspective (Madison, 2005). Once again this is my interpretation of important themes and this was a way for me to delimit my study into a comprehensible thesis at this level.

Calculating the dominating key concepts of my coding of all interviews put together I could see not only where there frequent themes and key words appeared, but as I clustered them together they formed three different areas that the perspective depended on according to my interpretation of my data, so called categorical distinctions. Categorical distinctions define units by them having something in common, creating memberships in a category (Krippendorff, 2013). These three themes ended up to be 1: “Colonialism's faults”, 2: “What is the intercultural and decolonial perspective” and 3: “The personal journey”. I realized these where central issues and these three major themes clustered together all contained more discrete or specific themes.
and from each of these themes subthemes also showed. In order to facilitate the presentation of my findings I used tables to clarify the steps I took to chose themes that later would direct me to the particular theoretical methods that I needed to interpret my results (Madison, 2005).

Table 1. Example of Context Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence unit</th>
<th>Coded sentence unit</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-categories (Findings from other sentences within the interviews in the same category)</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The western epistemology when it arrived it arrived with violence, conquest and presenting itself as the only choice. The critical reflection that we are doing in Intercultural and decolonial studies is that this epistemology based on conquest and violence prevents other epistemologies”. (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017)</td>
<td>Western epistemology presented itself as the only one through colonialism preventing other knowledge from having an epistemological and scientific value.</td>
<td>Colonialism penetrated all levels of life presenting itself as the only and right choice.</td>
<td>Colonialism Modernity Hegemony Epistemology Development The other The coloniality of being The white saviour complex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“So then it’s important, not only for social workers but for all professions to have the consciousness that it exist other worlds and that the world were we live in isn’t the only one, not the most valid, valued or normal, it’s just one of many worlds”. (G. Vásquez)</td>
<td>We need the consciousness that ‘other worlds’ exists and that the one we know isn’t the most valid one neither is it the normal one.</td>
<td>Intercultural and decolonial perspective is the recognition that other worlds exists and that they are as valid as the one we know and refer to as normal.</td>
<td>Questioning Horizontal-dialogue Subjectivity Diversity Other worlds Co-existence Post-agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Colonialism’s faults”

“What is the intercultural and decolonial perspective”
The intercultural and decolonial perspective is something that brings you to a certain way of life. It’s a compromise, primarily personal, and later professional. It isn’t like something outside of you that you been taught, it’s something that you have to live and render corporal, it goes through the body.”

(E. Paulina Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

| Arena, personal communication, 3rd May 2017. | The intercultural and decolonial perspective is more than a professional perspective, it’s something you have to make personal, it’s a view upon life. | Intercultural and decolonial perspective is both personal and professional. | Deconstruct Unlearn Travel Personal and professional challenges | “The personal journey”, |

Thereafter I parted the text by colouring different sections responding to my three categories in order to further present my results and later be able to answer my research questions (Madison, 2005; Kvale, 1997).

**The researcher as a weaver**

The Spanish verb ‘tejer’ directly translates into ‘weaving’, but it does not really make justice to the practice and philosophy of ‘tejer’ in the indigenous, Latin American, context. The ancestral weaving practice has a much deeper connotation than the English verb implies. The weaving represents the path through life, step after step as knot after not. One weaves one’s path, and one’s thoughts, that through the weaving practice are kept concentrated, dedicated to the purpose. The weave tells a story, the symbols that are tied into the fabric are the lived experiences of the weaver and his or her community.

Deriving from this knowledge the acknowledgement of my own weaving takes place. In the intercultural and decolonial perspective we talk about ‘Tejer juntos’ (Weaving together), weaving history together, sharing our words and perspectives and not speaking the word of the other but letting them speak for themselves (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29...
Can I compare the use of ‘tejer’ to my own responsibility as a researcher and to my positionality? By suggesting that this thesis is in itself a weave?

An essential part of the intercultural and decolonial perspective on the researchers behalf is the acknowledgement of one’s own social, geographical, cultural and political position. In multi-sited ethnography the researcher is referred to as a ‘circumstantial activist’. Renegotiating one’s identity as one learns and moves along one’s research, finding out more and more about a particular piece of the world system (Marcus, 1995). The researcher is known to have different roles and positions, which depend on the social stages. For example my flexible identities have ranged from an international social work student, a researcher, a participant activist in the liberation of the mother earth movement, a colleague, a friend, a western woman or a ‘gringa’, a female foreigner, naming some of the roles evident to my own perception. All these roles ought to be evident in my weaving and determine how I participate in sharing or constructing knowledge. In critical ethnography the stance of activism is explained as the way the researcher takes position in intervening with hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalization (Madison, 2005).

**Research Ethics**

Good research is based on a particular set of principles that should guide all researchers in their work. This includes respect for the integrity of research participants and informants as well as the researchers own engagement with the practical, ethical and intellectual challenges involved in the research process. The principles are: The reliability in ensuring the quality of the research, which should be reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis and the use of its resources. To honestly develop, undertake, review, report and communicate research in a transparent, fair, full and unbiased way. To show respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment. For the researcher to be responsible for the research from idea to publication.\(^{12}\)

I have strived accordingly, to carefully explain my use of methods, theory and methodology in this study and with regards to reliability, to be continuously transparent in this text with my thoughts and choices made during the research (see section: Scientific validity). As a mean of research ethics I have come to focus cautiously on the topic of positionality and transparency in this study, which I hope will be evident for the reader.

My research participants and informants were all informed about the purpose, and the methods used, including the intended possible use of this research. They have participated in a

voluntary way, free from any coercion\textsuperscript{13}. They have chosen to participate in this study with their full names and the responsibility for the errors and limitations of this text are mine alone.

**Scientific validity**

We don’t agree with that there aren’t any theories explicable for our society. People from here have already created theories but it hasn’t been given the importance it needs, there is so much written that we don’t know of. Because it’s writing that we don’t think of as scientific or valid (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28\textsuperscript{th} March 2017).

Questions that can be asked to measure the validity of a study are: if the methods used actually measured what they were supposed to? And whether the results give answers to the research questions asked? (Kvale, 1997). To be considered valid, a researcher’s truth claims need to be comprehensible by others (Neuman, 2014). A critical examination of the collected material and the search for different sources of information on the same issue is part of the validation process (Kvale, 1997). The literature review included in this study, as well as the combined choice of methods prepares the ground for valid results.

Reliability in a study can be defined as providing reliable and consistent results (Neuman, 2014). Reliable studies are those that can be replicated in exactly the same way, no matter who is conducting the study where a positivist notion is related to quality (Tracy, 2013). This criterion for reliability is problematic in qualitative social science research as it implicates positionality and intersubjectivity by the researcher. A way to obtain high reliability in social science research is then to thoroughly describe and explain the process of its methodology. My methodological aim has been to clearly reflect my standpoints, considerations and choices involved in the research process. I have also attached the thematic guide used for the interviews as an appendix to the report (see section: Appendix).

The type of sample that would be necessary for reaching formal generalization is rarely desired by qualitative researchers, historically and culturally situated knowledge is ephemeral and always in transformation (Tracy, 2013).

Respondents with different professional views could participate in my data collection; I interviewed a social worker, a sociologist, an anthropologist and a graduated social work student. The respondents in my research all come from the University of Antioquia and are bound to the department of social work and social sciences. As with this I failed with source triangulation but I have used different information resources, methods and theories to overcome this obstacle.

\textsuperscript{13} http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/consent-72 Retrieved: 26/10/17
Analysis and Results

In these chapters (1-3) I will present my results quoting my informants and discussing the findings with the help of theory. I will use a pattern of analysis adding theories found in my literature review on top of my ethnographic findings. Critical intercultural and decolonial theories will construct my theoretical framework. Participant observation has been used as a complement to my interviews primarily in order to deepen my understanding of the context and use of the perspective. In context analysis it is common that themes and categories do not have clear frontiers or domains (Krippendorff, 2013). As you will see the categories and themes will blend in with each other and concepts appear in more than one category of units used in the example (see section: Table. 1. Example of Context Units).

I will try to present my results in a narrative way letting the participants “speak for themselves” and form a discussion among each other with the assistance of theory and earlier research. My own words appear in short comments and summaries to guide the reader ahead, nonetheless consider my participation and analysis as generally evident in interpretation and choice of narration. I have chosen this way of presenting my results and analysis as a part of the critical ethnographic approach is “seeing the world from somebody else’s eyes” and to be able to write “outside of yourself”.

Chapter 1. Colonialism’s fault

Before the invasion of this continent that they invented with the name of America, the original villages and the natives had named it Abya Yala and many other names (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

The global elites continue to deny the offensive struggles that have powerfully influenced their thought and political practice (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). The movie “La Controverse de Valladolid” by Carrière (1992) portrays what is known as the black legend, a critic towards Spanish colonialism as particularly brutal. The movie takes place in a cardinal hearing, later to be known as the Valladolid controversy where the question of “the beings found on the concurred lands where believed to have souls, and therefore needed to be treated as human beings or not?” A fundamental core of the ‘colonial model of power’ is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a construction that expresses the experience of colonial domination and the dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism (Quijano, 2000). The history of the idea of ‘race’ is important to understand today’s construction of ‘the other’, ‘La colonialidad del ser’ the ‘colonial way of being’ or the ‘colonial politics of being’ as Suárez-Krabbe (2016) puts it; the production of a specific normativity, the white male identity, including white male knowledge.

What decolonialism situate as an idea is that there aren’t really any processes of decolonialism. In the new forms of society that we created, politically and economically, we reproduce, not that much the physical structure but the substantial structure of colonialism. We reproduce the same power hierarchies, racial hierarchies, the same practice of thought, ideals of society and how to
‘be human’. So then which decolonialism? This processes isn’t decolonial but colonial. Because it’s not that much the physical model, colonialism can instruct us how to be, what to think, feel, dream, and this struggles still exists (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

By not recognizing the ‘colonial politics of being’ the ‘non-being’ generated through this is neglected. Not only the people who do not fit in into the Eurocentric, white and colonial framework of knowledge and ‘being’ are neglected, but also so are their realities and their theories about these realities (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

Latin American revolution was the work of the elites as well was the human rights legacy (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). The ‘metstizaje’ and ‘latinidad’ found in Colombia can be played in two directions. The period of Latin American independence is woven into the general decline of Spain as a major colonial power and the “liberator” Simon Bolivar stated that in the new Gran Colombia, 1819, there would only be one people, Mestizos and no more racial inequality (V. Betancourt, personal communication, 29 March 2017). This leading to internal colonialism and blind spots that are still seen in today’s Colombia (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

“Colonialism’s fault” is a category regarding the remnants of colonialism within many parts of life: economic, epistemic and social power. Since it is our task as social workers to promote empowerment, liberation of people and to enhance wellbeing, as well as principles of social justice, the construction of ‘the other’ and the ‘colonial politics of being’ must be considered important to deconstruct or the least to be critical towards its (un)conscious power in any social work interrelated situation.

With the theme of race, it’s a key theme in this discussion: how we constructed the invention of race as an element of differentiation and an element of justification of the actual geopolitical divisions (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3rd May 2017).

There is always a construction of ‘the other’ and our schooling doesn’t tell us that this has to change. They educated me with the image of ‘the other’ as poor, miserable and in need. They also educated me with the idea that they need me but that I don’t need them. And this is severe in a relationship. It creates the idea of superiority. And this superiority has been created out of nothing (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

Violence occurs when one is able to objectify ‘the other’ to such an extent that their life and being is no longer relevant to one’s own and therefore not an issue. However the objectification of ‘the other’ is a choice and as such, it can be unchosen (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). In all my interviews the thought of the social worker as a problem solver and of ‘the other’ as week and helpless was evident as well as questioned. Most of my informants referred to this thought as being planted by their education and something they later had to rebel against.

So because of that the social worker often attends to what is called vulnerable populations; people that suffered from the conflict, violence within families, small children and youths etc. The idea is that the social worker is someone who remedies problems, a resolver of problems (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).
I come from a tradition that allows me to think that I’m a saviour. It’s another point of unlearning, that one is only mortal, you can make some contributions but not in any moment be he who directs the processes (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

So it’s not like the vulnerable image that social work has constructed of them historically, like the poor who needs help. We don’t see them like people with real potential and capacity, as absolute and whole people. From this perspective the image of ‘the other’ changes and you stop seeing them as poor and stop pitying them. Here at the university they teach us to go out and save the whole world. If you don’t start to see the potential of the other and his or her capacity and his or her importance as human… I think that from this perspective a lot of that changes, how you construct ‘the other’ in your profession (E. F. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

I recognize this as the ‘white saviour’ complex, a problematic perspective of oneself as superior and a standing point that arguably does not lead to the empowerment of others. The white saviour complex works with the background of understanding white privilege and racially constructed hierarchies at all levels of society. For those western or white people that seek employment in development, they feel a privilege that often exhibits itself as a sense that as a ruling class their role of a white outsider citizen is based on the unique power to uplift, strengthen and rescue the poor and oppressed in developing countries or situations (Straubhaar, 2014).

Look, who is the strongest, those who don’t have a daily salary and can survive, these people that have constructed their own houses that they built on a mountain with a heavy tilt. Could I do that? No so then, who is the strongest one? Where is my strength, nowhere, I’m totally useless, it’s nothing more useless in the world than an intellectual, and I learnt this from going to places where I couldn’t do anything (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

They don’t need our help; alone they have achieved models against hegemony and manners to be and live in the world that are against this system. No, we have to understand that we are no saviours of the world and to the contrary we are here to support these types of expressions, but to support this recognition of ‘the other’ from the value of their knowledge, the value of there being without awaiting that we are the ones with the truth, no, we just have to accompany this types of causes (E, P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

Another theme showing in my empirical data under this category is the one concerning capitalistic expansion. Capitalistic expansion placed colonial differences in the dark and the history of capitalism with its Western epistemology complemented each other upon its arrival with physical as well as epistemic violence (Mignolo, 2002). In a world organized around the Western capitalist principle of ‘living better’ and of being more ‘developed’; a concept which has its historical significance. For many it is the frame against which the Global South and Latin America have been measured and keep measure themselves against. It is the developed West against as well as the model for all the rest (Walsh, 2009). Could we say that alternative economies shall be either similar to capitalism (and disappear) or be condemned to remain so different that their credentials as genuine economies will be doubted? Question Mignolo (2002).

I started to realize that the same always happened, people received means and programs to better their economical environment, but few people entered the programs because the majority of the programs didn’t help changing the conditions of people’s lives. On the contrary, it seemed that
when they entered the processes of development they had to change and leave their way of being, leave the way they were, and this is serious. It led me to the answer that the idea of development is our own idea. And that what they need isn’t development but living their lives. And to live how they would like to live without being preoccupied by achieving economic, infrastructural success (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

The very idea of development itself is a concept and word that does not exist in the ‘cosmovisions’ (world views) and languages of indigenous communities (Walsh, 2009). In order to receive a greater understanding of use of intercultural and decolonial perspectives in social work as my aim is with this study, the construction of this first chapter is central to build a common ground for my readers to understand a few of those many difficulties brought about by colonization.

**Chapter 2. What is intercultural and decolonial social work?**

Intercultural social work is based on questioning how we will solve the issue of human co-existence in the world we are living in? This is the intercultural social work. Then we have understood that the answer isn’t us (the social workers) but it’s the personal struggle of: groups, collectives and populations that have been rendered invisible, rejected and excluded (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

Interculturality is dependent on one’s own positioning within the global hierarchies constituted by colonialism, whether one’s position is within the zone of the ‘colonial politics of being’ or apart from it; in the zone of ‘non-being’. For the individual positioned in the zone of being, that is to say the person belonging to the global elites, then interculturality requires that he or she is willing to question his or her privilege and is thus prepared to self-destruct (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). I would argue that the great number of social work students belongs to the category and the area of the ‘colonial politics of being’ and global elites. Solely the entrance to the Westernized university would be sufficient at large for belonging to this category. The Westernized university is organized out of a canon of thought that is both Western and masculine. The main problem is that the Westernized university model is institutionally globalized around the world. Bringing its Eurocentric foundation of knowledge as the norm everywhere it goes. The same structure of knowledge in Westernized universities is found all over the world regardless of where it is located (Grosfougel, 2016).

What we need to do today is to decolonize, thereby implying an epistemological crack, to transform the thought beyond colonialism and modernism and to permit our subjectivities to transform into other subjectivities out of this Eurocentric pattern (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

I had to study a lot to understand the basics because the intercultural and decolonial perspective leaves one without peace, without a floor to stand on. Without an epistemological floor, without a professional floor, because it says “who discipline us?” It says “how can we understand the society of the misunderstood?” It’s a problem because when you come to university the estimation of learning is centred around the wrong perspective. So the intercultural and decolonial perspective tells me that I have to eliminate everything I’ve learnt, to unlearn, to redo and to be able to learn to walk in another way. Quite hard and quite painful (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3th May 2017).
From the research group of intercultural and decolonial studies we are establishing ideas not trans-disciplinary and not too disciplined but rather undisciplined. We are undisciplined mostly because we intend to be these “up tooth” rebels. The idea is that the disciplines discipline us, and they discipline our subjectivity to be linear and cold. It does not allow us to share with, or permit us to feel the warmth of the other. To be disciplined is something established from the outside and not from the other's warmth, nor does it come from a familiar place thinking about the other as a brother (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

Decolonizing oneself and one's thought implies the urgent task of ‘un-disciplining’ the sciences, to undertake a radical rethinking of their institutions and organizations. To weave a collective, intersubjective and intercultural (his)story beyond modernity. Investigating from ancestral knowledge and collective territories, imagining and living in other worlds. Decolonizing the knowledge of the social sciences and social work from or beyond the borders of diversity implies imagining and “walking in other ways”. Ways that are; intercultural, autonomous, diverse and with more imagination. It involves forming and walking together with committed and rebellious students, collective processes of communities in resistance, weaving networks with social movements towards other epistemological horizons, towards the liberation of mother earth from destructive consumerism and towards autonomy, self-determination, self-government and towards the good life of the people (Arias, 2014).

Interculturality is then put forward as a way of moving outside the logic of modernity and of allowing knowledge systems that have been colonized and de-legitimized to co-exist (Aman, 2014).

In reality the answer is decolonial social work, but there is tension because if social work leaves what it has been, it doesn’t know what to become so we believe there is a way and that is interculturality. Interculturality can’t perform without decolonialism but we think that interculturality allows it to become more understandable, it permits one to rethink the social, political, economical, and cultural structures that we have today. Otherwise social work doesn’t have a future. If we know that there are other ways of knowing and other ways of living, the most certain is that social work does not have a lot of reason to exist (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

To understand that beyond the “normal” world other worlds exists that are also “normal”, they are simply not hegemonic, they are not the ones that impose themselves upon others as the model for a “normal life”. So for the students to get educated in these perspectives in their future professional work, it will be a possibility for them to have a much more enriched framework (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3rd May 2017).

Western epistemic hegemony and its power of producing knowledge has refused those who do not fit into the ‘colonial way of being’ and neither into, the Eurocentric, white and colonial framework of knowledge, to speak (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). Seeing as Western expansion was educationally and intellectually based, making visible this colonial difference provides an epistemic potential (Mignolo, 2002). For those people relegated to the zone of ‘non-being’ a first step towards interculturality implies locating and affirming an identity that has been denied (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). Non-Western social scientists and critical thinkers, thinking from
different cosmologies and epistemologies, are considered inferior and as such excluded from the western universities as invalid knowledge (Grosfougel, 2016).

Our idea is to always research from the proper form of the community and how it works. We are not going to impose external methodologies but rather to look at how they work within the community. The idea is to strengthen the same form they are using and not to impose external thoughts (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

In order to stay awake to knowledge and to other perspectives than those permitted in the Westernized university, as an example; my professors went to the educational “camp”, the ‘minga’, ‘La liberacion de la madre tierra’ where they participated as students listening to lectures by the ‘liberators’ and performed tasks proposed to them. They also participated in everyday tasks such as cooking or sowing corn. The idea of these field trips is to step outside of the academia to bring back new knowledge.

Studying intercultural social work at the University of Antioquia also involved the students to get the opportunity to learn from ‘the other pedagogy’ outside of the Westernised university. For example we went to visit the community of the Embera Chamí in Valparaiso, Antioquia.

It’s very important to travel, get to know other experiences and to share with people who have a different way of living than yours (E, P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

What happens in the intercultural social work that you have seen Olivia is that there are questions, all are questions, questions about who the other is? And it’s always the same thing, you have to get to know them. Get to know their way of life, why they are and where they are, for how long they have been there, what they want, what they fought for etc. and later you can rethink if you have learnt and can work with them or if you have to do something else (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

By getting to know ‘the other’ the student gets the opportunity to practice horizontal or symmetric dialogues. Involving in discussions about the intercultural and decolonial perspectives and of questioning their own positioning in the global hierarchies of the Westernised education. This can be thought of as a way to practise intercultural and decolonial social work.

It’s about creating an intercultural dialogue, not in the perspective of UNESCO, that talks about an intercultural dialogue but an intercultural dialogue that’s symmetric that lets us establish our differences in the midst of this world because we are different. The pretension is to homogenize, the pretension is to impose a life-style or a particular form of life on ‘the other’. The interculturality is the possibility to construct what the Zapatistas said, “a world where there is room for many worlds”. It’s not that everybody should become indigenous, no, we are different, we respect that and can love the diversity which constitutes a great richness for the human race (G. Vásquez Arenas, personal communication, 3th May 2017).

From the intercultural and decolonial perspective we seek to make horizontal dialogues where you can understand and coexist in diversity. And when we are talking about difference we are not only talking about ethnic or cultural differences but also ideological. We are understanding power in an ideological and political way, how we exercise and accept it, so the challenge is then to be able to generate space for that, what we call dialogues that allow recognizing ‘the other’ and his or her differences and to respect these differences. It is a big challenge but it is one that could lead to coexistence (E, P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3th May 2017).
Social work as a part of intercultural and decolonial studies is beyond being a sample, it’s concerned about being a part, being there together with ‘other worlds’ and we’re already doing that. We are not only participating with our academic position, we are working together with people in Cauca and from other places, giving classes on the subject, doing research, joining political processes, taking part in the movement and organizing (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

The pursuit of intercultural and decolonial social work is to enable us to rethink these underlying asymmetric relations (Gómez H., o.a., 2014). To broaden our horizons and to develop honest communication seem to be reasons of pragmatic relevance in understanding intercultural and decolonial perspectives used in social work. “Subject to subject” communication as opposed to “subject to object” communication is not a new endeavour in social work. On the contrary influential thinkers, still used in social work, such as Paulo Freire and his educational theories as well as Jürgen Habermas and his theory about communicative action both questioned the same unequal relationships. What this perspective does show though is that the use of intercultural and decolonial perspectives could be of educational importance in preparing students for ‘horizontal dialogue’ giving them tools to make conscious rather than (un)conscious actions when objectifying ‘the other’.

**Chapter 3. Learning decoloniality through the metaphor of the personal journey**

The intercultural and decolonial perspective is something that brings you to a certain a way of life. It’s a primarily personal, and later professional compromise. It isn’t like something outside of you that you have been taught, it’s something that you have to live and make corporal, it goes through the body (E. P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3rd May 2017).

A common notion of how to approach the intercultural and decolonial perspective in ones social work practice was expressed by my informants as a matter not only of professionalism but what I would interpret as a personal journey. Commonly the interest of the intercultural and decolonial perspective arrose after some time working in the field realizing that the actual life of a social worker had nothing to do with what they had been educated for.

I started to understand that finally I didn’t know. I had worked for many years but I didn’t know, I didn’t really know the people that I was working with. I had never been a part of their lives but they were being a part of mine. I spent three years lost in nothing, literally. I was lost because I had accomplished a lot of prestige in the field I was working in. For example I’d been part of the national council, the planning committee. I’d written a lot and when I later started with these questions... For example the people are not poor, no one is born poor in this world, it’s a lie, people impoverish, that’s different. They then stopped inviting me and I lost my friends, no one invited me and I was very confused. But I started to learn, I started to listen, by not having pre-conditioned ideas of anything (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

It’s really about totally leaving your comfort zone, it’s about starting to question everything, everything around you, understand and unveil all of these structures of power that are embedded in the way you know things and how you would like to get to know things. Understanding the systems that are established within politics and the form of hierarchy in the world, understanding all of this makes you leave your comfort zone and open up personally and professionally to a very broad horizon, but also it signifies a lot of confrontations in your life, commodity, life-
styles that you can no longer accept (E, P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3rd May 2017).

My data shows that starting to criticize their epistemological base and their social work background signified a lot of personal as well as professional challenges. Still, to continue to live as if nothing happened would amount to the recognition of ‘the other’ common to neoliberal society’s use of the idea of multiculturalism: peering outside the master’s house but leaving it intact (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

It’s a path that you choose, this is so important because it changes you. It changes the way you relate to others and your understanding of the world. The way to achieve your dreams is no longer the same because already, to live a good life is not the same as it was. It’s a spiritual theme as well, to feel good about one self, to be more calm, live happier, to acknowledge the other and all of his or her potential. A quantity of things that changes your life totally (E, P. Uribe Cardona, personal communication, 3rd May 2017).

It’s an epistemological and ontological question about ‘being’. It’s a matter of the heart. To look for other people and ally with other strengths, but not hegemonic or violent powers but other powers of the heart. This may sound romantic but it goes beyond romanticism. Like I said to you earlier it’s not only social work, it is beyond a line of social work, it’s a way of thinking about the world (V. Betancur Arias, personal communication, 29th March 2017).

When I was already a social worker, working with farmers ‘campesinos’ and within the public sectors in the city it always made me question how we can understand what it is to be human? (E. Gómez-Hernández, personal communication, 28th March 2017).

This critical perspective is a question about your own positioning and subjectivity. It requires a change of the way we construct our identity. It is concerned about the essential being, what it is to be human. This position or construction, claimed to be corrupted by ‘modern’ thought and Eurocentrism. At the same time its concern is intersubjectivity, a theme already established within social work; how we relate to others and ourselves, the interplay of human relations. Apart from that it seems as if something “drags you” to the perspective, is it a call for justice? Experienced injustice? Maybe your loved ones are norm-breakers and are being relegated to the zone of ‘non-being’. Or is it that some of us have all of our lives tried to fit into a role too small for us, or just not really suitable for us? But still expected of us. Maybe it is political as the second-wave feminists slogan suggests, “The personal is political”.

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Conclusions

“How are intercultural and decolonial perspectives understood and used in the academic field of social work?” Intercultural and decolonial perspectives are understood and used in the academia to recognize colonial heritage and colonial differences as well as giving alternatives to other possible ways we could organize ‘the world’, our subjectivity and the construction of ‘the other’. Historically, politically, economically, socially and in many other ways, the world order of colonialism and white privilege has been dominant. Mandating its power over whose rights that matter, whose history that should be taught and whose body should be in charge. The intercultural and decolonial perspective in social work is used to highlight the discourse(s) that we are in, to criticize them and to make us recognize that there are worlds and that there is knowledge beyond our imagination and beyond the teachings of Westernized universities. It is a helpful tool in order to deconstruct our senses as superior students within the global elite and the Westernized university. It is a critical discourse that aims to dismantle subconscious oppression of the other. It is the notion that we are disciplined into believing in inequality at the same time as it is a claim for disobedience. It is the notion that there is no room for equality within equality because the very foundation of the social sciences promoting equality is not equal. It implies the locating and affirming of identities denied and it is the call for the deconstruction and reconstruction of the social sciences. “And what eventual contributions could they bring to the practice of social work?” The intercultural is not merely an ethical matter. I see this perspective as meeting a need for liberating ‘the other’ from the brutal chains of ‘the colonial politics of being’ and the adjustment to social norms. Whether there may be social work with any culturally marginalized group in society, it acts as a critique providing another point of departure. It is letting social work be a zone of questioning instead of knowing, learning to be led instead of having to lead. Urging us to move beyond objectification, differentiation and stereotypes. The incorporation of decolonial and intercultural perspectives in social work education could be a stepping stone in getting closer to new theories of social work based on different values and skills than those arriving from the West, that Dominelli and Hacket (2011) calls for as well as to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening and learning from Indigenous people as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) suggests, breaking ground for future social work and social work graduates.

From an International Eurocentric glance Colombia is considered a developing country and as far as the Westernized university reaches, students in Colombia are being educated to “develop” “weak” communities, this has been evidential in my empirical data. A personal experience I had after visiting both the Nasa community and the Embera Chami was that they do not need our help, not in any other way than for “us” to stop exploiting the earth, occupying

territories for monocultures, poisoning the water and making it inaccessible for people. This, as well as other capitalistic and colonial trespasses and crimes against the earth and humanity. There is in fact no lack of knowledge from indigenous communities but a silencing of their knowledge caused by colonial thinking. An important aspect in understanding decolonial ways of doing social work is thus to acknowledge the knowledge production that has already taken place.

Limitations

It is no longer possible, or at least it is not unproblematic, to “think” from the canon of Western philosophy, even when part of the canon is critical of modernity. To do so means to reproduce the blind epistemic ethnocentrism that makes difficult, if not impossible, any political philosophy of inclusion (Habermas, 1998, cited in Mignolo, 2002).

I am the narrator. As much as it has been my aspiration it has also been my limit. This is a reconstruction of the narratives of my research participants and informants and my ability to understand is dependent on my background as well as my body, influenced by elements of origin, age, gender, race and social class etc. It is also dependent on my willingness to unlearn what I have taken for unmistakable and proper knowledge. This is in so many ways my interpretation of the words that have been taught to me. This is not ‘tejer juntos’, to weave history together, but this is my part, my contribution, maybe and hopefully a knot in a bigger weave. It was a too difficult task to succeed in, to give the word to the other and perhaps impossible regarding my choice of method.

The empirical material used in this study could be considered insufficient to prove any universal image of what intercultural and decolonial social work is or could be. However the general picture was never my main purpose as this is an explorative study. Ethnographic methods originate from investigations into foreign culture and over the years, it has been criticized for being an implement of colonialism: controlling and exploiting a weaker or racially different culture by a stronger group (Tracy, 2013). The method is criticized as being subjective regarding the presence of the researcher and the interpretations, in this case, made by her. Contemporary ethnographers incorporated the presence of the researcher into the study but regardless of that ethnography is criticized for its lack of focus on the researchers own positionality. There is a claim for critical ethnography to become post-critical and researchers consider how our acts of studying and representing people and situations are in-fact acts of domination (Madison, 2005). The privilege of epistemic perspective is inseparable from the privilege of defining what is and what remains unsaid on the basis of ideas about validity, scientific value and methodology (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

Other obvious obstacles are: primarily the language barrier, Spanish is not my mother tongue and even to learn it and understand it has taken me great efforts and challenges, to a certain extent; neither is it the mother tongue of all my research subjects. Secondly I translated my
interviews into English, which makes it far from possible to know the original quotations. This highlights ‘the privilege of the last word’ that despite my preoccupations of intercultural and decolonial perspectives within the Westernised university I am at the same time defending my privilege of having the last word, through which I am the master of knowledge (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016). To quote Mignolo (2002) they do not need intellectuals from the outside to defend their interests.

Regarding the size of this thesis and my short experience in the field I had to limit my thesis to make it doable for me and I have therefore not had the opportunity to deeply explain or examine relevant concepts concerning the intercultural and decolonial perspective. For example to examine the shortcomings in using interculturality as a concept and not ‘interculturalidad’ and their inequities as Aman (2014) investigates in his research. Other concepts of interest are for example modernity, delinking and pluriversity. To gather this information I suggest that the curious reader more closely examine the list of references used in the study.

**Recommendations for further investigations**

My study left me with many questions. On the latter part, with the help of the verb ‘tejer’ and the meetings with the Nasa population and the Embera Chami made me question what would happen if we broadened our perspectives and saw life and subjectivity as something more than a human to human communication? What happens when we think of subjectivity beyond the human race? Including the earth. This is already the ‘cosmovision’ of the Nasas, the Embera Chami and many more. In a world facing huge challenges of inequality, migration, and environmental crises just to name some of the most profound challenges that are in need of solutions.

At my visit to the Embera Chami I was impressed about how they had educated their young boys. I would roughly say that this is a problem in the ‘West’, our “wronging young boys”, making trouble and getting into trouble, and us not knowing what to do about them. We have many examples of this: the incarceration of young (black) males especially in the United States as well as the custody of young males at The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (Statens institutions Styrelse or SiS) in Sweden that has been criticized for being a “storage” of youths as the society waits for “the problem to go away”. I did not stay long enough with the Embera Chami to know much more to say about this but I would find it motivating to get to know more about their education and ‘the other pedagogy’. I heard them singing for a whole night to cure their own mind and keep their community and mother earth safe. This is something which I have never experienced an equivalent of among male youth in “our” society.
"It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness". - Frantz Fanon
References


Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods: collecting evidence, crafting analysis,*


http://www.postkolonial.dk/artikler/kult_6/WALSH.pdf
Appendix

Interview Guide
Based on Steinar Kvale (1997)

Themes
Colonial history of social work, the construction of the other, de-colonial social work, intercultural understanding.

Preliminary questions
Can you tell me a little bit about social work in general in Colombia? What are the most common practices?
How has the subject developed in Colombia?
Can you tell me a little about Trabajo Social Intercultural y Decolonial?
What led you onto the subject?

Follow-up Questions
What challenges has it meant?
Do you have more examples of this or similar research?
What other research has been done on the subject?
How did the subject arise?

Specifying issues
How have you networked around this?
What are the adjoining study subjects?

Direct questions
Is it possible to conduct de-colonial social work? How?
Are diversions in sexuality, body function, gender etc included somehow in intercultural discourse? How?

Indirect questions
In what way does racism unfold?
Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups where/are badly affected by the conflict, how does this have something to do with intercultural and de-colonial social work?
Interpreting questions

How do you see this?
What does this mean for you?
Why is it so important (to you)?
Is the post colonial perspective related to the de-colonial one?
How do you feel about knowledge coming from the west?

Silence
"Thank you, I would now like to bring up another subject!"

Guía de entrevista
Basado en Steinar Kvale (1997)

Temas
Historia colonial del trabajo social, la construcción del otro, trabajo social de-colonial, entendimiento intercultural.

Preguntas preliminares
¿Puede decirme un poco sobre el trabajo social en general en Colombia? ¿Cuáles son las prácticas más comunes?
¿Cómo se desarrolló el tema en Colombia?
¿Me puedes contar un poco sobre Trabajo Social Intercultural y Decolonial?
¿Qué te llevó al tema?

Preguntas de seguimiento
¿Qué desafíos ha significado?
¿Tiene más ejemplos de esta investigación o similar?
¿Qué más investigación se han hecho sobre el tema?
¿Cómo surgió el tema?

Especificación de problemas
¿Cómo se han creado las redes actuales de este tema?
¿Cuáles son los temas de estudio adyacentes?

Preguntas directas
¿Es posible llevar a cabo un trabajo social de-colonial? ¿Cómo?
¿Las desviaciones en la sexualidad, en la función corporal, en el género, etc., están incluidas de algún modo en el discurso intercultural? ¿Cómo?

Preguntas indirectas
¿De qué manera se desarrolla el racismo?
Los grupos afrocolombianos e indígenas que están gravemente afectados por el conflicto, ¿cómo se relaciona esto con el trabajo social intercultural y decolonial?

Interpretar preguntas
Como ves esto?
¿Qué significa esto para ti?
¿Por qué es tan importante (para usted)?
¿La perspectiva post-colonial se relaciona con la de-colonial?
¿Cómo te sientes sobre el conocimiento que viene del occidente?
Los temas de trabajo intercultural y decolonial son diferentes, ¿cómo están conectados entre sí?, ¿se puede separar uno del otro?

Silencio
"¡Gracias, ahora quisiera plantear otro tema!"
Pictures from the fieldwork

First row: The University of Antioquia, the campus site.
Second row: La liberation de la Madre Tierra, my professors as students to the right.
Last row: Together with the Embera Chami and the class in Intercultural Social Work.