

## Epistemological assumptions and dual roles of community-centred researchers

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**Abstract:** Smith (1999) states that “researchers must go further than simply recognizing personal beliefs and assumptions, and the effect they have when interacting with people” (p. 173). In this article I take this view further and argue that research is a social game and as social researchers we have dual obligations of utilising theory to explain social realities for the purposes of the ‘Academy’ but also moving beyond this, and to engage in meaningful ways with the society it is that we are critiquing; by creating, producing and disseminating knowledge. This is done by tracing my epistemological assumptions which are informed by critical theories and the Gramscian notion of hegemony. I draw on my Masters thesis project as an example of how these particular epistemological assumptions informed this research. I also discuss the dissatisfaction emanating at the end of this research and the epistemological ambiguities I felt with not being able to attend to my perceived dual obligations as a researcher, in particular, engaging with the community. I then discuss an opportunity that arose for doctoral research and how I felt this aligned to my views of the dual roles of researchers. Finally, as an aid to fulfilling my obligations as a researcher to my community, I address a number of the critical questions raised by Smith (1999).

**Keywords:** Community research; epistemology; Māori; indigenous studies

### Epistemological assumptions

The impetus for becoming involved in research was that I had an interest in critiquing the status quo. Particularly where perhaps there were injustices, regimes of oppression, or unfair power relationships evident in a given situation. I assumed that if these were highlighted, there could be changes made to the situation, and thus the status quo could be improved. Therefore research could be used to open the possibilities for the situations to be made better, from the view of those people it most affected. This view, as is often the case with students new to research was, in hindsight slightly rose-tinted, as well as incorporating the idealism of wanting to ‘save the world’. Prior to embarking on a Masters degree these epistemological assumptions were, unknowingly, closely aligned with the critical theories espoused particularly by scholars from the Frankfurt School. Thus because they tended to reconfirm beliefs about (un)fairness and (in)equality I drew on these resources extensively to frame my Masters research project and consequently it is these theories that have shaped how I currently know and understand the social world. (Billig, 2003; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Curtner-Smith, 2002; Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2001a, 2001b; Kemmis, 1998; Sparkes, 1992; Taylor, 2001; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000; Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2004).

Specifically, to help to explain social injustices and regimes of oppression, or social games, where there are winners and losers, and where these outcomes depend on unfair power relations between the dominant and the dominated, the Gramscian notion of hegemony is particularly useful. For me hegemony exists and operates at every level of society, from the meta-narratives that influence dominant discourse, to our everyday lives. My interpretation of hegemony, is that in any given society/situation/social game, there are groups of people that are powerful (rich, popular, bourgeoisie), and there are those groups of people that are powerless (poor, unpopular, proletariat). How hegemony works is that the powerful group control the powerless by consenting to being ruled, rather than by being coerced into being

controlled. The powerless take up the values, languages, discourses, and ideologies of the powerful and begin to take them on as their own (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Fairclough & Wodak, 2004). These values, languages, and discourses become common sense and by becoming common-sense they become ideological and thus retain the status quo. How these become ideological is when apparently unrelated concepts are arbitrarily linked to formed new ways of thinking and believing. An example of this process is when neo-liberal market policies are applied to education, we assume it as common sense that cost-savings and cost-cuttings will lead to better, more quality educational outcomes (Jackson, 2006). In summary critical theories, and Gramsci's notion of hegemony, profoundly shaped my first research attempt. In the Masters project I identified a seemingly unjust social process which I set out (possibly naively) to do something about.

### **Masters research**

My Masters research was an examination of the Invercargill school closure process. I proposed that the Invercargill school closures process was an example of a social game, and inevitably at the end of the process there were winners and losers. Winning or losing this social game depended on the skill sets of the players and also the adherence to the rules of the game. The social game that was being played was writing submissions to keep schools open. The winners were those that at the end of the submission process kept their schools open, the losers were those whose schools were closed. In this example, the powerful group were the higher decile schools, those parents with arguably greater social capital and who bought into the neoliberal discourses, were kept open. The powerless, the lower decile schools, those parents with arguably less social capital, and who did not buy into the neoliberal discourses were closed. Thus in doing so reproduced the hegemonical nature of the neoliberal discourse because the outcomes continued to privilege the powerful.

In reflection, on finishing the Masters degree, in terms of the dual roles I propose as a researcher, it was clear that it was simple to treat the theory, to fulfil my obligations to the Academy, and to theorise about a particular social game. However I had great difficulty in fulfilling my obligations to the community that I was involved with. I could highlight these ambiguities and explain that their schools were closed because of a social climate that privileges neoliberal discourses, however I was unable to do anything about the glaring injustices of the school closure process. Furthermore, I tried unsuccessfully to disseminate the results of the research to schools and Boards of Trustees around New Zealand. I felt dissatisfied with the research outcomes and the lack of linkages between theories to practice. Thus, for future research I wanted to undertake a project that would allow me to fulfil these obligations.

### **Doctoral research**

The opportunity arose for me to join a research team at the University of Otago called *Te Tiaki Mahinga Kai* (TMK). TMK "is a national network of tangata kaitiaki/tiaki, kaumatua, environmental managers, and researchers formed to improve management of mātaaitai (local reserve), taiāpure (local fishery), and rāhui (temporary area closure) throughout Aotearoa" (Te Tiaki Mahinga Kai, 2008, paragraph 2). The vision of TMK is for the "sustained enhancement of the cultural, economic, social and environmental well being of Māori and New Zealand as a whole through the application of matauranga and science associated with mahinga kai to modern customary fisheries practices" (Moller & Kirikiri, 2007).

This group aligned with my views of dual obligations of researchers and my subject interests.

With regard to the first obligation, to treat the theory, in terms of customary fisheries processes, I propose that applying for a customary fisheries area is an example of a social game. There are rules to this game that are determined by the government. There are also various skill sets that the players can draw on in this social game. Again, inevitably there will be winners and there will be losers. The winners are those that have their fishery approved. However, it is interesting to point out that in order to win this social game, tangata whenua must buy into government discourse to do so. Herein lies some of the ambiguities, as this government discourse is at odds ideologically with an indigenous perspective (Jackson, 2008). In fact, by buying into this government discourse lends further to the hegemonical nature of that discourse and thus arguably adds to the control of the powerless (Māori) by the powerful (government).

Also, I am working closely with a local community in East Otago, Karitane, where the Kati Huirapa ki Puketeraki hapu of Ngai Tahu is centred. I am working with the taiāpure management committee which has 8 members, four iwi representatives and four community members. After a wait of approximately seven years, the taiāpure committee successfully had their customary fisheries area gazetted (Jackson, 2008). There are a number of ethical dilemmas that arise when working with communities. To further discuss these dilemmas I use Smith's (1999) key questions that she proposes about engaging with indigenous communities.

### **Ethical practices of researchers working within Indigenous communities**

The critical questions Smith (1999) outlines for any researcher when engaging with indigenous communities relate to ownership of the research: "Whose research is it? Who owns it?" The methodology of the research: "Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?" And most importantly, for the purpose of this paper, questions pertaining to the winners and losers of the research process/product: "Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it?" (Smith, 1999, p. 10). Each of these questions will be addressed in the following sections with a discussion of the outcomes of this doctoral research process and the product for myself, the research group, TMK, and the communities I am engaging with.

#### ***Ownership***

First, it is essential to acknowledge that the research forms the study for my doctoral degree at the University of Otago. In this sense the research is partly mine, because in completing the project I am fulfilling the requirements for the degree. With regard to the ownership of the research, I will own the document that will be produced, that is, the final, physical thesis. I am also bound to University of Otago intellectual property agreements. As previously mentioned, I am a member of a collaborative research group, TMK, therefore I need to acknowledge that other researchers will have access to some of the information obtained throughout the research process. The research also belongs to the local community that I am working with. For example, if there are any parts of the thesis the community does not want to be included, it will not be included. In this way, I am guided very strongly by the directions of the community. The point here is that in no way do I own the knowledge that is being discussed, unless they are my own thoughts.

#### ***Methodological issues***

When undertaking research with communities, consideration must be given to methodological issues such as questions about who has framed the project, who will be carrying out the research and what the intended outcomes are (and who decides) need to be addressed. I am affiliated as a student to TMK so my doctoral project is situated within their broader aims and vision (see [www.mahing kai.org](http://www.mahing kai.org)). However my research has also been shaped by community needs. The project was borne out of a TMK hui and the initial origin of the research was from people at this hui where specific research priorities were made, and this research was one of

them. Also, prior to undertaking the doctorate, I discussed with the taiāpure committee some of the research ideas I had, and it emerged quite organically from there. I am in constant contact with the taiāpure committee and attend their monthly committee meetings, where I report back about the research and any other work we are doing that may impact on the taiāpure, and also if there is anything that I can lend expertise to. Subsequently, the design of the research questions has been a collaborative process between myself, my supervisors and with input from community.

Methodologically the research will primarily be carried out and written up by me. However because my project falls under one of my supervisors Dr. Phillipa Pehi's Postdoctoral Fellowship with TMK, ('Ka ora te whenua, Ka ora te tangata': If the land is well, so too are the people), we have been interviewing participants together. In terms of disseminating the results at this stage there are a number of foreseeable forums, I will present the work at conferences and also in journal publications. I will also give departmental seminars as required. TMK has it's own hui, so I will present the results at this forum as a seminar. There is also a magazine called 'Kai Korero', which TMK publishes, where I can write informal articles about the research. I also continually update the community at the monthly meetings about my project. At the conclusion of the project I will present the results in a way the community wants, whether this is a brief seminar or a short documentary for example. There will also be possibilities for writing papers with Dr. Pehi and with members of the community.

### ***Winners and losers?***

As argued throughout this paper, the process of such research is a social game, and potentially results in an imbalance in terms of who might 'win' from the research. Therefore, asking whose interests the research serves and identifying the potential winners and losers is an essential component of ethical practice. There are a number of people and groups that I hope will benefit from my doctoral research. The primary aims of this research were borne out of a TMK hui, where there were a number of requests for research made, one of which was for information about the strengths and weaknesses of the taiāpure process and how this knowledge can help future area success. TMK will benefit from this research because it will add to the strength of the project and hopefully aid in promoting its aims and visions.

While the research certainly serves the interests of those people who are aligned with TMK, the interests of the local community are also being served. When discussing the project with the community, there have been a number of comments made about the need for there to be education of the community and people coming into the area about the taiāpure. The community will benefit directly from the research because it will give a greater understanding of their taiāpure as well as the local area. It can be used as an educational and information tool for their taiāpure management committee.

The project also hopes to reach, and therefore potentially benefit, both the research community and more broadly other Māori communities in New Zealand. Researchers interested in customary fisheries within New Zealand, Māori health and well being, indigenous knowledge, sustainable futures will also benefit from this research. It will also provide information for future areas wanting to establish customary fisheries within New Zealand. It will help to promote further strategies for improving iwi/hapu/whanau health and well being development.

However as part of ethical practice, I see that a key point of reflection is that this research also serves my own interests in the form of completing a doctorate. Personally, I will benefit from this research because I will gain a doctoral degree and skills that are associated with this degree such as; writing, reading, literature reviewing, engaging with community, knowledge of the fisheries, indigenous and Māori issues for example. This is one of the contradictions of community-based research. That is, even when the community is at the heart of the enquiry

and the researchers have the best of intentions, ultimately the researcher still benefits. Therefore I think it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to make their assumptions, motivations and practices clear. In doing so, the nature of the research 'game' is made more transparent and the power relationships between researcher and researched may potentially become more equal.

## Conclusion

Epistemologically, I am informed by critical theories and Gramsci's notion of hegemony. This means I am interested in challenging the status quo in social games, highlighting regimes of power between the winners and losers, between the powerful and powerless, between the dominant and the dominated. The purpose of this paper was to highlight that even when underpinned by a socially critical epistemology and informed by critical theory, research is still a process which produces winners and losers. Most often it is the researchers that are the winners because they are equipped with certain skill sets that allow them to engage in the production and dissemination of knowledge within the Academy. While to maintain our position within the Academy we may at times have to treat the theory we must also challenge the social game of research. However it is not enough to merely critique the research process as being potentially disempowering to communities. We must produce research that is at least as beneficial to the community we are working with as it is to the researcher. We must actually move outside our 'Ivory Towers' and engage with the very world it is that we are critiquing, in meaningful ways. I hope that during my doctoral research that I can fulfil this obligation.

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