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Worlds Turned Upside Down:
inclusionary research in Australia

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The 'Inclusionary Geographies' panel was briefed to consider how projects we've been involved with 'welcome Difference' into our discipline. I initially considered talking about efforts at my university to open new pathways for indigenous participation in tertiary studies. [1] On reflection, however, I would rather discuss how we might pursue inclusionary geographies through research. In fact, I want to turn the opening question on its head and consider how we might approach research differently to reconstruct our discipline and its relationship with 'Difference'. In particular I want to explore the requirements for decolonising geography.

Starting points

One of my starting points as a young geographer was privileged to be exposed to the idea of 'Geographical Expeditions' not only in a remote literature but also more directly through the work of Ron Horvath (eg Horvath 1971), who came to Australia as something of a refugee from the institutional backlash against the Geographical Expeditions' efforts to forge inclusionary geographies in the 1960s. When I came across David Harvey's plea for an 'applied peoples' geography' (Harvey 1984) I found a label for what I was doing. Similarly, I needed no persuading to accept Doreen Massey's argument that 'geography matters' (Massey 1984).

But the academy is a major element in the construction of power and privilege. Academic institutions harness well-intentioned efforts to their own purposes. Indeed, coopting dissent, allowing a small space for difference while reinforcing the *status quo* of privilege is a defining characteristic of the liberal academy. The task of harnessing the opportunities provided by this discursive space in pursuing the core values of social justice, economic equity, ecological sustainability and the acceptance of cultural diversity has been a central element in my projects for inclusionary geographies.

For most of my professional life, I have 'studied up' (Nader 1984), working with Aboriginal people in Australia towards an effective critique of the mechanisms of indigenous marginalisation. Most of my research is framed within the Aboriginal domain in Australia, although I have generally been involved in analysis of dominant Australian cultures and institutions for Aboriginal people,

[1] In 1999 I received a national teaching award with a substantial cash prize (Howitt 2000). Most of the money was allocated to developing the 'Indigenous Pathways Program' at Macquarie University. I have also been involved in a wonderful inclusionary program for indigenous students, the Advanced Diploma in Community Management. This program is in its tenth year, and has provided access to University education for several hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indeed, one of the program's graduates is currently completing her Masters under my supervision at the moment, and several more are studying in our mainstream geography programs. Programs such as the ADCM help to make the considerable resources of the University more accessible to indigenous peoples. By themselves, however, they are not enough.

rather than ‘studying Aborigines’. This puts much of my work somewhat outside the conventional frame of ‘Aboriginal studies’ in Australia.

In its colonial mode, ‘cross-cultural’ research treated indigenous Australians as a field, and rendered Australia’s complex cultural landscapes as empty spaces awaiting realization through colonial discovery and possession[2]. Despite the Australian government’s efforts to defend, disguise and excuse colonial (and more recent) policies that have been labelled genocidal[3], Australia is currently facing powerful critique of the notion of innocent good intention that would defend research done with good intent, but with racist consequences. The role of scientific research in the legacy of stolen generations of Aboriginal families whose racialised misfortune was underpinned by the work of anthropologists, geographers and missionaries has been under renewed scrutiny recently in Phil Noyes’ recent film *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Questioning the dominant models of research

Colonial models

For decades, Aboriginal people have rejected the unethical nature of most university-based research involving indigenous peoples in Australia. A working definition of typical research under colonial conditions in Australia was an incomprehensible process that would take information away without permission or explanation. The structural relationships forged between universities and Aboriginal people have been hard to dislodge. The absence of ethical standards in colonial institutions exposed Aboriginal peoples to much dubious and destructive research. It also habituated many disciplines to an assumption that research was done ‘on’ rather than ‘with’ or ‘for’ indigenous Australians.

Postcolonial models

The emergence of the indigenous rights movement in Australia in the 1960s encouraged postcolonial approaches to research in which researchers became advocates of indigenous concerns. While this unsettled colonial models, postcolonial approaches did not overcome the legacy of colonial research practices. Although there was a conscious effort to return information to communities[4], much of that work was poorly targeted because the information was inaccessible to its intended indigenous audiences because of low literacy levels (amongst many reasons).

Deep colonizing in the postcolonial mode

For me, the ‘A-ha moment’ that unsettled my own naïve version of this advocacy geography[5] in remote northern Australia came in trying to present my PhD research on transnational mining company strategies. As part of a ecumenical effort by the Catholic and Uniting Churches in Australia, my research became the raw material for an interesting shareholder and community education campaign. We wrote songs, prepared controlled vocabulary readers for adult education, presented a wall chart, radio plays, a comic book and published a book. Drawing on liberation theology, Freirean education philosophy, outstanding artistic talents (not mine!) and barefoot geography, we set about making basic information available to Aboriginal people facing increased intrusions onto their lands from mining companies. I realised in this process that no

2 Sue Jackson and I discuss the way in which geography as a discipline in Australian colonial projects (Howitt & Jackson 1998).

3 See eg Reynolds, 2001 and Tatz, 1999.

4 Here I should remind you that the term ‘community’ is highly problematic in the context of indigenous Australia because Aboriginal ‘communities’ in many parts of Australia are more reflective of government and missionary impositions than indigenous self-government.

5 I was influenced in my ‘advocacy’ orientation by work such as Breitbart (1972).

matter how well I wrote a PhD thesis, it was not going to make much difference on the ground in Aboriginal domains.

Turning things on their heads – taking ethics seriously

After a period as a classroom teacher, I was involved in a series of projects in the late-1980s and 1990s I was engaged in applied social research through social impact assessment studies. The focus on impact assessment led to an early recognition that methodologies that could identify and address social impacts of development projects had to be 'participatory, empowering and interventionist' (Howitt 1993).

This has led to start thinking differently about research infrastructures – community-based steering committees, increased use of interpreters and workshops for feedback rather than text-based feedback, linking research to research training for participants, including linking research processes to the evolution of negotiations in a range of social impact and native title contexts.[6]

In addition, two threads have come together to re-frame the link between research ethics, methodology and what we might call 'inclusionary' research.

Negotiated research agreements

First, developing negotiated research agreements with Aboriginal groups in different settings has reinforced the role of ethical protocols as methodological and conceptual issues. Cross-cultural negotiations about research agreements for student research we have confronted the practicalities of ontological pluralism and how its must be engaged at every point of counter-colonial research. The University requirement for ethical approval has been widely criticised as intrusive and procedural by some researchers, but in our case the University process has provided the discursive space to negotiate ethical relationships on the ground.

Let offer two examples.

One of my students, Jan Turner, is working with the Ngaanyatjarra people of central Western Australia. Jan has worked for the Ngaanyatjarra Council for ten years as a field anthropologist and could easily have used a patronizing post-colonial position to secure permission to undertake her research. She was well known and deeply trusted by the people on the ground, and her topic, the evolution of the Council's mining policy, is an issue she has worked on with people for most of her time with the Council. Yet when she commenced discussions about a PhD on this topic, it quickly became clear that few people on the ground had any clear idea of what a PhD thesis was. Thinking that we could verify their provision of 'informed consent' to the research or their individual and collection participation in it in that situation would have been laughable. We may have been able to convince our University Ethics Committee of it, but we couldn't convince ourselves.

Over time, Jan developed a reference panel from the Council and its communities to discuss, review and direct her research. She commissioned a major painting about one man's involvement in early mining in this remote region, and in talking with others about this painting, she triggered a rather dramatic response – first a series of new paintings from others, then a rapidly evolving proposal for her research to culminate in an art show about mining and its implications for the Ngaanyatjarra peoples, and a workshop in which Jan, her teachers and a small number of other 'experts' will offer a workshop after the people have discussed the paintings and their implications in their own time and space.

[6] An early discussion of these issues is found in Howitt et al 1990. O'Faircheallaigh (1996a, 1996b) provides an account of further development of community-controlled impact studies.

A second colleague, Dr Sandie Suchet, has recently commenced a post-doctoral research position focused on a broad project on Cape York Peninsula in far north Queensland. The project is broadly titled 'capacity building for self-determination' and aims to bring together research and training at several scales to allow Aboriginal groups to move beyond responding to the development agendas of mining companies and governments in the area, and to move towards setting up their own agendas and a self-governance agenda. In her PhD research, Sandie had emphasised the theoretical importance of 'situated engagement', arguing that this position changes the way one does both research and social action.

Scale and Levinas

Second, my long theoretical engagement with the concept of geographical scale has recently led me to the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas.[7] Levinas' consideration of difference and ethics has provided a fertile source of ideas through which to rethink the ethics of cross-cultural research. His emphasis on the face-to-faceness of the ethical domain, the need to take context (including the contexts in which meaning is socially constructed for the 'other') seriously has pushed us as a group to an increasingly coherent argument for a different kind of methodology.[8]

Towards decolonisation?

A fortnight ago, Sandie I were sitting on the banks of the Embley River at Weipa on Cape York discussing her project, and the prospects for marshalling resources to create the discursive and material spaces in which to begin challenging the expert-centred view of research. We had been asked to provide advice to the local Rio Tinto subsidiary on how to monitor implementation of a major native title agreement that had been negotiated with the support of O'Faircheallaigh's negotiations-based impact assessment methods.[9] We had agreed to a process focused on skilling up local people to report to themselves about implementation, to monitor and debate strengths and weaknesses themselves, to use 'technical experts' in specialist and training roles rather than handing over responsibility to them.

Last week, I was discussing the links between Ngaanyatjarra ontology and the mining workshop that would be the culmination of Jan's PhD while she spoke of how to organise her writing-up, with threads that would be meaningful visually, textually and culturally to Ngaanyatjarra people as well as academic examiners.

In the process, I think we are outlining a different way of research that opens our discipline to difference and diversity, and in the process, offers a path to decolonising the discursive spaces and communities we nurture in our work.

I have long considered the links between intellectual nourishment and the construction of critical engagements a central element of academic responsibility.[10] I have never limited this sort of engagement to the classroom, and have found it difficult to discipline my work to a neat divide between teaching and research. Both activities are about the development and application of ideas, and the engagement with the production of meaning, power and privilege. In the service of privilege and power, both have the power to turn upside down the taken-for-granted world of those whose inclusion in our work this panel is meant to address.

In my way of seeing things, we need to tackle the deep colonising that so often accompanies well-intentioned post-colonial research, and to engage in the difficult work of decolonising our research. This needs to be done methodologically, conceptually, ethically, epistemologically and

[7] Eg. Howitt (2002).
[8] Eg Levinas 1969, 1987
[9] See eg O'Faircheallaigh 1996a, 1996b.
[10] Eg Macquarie Human Geography Group (2001), Howitt (2001).

procedurally. Rather than disciplining our research to conform to the procedural ethics of the University, we need to discipline the university processes to engage with the ethics of cross-cultural research by taking seriously questions of skills transfers, intellectual property rights of research participants, and the social responsibilities that go with the work of producing and using ideas.

Situating inclusionary research

If the colonial research model was about taking information away from indigenous groups, and the postcolonial model was focused on providing information back to them, what might characterise decolonising research? Certainly there are more and less appropriate research methods, but this is not a question of doing the same sort of research in more inclusionary ways. I want to turn things much more on their heads than that. What we need to be moving towards is the process of research methods that draw expertise, ideas and skills into communities of Difference. We need processes that draw the academy off campus and into the social settings in which power and privilege is exercised to the material disadvantage of 'others' – not because we are do-gooder saviours, but because it is in those discursive and material spaces that we might find we can nourish the sort of discipline that 'others' might find useful; that others might welcome.

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