

**De-colonizing psychosocial science in the Kurdistan region of Iraq
Examples from the Mastura Institute of Applied Science in
Psychosocial Work.**

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The Mastura Institute of Applied Science in Psychosocial Work has been established in 2023 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as a non-University academic institute, which brings together University teachers, researchers, students and practitioners in the realm of psychosocial work, including psychosocial (activist) workers without formal education. The Institute has a strong emphasis on creative and grounded ways of facilitating training, supervision, research, internship, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in the engagement of practitioners and academics in conferences and exchange processes. The overall objectives include de-colonising knowledge transfer in the psychosocial sector, strengthening voices of local practices and knowledge in international knowledge debates, while establishing an equal platform of knowledge transfer and debate between West and East, North and South.

Based on a series of workshops and discussions between Kurdish/Iraqi, South African and German academics and practitioners from multiple disciplines and work fields (Social Work, Psychology, Social Sciences, research, psychosocial counselling, etc.) on the contextualization of psychosocial knowledge, the paper examines the outcomes and dilemmas in systematizing local knowledge and creating in-depth exchange of theories and practice of psychosocial work across different contexts including challenges of language and translation. The paper is based on a qualitative, evaluative research, conducting in-depth, individual and focus group discussions with participants of reflective workshops and activities at the Mastura Institute. The paper contributes to the broader debate on how to put decolonial approaches to knowledge production and exchange in the fields of Social Work, Psychology and Social Sciences into practice.

Key words:

De-colonization, Knowledge Production, Psychosocial Work, Local knowledge, Mastura Institute

Introduction

The history of the emergence of psychosocial sciences in academic institutions in the Kurdistan Region does not exceed 15 years. Reflecting a generally strong orientation of the academic and teaching system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq towards Western models¹, teaching and research in the field of Psychology, Sociology and Social Work have been largely focusing on theories, values, standards, criteria and practices developed in the Western world and only rarely consider and address the characteristics of the Kurdish society. The approach is closer to copying and adapting Western standards - often challenging for local experts in trying to adapt them to the Kurdish context - rather than generating contextually relevant approaches. At the same time, numerous social workers, psychologists and counsellors are actively working in the psychosocial field and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups daily - from social workers in schools to psychosocial counselors assisting survivors of political, social and gender-based violence. The gap between academic education in Social Sciences and the daily challenges faced by practitioners, e.g. the lack of integration of practice experience in academic courses or weak internship programs, further weaken the role and impact of University education in successfully fulfilling its role in society and in contributing to qualified and meaningful psychosocial services.

The Mastura Institute of Applied Science in Psychosocial Work in Sulaimani was established in 2023 by a group of Kurdish, South African and German academics and practitioners - looking back on joint working experience in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq - with the aim to address these challenges and to create a safe space of debate and reflection for working towards a greater contextualization of psychosocial theory, linking theory and practice, and strengthening and systematizing local knowledge and practice in the psychosocial sector. More precisely, through project activities in the fields of contextual supervision, monitoring, evaluation and series of reflective workshops the Mastura Institute brings academics, practitioners, students and organizations together for in-depth exchange with the aim to connect theoretical and practical aspects of psychosocial work and develop an approach to psychosocial work that embraces both, global approaches and the richness of local experience of practitioners in the psychosocial realm.

The approach of the Mastura Institute considers “thinking globally” as important as reflecting on the specific challenges in the context of the Kurdistan society. It aims at carefully reflecting on which approaches and practices in psychosocial work and which do not work in the Kurdish context. It aims at encouraging Kurdish researchers and practitioners to systematize their own approaches and practices and share and link them to, and thus gain influence, in international debates in the psychosocial sector. For this purpose, Mastura's team has formed a ‘glo-cal’ team. Academics and practitioners from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Germany and South Africa have jointly facilitated discussions, workshops, and seminars in this regard. This paper is based on both, observations from the Mastura Institute’s activities and discussions and a systematic, qualitative

¹ See for example the introduction of the Bologna Process to the Higher Education System in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (<https://spark.ngo/spark-announced-as-key-partner-in-iraqs-higher-education-reform/>)

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and evaluative research among participants in the Institute's activities. It presents the experience of Mastura Institute in the field of contextualization and decolonization of psychosocial sciences, outlines some of the main challenges met in the process and offers a number of recommendations and suggestions for further debate.

CHAPTER ONE: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK AND BASIC CONCEPTS

First: Problem Statement

It can be said that the focus on psychosocial support (PSS) in the Kurdistan Region and its importance as a science and as a service date back to 2014. The outbreak of the ISIS war in Iraq and Syria (2014-2016) and the displacement of millions of people in Syria and Iraq brought international organizations and United Nations agencies to focus more on psychosocial support for victims of war, violence and displacement. This reflects a more general rise of attention to psychosocial support programs in international humanitarian aid and development according to the framework of MHPSS – Mental Health and Psychosocial Support and related guidelines and standards (see e.g., IASC 2007). Within this framework, packages of MHPSS concepts and practices were imported to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, introducing MHPSS frameworks to governmental institutions and NGOs and training local academics and practitioners in MHPSS standards (Moloch 2022). Most of these concepts and practices have been developed in contexts of the Global North and rarely take into account the needs and specific challenges of the Kurdish society. This made the psychosocial sector in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq abstract and theoretical with local experts finding it challenging to implement these concepts in the Kurdish context. Against this background more debate and reflection is needed on how to contextualize psychosocial approaches to the local reality.

Second: Significance of the Research

The distinctiveness of this research lies in its foundation on collaborative discussions of academics and practitioners in the psychosocial field and students of social work. It aims to strengthen the link between theory and practice and thus to contribute to the advance and effectiveness of psychosocial services in the specific local context.

In addition, the research contributes to the broader debate on de-colonization of knowledge in the psychosocial sector.

Third: Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are outlined below:

1. Identify and present the most important challenges facing social work and psychosocial science in the Kurdistan Region.

2. Identify and present the role and approach of the Mastura Institute in the process of contextualization of psychosocial knowledge, strengthening and systematizing local psychosocial knowledge and practice and adopting decolonial approaches to workshops, discussions and knowledge exchange
3. Outline the achievements, obstacles and challenges in the process
4. Examine how psychosocial science can be adapted to specific local and cultural contexts.
5. Contribute to the international debate on strategies for de-colonizing and contextualizing psychological and social research and practice.

Fourth: Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives, the researchers used qualitative methods. Semi-structured individual and focus groups discussions were conducted with participants in the Mastura Institute's activities at different levels.

Fifth: Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling strategy included participants of the following activities of Mastura Institute:

- Participants of an internship program at Mastura Institute for students of social work at the University of Sulaimani;
- Participants of bi-weekly open workshops at the Institute for a mixed audience of students. Academics and practitioners;
- Members of a group of supervisors and evaluators based at Mastura Institute;
- Members of a group of 25 academics and practitioners engaged in long-term workshops and research on the contextualization of psychosocial theory and practice.

The total number of focus group discussion and individual interview respondents were 22 respondents, 13 of them male and 9 females.

Six: Ethical Considerations

During the conduct of this research, ethical standards were respected in both, the focus group discussion and individual interviews. Participation was voluntary. Consent forms were distributed before the interviews and the principles of do no harm and confidentiality were considered and maintained. The participants were asked whether they would like their names to be used in the findings or if they prefer to remain anonymous in their responses.

Seventh: Data Capture

The individual interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) were recorded in writing, with the permission of the participants. The recordings were translated when necessary and transcribed. Permission was asked to audio record the FGD.

Eighth: Data Analysis

Transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, grouping the interviewees' statement according to deductive (previously established) categories and inductive categories, emerging from the interview material. Analysis was done by individual researchers of the research group and collectively discussed after data-sharing.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**First: Concepts and Definitions**

Definitions of concepts and terms are a good way to reduce the complexity of concepts and clarify researcher views. The core concepts and terms referred to are:

1. Colonization

Colonization is understood as “a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power’ in which the ideologies and mechanisms of control created through colonization continue to oppress and manipulate how people perceive the world and their place in it” (Gray et al., 2013, p79).

Thus, colonization is a comprehensive process, involving beyond occupation of territory also the colonization of culture, science, and history. What is remarkable is that this occupation has covered all aspects of the life of the oppressed population. It can be said that in general, colonization of people and countries was not only carried out by force, fire and iron, but also with the support of the sciences of anthropology, history, and oriental studies (Said, 1978). Finally, we can define the procedural definition of colonialism as the domination of the science and logic of powerful countries, including the psychological and social sciences. Gayatri Spivak has coined the term “epistemic violence” the process of colonial powers imposing knowledge systems on the colonized (Spivak, 1988). Considering Michel Foucault’s (1980) theories on the interrelation of power and knowledge, knowledge production and its dissemination function as a consolidation of power structures and consequently become an inherent part of colonization (Hiddleston, 2009).

Under the continuing colonial policies of many settler governments and agencies, “local people face numerous oppressions, including genocide (deliberate destruction of the people), ethnocide (deliberate destruction of the culture rather than the people themselves), ecocide (destruction of their natural environments) and linguicide (destruction of indigenous languages).” (Gray et al., 2013, p17)

The Kurdish people have become a victim of two types of colonialism, one of which is the occupation by world invaders, i.e. the Ottoman empire and the British empire in the last centuries, and second is the colonization by the Iraqi state.

2. De-colonization

Decolonization is the process of addressing und “undoing” the impact of colonialism in all aspects of life of the colonized people, including knowledge and science. In the context of the here presented research, the term refers to the de-colonization of knowledge production and transfer. A decolonial approach includes

- Uncovering and unpacking how the hegemony of theories and practices developed in Western contexts and its de-contextualized transfer to other contexts and the marginalization of local knowledge and practices perpetuate mechanisms of colonization
- De-naturalizing and critically reflecting assumptions and concepts of dominant knowledge systems and science
- Normalizing, contextualizing and strengthening local knowledge and marginalized perspectives (see Adams et. al, 2015).

Referring to social work, Gray (Gray et al, 2013, p.19) states, that “decolonization of social work first and foremost means acknowledging and harnessing the strengths of indigenous communities rather than engaging in blaming games that compounding deleterious effects of several hundred years of colonization.” (Gray et al, 2013, p19).

Here it is important to state, that when referring to decolonial approaches, the authors do not intend to reproduce polarizing dualisms, such as East versus West, South versus North, local versus global, spiritual versus professional, or traditional versus scientific knowledge.

The researchers' operational definition and approach to de-colonization means taking into account local experience or daily experience in the psychosocial field and meaningfully engaging local voices in global platforms, taking into account cultural and conceptual boundaries, people's access to psychosocial work, and how to systematize local knowledge in the psychosocial field in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

3. Local Knowledge

Another term that is often used in the field of localization of the psychological and social sciences is the term ‘local knowledge’ or “indigenous knowledge as the main component in the indigenization process, in learning of local needs, diversity and pluralism and developing practices that are culturally appropriate within local contexts”. (Gray et al., 2013). Leading questions of the here presented research and reflections is what kind of knowledge does psychosocial work need in a double–colonized society and what is needed to establish platforms of mutual, non-hierarchical knowledge exchange across contexts. This includes the

challenge to not only ask ‘which knowledge’, but also ‘who can speak?’ - who is allowed to produce knowledge?

As stated above, many training workshops and qualification programs conducted for psychosocial professionals in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focus on theories and practices developed in and for Western contexts, ignore the specific situation and needs of local participants and marginalize locally developed contextualized approaches to psychosocial work, thus introducing standards and practices of psychosocial work, which are not applicable in the local work situation (Sonnenberg & Ghaderi, 2021).

It is important to note here, that in this study we look at local knowledge as local experience, not tradition. The researchers’ procedural definition of local knowledge is the sum of the experiences and knowledge that psychologists, clinical psychologists, sociologists and psychosocial counsellors have gained during their daily practice².

4. Psychosocial Knowledge and Science

Psychological science is here defined as integrating multiple disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc., which were initially all embraced by philosophy, then gradually separated with the advent of modernity. In order to provide an operational definition of psychosocial sciences, in this context this includes social work, psychology, and clinical psychology, including education/pedagogy e.g. in regard to educational counselors and social workers working in schools in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Second: Challenges Facing Psychological and Social Sciences in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region

It can be said that the psychological and social sciences in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are facing a number of challenges at institutional and societal level, that have made these sciences unable to perform their duties and execution as necessary.

1. Challenges at the Institutional Level

The University of Sulaimani in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was established in 1968, but was forcibly moved to Erbil by the Iraqi Baath-regime in 1981 and named Salahaddin University. It was only in 1992, that the University in Sulaimani was re-established³. The establishment of a

² Examples of local practice knowledge might be the rich experience of Kurdish women organizations assisting victims of domestic violence and their expertise in family- and community-based counseling strategies, but also collective strategies of dealing with experiences of extreme violence in non-professional contexts, such as developed by survivors of the Anfal operations.

³ See: <https://su.edu.krd/ku/about/history/suhistory>

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Department of Social Work at the Salahaddin University in Erbil dates back to 2008, the establishment of a Department of Psychology to 2009–2010 (Salih, 2024). The Department of Clinical Psychology at Koya University dates back to 2010⁴, while the establishment of Social Work at the University of Sulaimani dates back to 2014.

Thus, the fields of social work, psychology and clinical psychology have a very recent history and limited experience in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Teaching and research at the Universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been established referring to a Western positivist background. This has caused the practical aspects of these fields to not develop sufficiently and have difficulty creating links between theory and practice. Teaching at the Departments of Psychology, Social Sciences and Social work is conducted in Kurdish language with most of the students having limited English skills. Yet, very few academic sources are available in Kurdish language. For example, for Social Work there is only one academic textbook available in Kurdish language. This makes students and lecturers in Kurdistan – and more generally in the Middle East – rely almost entirely on Western literature and neglect their own political and socio-economic backgrounds (Midgley, 1981).

It might be said that in academic institutions' research and teaching a strong focus is placed on copy/pasting Western imported models of science (based on non-contextualized English sources) rather than understanding social sciences as a way of thinking about world and life challenges and develop approaches to deal with social and psychological problems and challenges in the specific context. This approach does not only weaken the role of social sciences in the Kurdish society; it also perpetuates mechanism of scientific colonialism.

Another problem of the scientific departments of social work and psychology is the lack of job descriptions and clarity on scope of work, especially for graduates of social work and, to some extent, for graduates of various departments of psychology, clinical psychology, educational counseling, etc. It has made the professional boundaries between these disciplines vague and confusing. It is worth mentioning that a reason for the lack of job descriptions is that until now in the Kurdistan Region, there are no professional associations for social workers or psychologists. Another problem is the lack of internship guides to guide students, teachers and supervisors of organizations in their practical work.

2. Challenges at the Societal Level

The role and position of the psychosocial sciences depend on the perception of society of its role, and there are a number of challenges for the psychosocial sciences that prevent them from fulfilling their role in society. The most important of these challenges are:

⁴ See: <https://fsch.koyauniversity.org/departments/dcps>
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In Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, mental health and social wellbeing does not receive the same importance and attention as physical health, due to negative perceptions of mental conditions and stigma associated with mental disorders. This is due to limited education and awareness, along with the negative role of the community and neighborhood through their interference and stigma towards mental illness.

Many people think that visiting faith healers (FHs) is not as stigmatizing as going to psychiatric clinics and receiving medication or referring to psychological counselling. As a result, faith healing has become a popular way of treating psychiatric patients.

According to a scientific study among 482 cases in Iraq, 279 (57%) reported going to faith healers at any time before, during, or after a psychiatric consultation. Of those, 84.6% reported visiting FHs less than 10 times, while 15.4% went 10 times or more; 36.9% still believe that the treatment of FHs is accepted or even good (21.5%), while 30.9% realized that it is useless, and 10.7% think it is bad. Choosing FHs as the first station of treatment was considered by more than 70% of the patients in the current study; a much higher number than in the findings of Alotaibi for Saudi Arabia (Younis et al, 2019). The vast majority of FHs are men (Younis et al, 2019).

In conclusion, in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the trust in and referral to Faith Healing is prevalent and undermines the role and acknowledgement of psychiatrists and psychologists in treating mental illnesses.

Sincere efforts are needed to help build public awareness for de-stigmatizing and normalizing mental illnesses and psychological problems and thus improve acceptance of and accessibility to mental health services for vulnerable groups.

Third: De-colonizing Psychological and Social Science- Activities of the Mastura Institute

Against the background of the above-described challenges in social and psychosocial work the Mastura Institute has carried out a number of projects and activities aiming at contextualizing psychosocial knowledge to the specific Kurdish context, bridging the theory-practice gap and contributing to decolonization of psychosocial knowledge:

First: Developing locally contextualized strategies of supervision by continuous training and regular InterVision for a pool of local supervisors from different backgrounds (sociology, clinical psychology, social work, who offer supervision to practitioners of psychosocial counselling in civil society and governmental organizations.

Second: Training of a group of local evaluators and students in evidence based and contextualized project monitoring and evaluation by local and international trainers and evaluators.

Third: Internship programme with teachers and students of Social Work at the University of Sulaimani (learning about knowledge and practice of psychosocial work) including exchange with

German students and women counselling projects.⁵ Cooperation with the Presidency of the Department of Social Work at Sulaimani University in producing the first internship guide for students of the Department.

Fourth: Development of a local manual for premarital counselling in cooperation with the Social and Cultural Organization KHANZAD, the Directorate of Combating Violence against Women (DCVAW) and the Department of Health (DOH).⁶

Fifth: Workshops and debates conducted bi-weekly at Mastura Institute for an audience of academics, practitioners and students. 30 workshops have been conducted, by psychosocial experts from practitioners, University professors and organization activists with the participation of different fields of work Social, Sociology, Clinical Psychology, Law, History, Art, Psychiatry on a multi-disciplinary basis and working on critical thinking in de-colonizing psychosocial sciences.

Six: Within a one-year project for the contextualization of psychosocial knowledge and reflecting on decolonial approaches to knowledge production⁷, continuous workshops and debates have been organized with a group of some 20 academics and practitioners from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, South Africa and Germany. In these debates and long-term workshops explicit focus is given to the importance of language barriers and the translation process. The outcome of the workshops will be summarized in a discussion paper including recommendations for the contextualization of MHPSS knowledge.

CHAPTER THREE FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND REFLECTIONS

Chapter Three includes

- 1.) The findings of the research among participants of the Mastura Institute's activities
- 2.) Reflections on research findings and the Mastura Institute approach to decolonization of Psychosocial Knowledge
- 3.) Recommendations for further discussion
- 4.) Conclusion

1. Research findings

Needs, interest and motivation of research participants for joining Mastura Institute's activities and debates on decolonizing psychosocial knowledge

Asked about their motivation to join the Mastura Institute's activities and debates, a third of respondents expressed a genuine interest in the topic of decolonizing psychology and social work. Through their engagement with Mastura, they described becoming increasingly critical of the contextual, social, political embedment of ideas and schools of thinking and the underlying

⁵ This component was funded by the Department of Development Cooperation of Berlin, Germany

⁶ Within a project funded by the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

⁷ Implemented with funding of and in cooperation with the German GIZ (German Society of International Cooperation).

political and economic interests. Participants have already been active in sharing these ideas with others. *“I have been able to draw students' attention to the fact that what is imported from abroad in the sciences, especially the social sciences, does not necessarily serve us.”*

More than half of the participants expressed an interest in developing a more locally relevant theory and practice of psychology and social work, based on a thorough understanding and analysis of the Kurdish society and its specific needs and challenges. In particular, they recommended a greater focus in psychosocial work on family relations and the cultural and faith-based aspects of healing and help-seeking behavior.

Half of the respondents expressed a need to develop and formalize the policies, laws, roles, ethical guides, international standards, education and research of psychological and social work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to strengthen the psychosocial sector. A third of the respondents underlined the existing stigma related to mental health problems and social work as a challenge to be addressed in the sector through awareness raising.

A majority of interviewees (78%) expressed a strong interest in research-based practice. In particular, they were seeking more high-quality qualitative research by local researchers to be undertaken. The dominance of positivist research in Kurdistan (and in other parts of the world) was criticized. They expressed a strong interest in more qualitative phenomenological research focused on understanding Kurdish society and family life and to developing psychological and social work practices out of these research findings.

Participants also underlined their need and interest in research on Kurdish society and identity done by Kurdish researchers. One respondent stated, *“It is very important how others think of us. But it is also very important for me to bring back the broken pieces of our identity”*.

Safe Space

A majority of respondents (71%) expressed their appreciation of a safe space for open reflection and critical thinking created at Mastura Institute, underlining the absence of fear and competition and an attitude of respectful listening, dialogue and looking at topics from different perspectives.

“There is something that makes me very happy that this mistake cannot be made here. It is that things are looked at in many ways. At least, this work seems to be viewed from different perspectives and methods. It's a multi-method world.”

“In Mastura's conversations, the art of listening and dialogue has developed more in me. The art of accepting different opinions is another positive point that has become more attached to me”.

“It's a beautiful space where everyone listens to each other, talks and at the same time listens to someone's experience and expertise. This has always been a process of knowledge production for me.”

“Mastura means free thought, free dialogue and reflection space.”

“What is remarkable for me is the atmosphere created by the staff of Mastura. I can really say that I have seen it as a second home. There is an atmosphere where you can freely express your opinions and support them at all times and for everyone”.

One respondent stated that discussions at Mastura Institute represent *“the Freire⁸ curriculum on dialogue. I mean that dialogue should start from the bottom up and gradually expand. Let all the members speak, let different people speak, let them all have their own opinions, and let them not have a filter”*

Respondents appreciated, that workshops settings gave half time to the input of presenters and left half time for open discussions and thus gave way to rich and critical reflections and exchange across different disciplines.

Multi-disciplinary approach

About half of the participants commented on the importance of taking a multi-disciplinary approach to decolonizing psychosocial work in Kurdistan. *“The institute strives to bring individuals from different disciplines together which is a point of strength.”*

They underlined that each discipline brings different strengths to develop a uniquely holistic focus. They stated that the multi-disciplinary perspective helps to break out of the closed circle thinking and language of the individual disciplines. Multi-disciplinary spaces urge and encourage participants to explain more in depth their concepts, their origin and underlying assumptions. Participants appreciated the presence of academics and practitioners from sociology, social work, psychology, philosophy, law, history, art as well as the space for faith-based reflection and learning from traditional cultural proverbs.

Flexibility and equality

Respondents appreciated that Mastura organized seminars around the times suitable for working professionals. This allowed for the participation of a wide range of academics and practitioners from different disciplines, including people with extensive practical work load. They also appreciated that topics for workshops were selected together with participants and schedules for workshops jointly discussed.

⁸ Referring to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970)

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Respondents positively commented on the atmosphere of equality amongst participants of all ages and qualifications:

“The atmosphere of discussion was such that everyone seemed to be in the same scientific and cognitive position. It was not like university lectures, there were no teachers and students, but all were teachers and everyone was a student. The role of each participant was clear; no one played a passive role, even those who did not have a topic to present or were not given the opportunity due to lack of time”.

“There is no dominant voice here. It is very interesting to me that there is no voice that says ‘I am the voice of religion’. It is very important to me that the space is directed in this way.”

Confidence, ownership and pride

In many instances during workshops and debates at Mastura Institute Kurdish participants had expressed frustrations, self-criticism and skepticism about weaknesses in the Kurdish academic and education sector, the societal stigmatization of psychological and social work, local people’s referral to faith healers.. Yet respondents expressed a strong sense of ownership and pride for the space they have created to reflect on psychosocial theory and practice and decolonial approaches from a Kurdish perspective and described it as an encouraging experience:

“Through these workshops, we are here to learn that there is a point in our history that we are proud of and happy about”.

The problem of Language

Language and translation were an important topic addressed by research participants. During workshops and discussion with external guests, simultaneous translation from English to Kurdish and vice-verse was available. Yet translation was an ongoing challenge throughout all workshops and respondents expressed a need for deeper explanation of academic and scientific terms beyond technical translation, unpacking their contextual, historical and political origins and meaning. In this regard they referred not only to “imported” English terminology, but also to Kurdish terminology. They were keen on understanding historical roots of Kurdish conceptual terms and interested in exploring the value of Kurdish proverbs, literature (written texts, stories, plays) and other forms of art (e.g. films) for understanding psychological and social problems.

They expressed a strong interest in the availability Kurdish translations of English original publications and in having Kurdish research translated into English so to share research results with a broader international audience.

Generally, respondents underlined the importance of research in one's own language.

“I used to think that I had to write my research in a foreign language because it was better and acceptable. But now I think it is important to pay more attention to the mother tongue so that my work does not weaken the knowledge and language of my community. We modify it according to the characteristics of the community.”

Critical thinking and Critical Psychology

Critical Thinking

Most of the respondents of this study stated that they initially joined Mastura with a hunger for broader, challenging thinking and new ideas. One respondent recommended Mastura to his friend saying *“If you want to get out of an idea, come and listen to these meetings.”*

Participants spoke about the importance of learning to reflect critically on the development of social sciences, from a contextualized, political, economic and social perspective. The unpacking of dualisms and non-dual thinking, which had been encouraged and practiced in Mastura workshops was appreciated as a key approach and competence. One participant said: *“one of the most influential things is that the world is not divided into black and white”*.

Critical Psychology

Many respondents described that the critical reflection on definitions of what is normal, on what is defined as (mental)health and (mental)illness, on the relation between individual suffering and socioeconomic and political contexts and the potentially pathologizing impact of widespread diagnoses of trauma were considered as a key experience throughout the workshops:

“I have learned not to see every illness as a disease, and to think of the individual as living in a social context.”

“The first point is what is normal and what is not normal, who is sick and who is not sick, who is ill and who is not ill. This has great impact on me.”

“The time has brought me out of seeing my cases and patients in a manual, but in a social context.”

Theory – Practice

Respondents found “*a good deal of realism*” in the decolonizing reflections at Mastura. They found much of their Western theoretical education limiting in the contexts where they worked. University students reported that the exposure to practical work settings within the internship program at Mastura Institute helped them to bridge this gap between theory and practice. The development of supervision and internship programs by Mastura were especially appreciated by participants in helping to understand practical contextualized relevant psychosocial practice.

Yet there was a strong request and recommendation to put a stronger focus on contextualized practical aspects of psychological and social work and introduce and share locally contextualized strategies on mental health and social work relevant to their practical work.

However, respondents found that agreeing upon specific, concrete models of implementation or specific psychosocial practices was not as important as the process of critical reflection of concepts, as the latter challenged their attitude and way of thinking about psychology and social work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in a broader sense. This process had a direct impact on their practice as they found themselves reflecting more critically on both local traditional cultural practices and ‘imported’ theories and practices and taking a more holistic approach in their work.

One participant said

“Understanding that working with the other person, especially cases, is not only conditioned by theory and a purely scientific method, but there are many other ways that benefit the case that may not be scientifically well thought out. There are other ways to help the case.”

Another respondent mentioned that the reflection process had direct practical impact in terms of listening more to the world view and opinion of the client, rather than imposing a particular method or practice. More attention was paid to understanding clients within a complex social context, rather than coming up with quick individual diagnoses of illnesses “taking place in their heads”. Greater confidence was expressed in trying alternative approaches and qualitative research methods.

However, the research also shows, that it is seen as a main challenge how to bring decolonial and critical thinking on a theoretical level into meaningful, contextualized psychosocial practice

2. Summary of research and reflections

The following paragraph summarizes and reflects on observations from Mastura workshops and research findings and further reflects on achievements, obstacles and challenges met in the reflection process on decolonizing psychosocial science.

Safe Space

The creation of a safe space for open and critical reflection was regarded by many participants as one of the most significant achievements of Mastura Institute. In reflecting on how this was practically achieved, the following aspects were noted:

- Continuity: Participants of the workshop series were asked for a strong and continuous commitment to the process with continuity of presence in workshops and discussions
- Shared ground values and respectful communication: Participants explicitly agreed on shared ground values for the reflection process: An attitude of self-reflection and mutual learning and respectful communication in each interaction. A culture of ASKING, NOT ASSUMING was established. For example, during discussions individual participants occasionally used English terminology or specific technical terms related to their professional realm, which were difficult to understand for other participants. Creating an atmosphere, in which all participants felt encouraged to ask each other for explanation and unpacking of complex terminology or theoretical assumptions, was a big achievement.

Interestingly respondents stated that the multi-disciplinary character of the group did not only enrich the reflection election process in terms of content, but also helped to lower barriers in asking each other for deeper explanation of terms and concepts.

Equality: Participants came from all age and gender groups, different professional groups, academia and practice. Equality among participants was encouraged and the importance of recognizing experience and expertise, not professional qualification was emphasized.

Access: There was a process of continuously discussing and adapting frameworks (e.g. time schedules) to the participants' specific challenge, e.g. work load, mobility, parental responsibilities etc. so to accommodate each participant's access to the workshop equally.

The research findings impressively show the outstanding importance of creating a safe space for open reflection as a precondition for engaging in a deep and mutual exchange across disciplines and contexts. It also shows, that a culture of mutual learning, respectful communication and equality across age, gender and professional groups help to create safe spaces and foster a sense of ownership among participants.

In a broader sense, in a reflection process on decolonization of knowledge requires first and foremost a safe space based on mutual respect and learning. There is a need to adapt frameworks and address socio-economic, time and mobility constraints, so to make the space accessible for participants across professions, disciplines, age and gender groups and socio-economic contexts.

On language and the politics of translation

The key role of language and translation in knowledge production, transfer and exchange across contexts and in contextualization and decolonization processes has been widely discussed (see e.g. the seminal work of Spivak (1993)).

The research shows, that language and translation remain challenges throughout the reflection process. In the exchange between Kurdish, German and South African participants or with guests from Latin America and more broadly, where theories, practices and terminology are “imported” across contexts, the richness of the concept, its origin, meaning and related emotions often get lost in translation. Mediating translators’ terminology is often shaped by specific vocabulary as used by International NGOs and UN agencies and it was sometimes difficult to find Kurdish expressions for theories and concepts.

The challenges of language do however not only refer to settings of international exchange, but also to the exchange among Kurdish participants. Local academics frequently use English terminology in presenting concepts and practices due to the lack of precise Kurdish translation. Thus, concepts come across in a de-contextualized way and remain inaccessible of others.

Throughout the Mastura reflection process, attention was given to carefully unpacking technical and professional terms – (again: asking, not assuming) and searching for appropriate expressions in English and Kurdish language. For example, even the very term ‘psychology’ was unpacked, with different historical, political and contextual forces being analyzed in developing and using such terms. There was a deep exchange on the meaning, related emotions, assumptions etc. of psychological terminology in various contexts (including basic concepts such as grief, suffering etc.). Reflections were made on the political character of translation. This is combined with an understanding that there is not ONE correct term/translation, but a mutual process of understanding and contextualizing. As pointed at by research respondents, it is important to integrate Kurdish proverbs, Kurdish literature and lyrics and the expression through arts in this process.

Based on the research findings, an ongoing project of the Mastura Institute is forming groups of professional translators AND psychosocial experts – to continue developing a commented, living glossary of terms and concepts.

The value of critical thinking

The research findings impressively show the great importance participants give to a space of critical reflection, self-reflection and critical thinking. They consider critical thinking not only as a key competence for engaging in debates on the contextualization and decolonization of knowledge, but also for finding practically relevant approaches in their professional work.

It was significant that one of the first seminars in the Mastura longer term workshop series was on ‘What is critical thinking in our various contexts?’ Kurdish university teachers were invited to present different schools and theories of critical thinking – with the aim of encouraging critical self-reflection.

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Throughout the workshop series, sessions and presentations started with an in-depth introduction of the speaker – making explicit one ‘s own context and educational background and history – which schools, thoughts have shaped one ‘s biography, with critical self-reflection.

Throughout the series’, explicit attention was given to unpacking underlying assumptions and belief systems underpinning not only psychological and social concepts but also broadly used terms such as progress, modernity etc. Attention was also given unpacking widely used dualisms, such as modern/traditional, developed/underdeveloped, etc.

Thus, it was perhaps more important to strengthen the capacity for critical thinking and self-reflection as a key aspect of decolonizing our education and way of thinking and speaking about psychology and social work, than coming up with particular recommended models or practices in the sector. This means that each time a new theory or model is ‘imported’ or even generated locally, this is critically reflected upon in terms of its historical, political and contextual roots and relevance.

The attitude and competence of critical thinking led for example to intense discussions, critically challenging psychological and psychiatric diagnoses of mental problems, the dominant definitions of health and illness, normality etc. and critically reflecting on the adoption of Western shaped therapeutic approaches in the Kurdish context.

Challenging positivist paradigms

Throughout the workshops and reflections participants expressed critique of a reductionist dominance of positivist paradigms and relatedly quantitative methodology in the Kurdish academic education sector. A meta-analysis conducted within a doctoral dissertation at the University of Sulaimani (Hamasaki, 2024) showed that 67% of the doctoral dissertations in the University Departments of Sociology across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are relying on positivist concepts and quantitative methodology, while there is a marginalization of phenomenological approaches and qualitative methods.

Discussion showed, that in many debates, Western knowledge is equated to positivist knowledge and evidence-based, quantitative methodology. In ppsychology, for example, there has been a global dominance of clinical concepts of trauma and healing. Thus, from the perspective of local participants, decolonial critique of Western dominance in knowledge production and transfer showed to be closely intertwined with a critique of positivist approaches.

It has therefore been an important step in the reflection process to introduce alternative phenomenological, critical, socio-economically contextualized concepts from the West and other Global South contexts (e.g., Critical Psychology; Latin American Liberation Psychology).

To summarize, alongside the need for re-discovering and strengthening local knowledge, it was found that there is also a need for discovering the richness of and controversies within Western and Global South knowledge and emancipatory approaches towards social and political change.

Relatedly, there is also a need of challenging the prioritization of quantitative methodology in the Kurdish academic context, going along with a depreciation of qualitative, phenomenological research as ‘non-scientific’ and strengthen locally contextualized qualitative methods. Local participants strongly requested trainings in qualitative methods. This led to a dilemma: how to even approach such training without once again reproducing an import of methodology from Western contexts? A suggestion in this regard is, that Kurdish and international researchers jointly engage in concrete research projects on specific social and psychological problems in the Kurdish society and developing context-sensitive methods, tailored to the specific research question, in the research process.

How to come from decolonial thinking to contextualized practice?

The research findings show that there is an ongoing tension between critical reflection on concepts and approaches to psychosocial work and the parallel challenge to address and” solve “every-day practical and professional challenges. Participants report that while unpacking concepts and terminology on a conceptual level in the workshops, they easily fall back into using recipes in every day work with vulnerable groups. Daily work challenges and the complexity of problems Kurdish professionals deal with on a daily base, induce pressure to come up with practical, local models or practices for psychosocial support and the research shows a strong request of local participants to introduce and share more practically relevant concepts and tools.

Interestingly, at the same time the research shows, that the process of critical reflection of theories and approaches has an immediate impact on daily work practices in terms of listening skills, looking more carefully at the context of individual help-seekers and adopting more holistic approaches in addressing social and psychological problems.

Thus, the process of developing locally contextualized practical approaches is closely linked to the key competence of critical thinking, self-reflection and mutual learning.

Emerging approach to de-colonization of knowledge at Mastura Institute

The workshops conducted at Mastura Institute and the findings of the here presented research have contributed to further elaborate and sharpen the emerging and continuously developing approach of the Institute to de-colonization of knowledge in the psychosocial field.

In reflecting on the Mastura process of decolonizing and contextualising social work and mental health in Kurdistan, one of the main emerging challenges has been to re-discover and strengthen

local knowledge without „romanticizing “traditional knowledge or fostering a kind of „knowledge nationalism “.

The tension between decolonial critique of Western dominance in knowledge production on the one hand and the risk of re-valuing traditional and faith-based practices through the emphasis on local knowledge was a red thread in many discussions. The question “*do we need a Kurdish psychology?*” was discussed alongside with the fears of local participants of thus fostering nationalist, fundamentalist list and traditional narratives and was rather framed as what type of contextual gaps and approaches exist and are needed in Kurdistan. This should be done without essentializing local colleagues ‘knowledge, for example „*they are specifically good at working with extended family structures* “.

In this regard it is important to state again, that in the Mastura context, local knowledge is understood as the sum of historical and current knowledge, practice and experience developed in the specific Kurdish context in addressing psychological, social and societal challenges.

An attempt is made in the Mastura context at avoiding dichotomization between Western and local knowledge and equation of Western with Positivist knowledge. Instead, workshops and reflection spaces strive to understand theoretical concepts and practice approaches both from the Global North and the Global South in their historical and contextual embedment unpack underlying assumptions, belief and science systems and interests and critically reflecting them. Thus, a continuation of in-depth exchange of knowledge across contexts is needed with an orientation towards identifying locally relevant theories and practices oriented towards social change rather than uncovering ‘local pureness’.

The need for unlearning truths and de-normalizeing our assumptions was underlined in the reflection process. One way to do this is to understand concepts, schools and theories as useful METAPHORS – they may be useful in a particular historical and political time and context, rather than representing the ultimate truth about human beings. In this way, rather than searching for the one truth, we can increase our joint pool of metaphors for understanding and addressing challenges across contexts.

Decolonial theorists talk about adopting an epistemic modesty (Teo, 2019) in respecting and understanding and challenging different approaches from different contexts. And this is the ongoing hope of the Mastura Institute in contributing to decolonizing and contextualizing mental health and social work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq - to keep respectfully learning from each other about our approaches in this context, while continually critically reflecting on theories and approaches from other contexts and potentially useful metaphors which may be adapted to this context.

RECOMMENDATIONS for further debate and research (based on research findings)

Continuation and expansion of exchange and outreach

- 1.) Continuation of the Matura Institute's seminars, trainings and workshops, the exchange on psychosocial knowledge across contexts and include approaches from other Global South contexts (such as Latin America)
- 2.) Develop outreach activities for addressing a greater audience specifically among young people, involving media
- 3.) Expand internship programs for reaching a larger number of students
- 4.) Address and cooperate with Colleges and Departments of local Universities so to contribute to a paradigm shift towards greater acknowledgement of phenomenological approaches and qualitative methods.
- 5.) Conducting workshops on how to localize and contextualize social sciences for social and psychological researchers within institutions of the Kurdistan Regional Government
- 6.) Conducting conferences on decolonization in collaboration with Kurdistan universities.

Topics and methodology

- 7.) Focus more on the development of contextualized qualitative methods for research projects in the Kurdish context and – avoiding polarizations – reflect also on locally and culturally contextualized tools of evidence-based quantitative research which move away from medical models towards more client- or survivor-centered holistic approaches.
- 8.) Joint research projects of Kurdish, German and South African participants on specific psychological and social challenges in the Kurdish context, jointly developing topic-tailored, context-sensitive methods.
- 9.) Research projects or meta-analyses of Kurdish research in the fields of social work and sociology.
- 10.) Paying attention to artistic aspects and incorporating it into Mastura's work—paying attention to the contribution of cinema, music, fine arts in understanding and addressing psychological and social challenges

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTION

Based on observations, workshops with Kurdish, German and South African academics and practitioners conducted at the Mastura Institute and the findings of a qualitative research among participants of exchanges, internship, supervision and evaluation programs, this paper has outlined the achievements, challenges and dilemmas met in the reflection process on the contextualization and decolonization of knowledge in the psychosocial field.

The research has shown that Mastura's open, critical and reflective environment has had a remarkable impact on the participants, prompting academics to critically reflect their concepts and

techniques and doctoral students to learn from Mastura's experience. For clinical psychologists and practitioners, the critical reflection process had also a direct impact on their practical work, leading to a more contextualized holistic approach in psychosocial counselling. Participants working in local organizations were encouraged to critically reflect on international standards and codes of ethics shaping their work.

In regard to the process of decolonizing knowledge, outstanding findings of the research are the importance of creating a safe space of open reflection, strengthening competencies of critical thinking, self-reflection and mutual learning as core components or even prerequisites for engaging in an in-depth exchange on knowledge across contexts. The main challenge identified is the question how to come from decolonial thinking and reflection to meaningful contextualized practice.

Despite the achievements, the research also showed that there is still a lot of work to be done and the overall concept of decolonizing psychosocial knowledge needs further elaboration and sharpening.

Decolonial approaches can be an opportunity to further contextualize psychosocial science, on the one hand, and a dangerous illusion that can lead to nationalism, radicalism, and polarization, on the other hand. There is constant ambivalence throughout the discussions between “returning to tradition” as an important part of decolonization and awareness of the risks of thus promoting conservative, nationalist concepts. Furthermore, decolonization debates often concentrate on criticism of the Western dominance and influence, while pay but little self-criticism, creating a similar polarization to what colonialism did.

Tensions identified in the process were:

- How to engage in international, cross-context exchange on knowledge without immediately reproducing the colonization of our minds and West-East, North-South, modern-traditional, global-local dualisms?
- How to avoid ‘romanticizing’ local, cultural and traditional practices while addressing contextual needs and strengthen local knowledge?
- How to avoid the fostering of nationalist and fundamentalists narratives while empowering local concepts and approaches?
- How can we talk about context instead of “culture” – thus not culturalizing and essentializing local colleagues’ knowledge.

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