

## Enacting an Indigenist Anthropology: Diversity and Decolonising the Discipline.

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### Abstract

My doctoral thesis focused on a national epidemiological survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing in Australia. I occupied many roles during my study and fieldwork and adapted the practice of my anthropology to fulfil both the goals of my research and my socio-cultural responsibilities as an Aboriginal Australian. Being able to conceptualise one's diversity and being reflexive in anthropological practice is necessary for researchers undertaking decolonising research in particular. The necessity of this process is not often taught at an institutional level, reflecting (and perpetuating) the lack of diversity within the Academy and the enduring power imbalances between researchers and the Indigenous communities with whom they conduct research. This paper is organised around four principles which are characteristics of a decolonising research model from an Indigenous standpoint — Resistance, Reflexivity, Relationality, and Respect. Through these principles I describe how I enacted an 'Indigenist anthropology' which enabled me to be diverse and work towards decolonising the discipline from within the Academy. What this paper highlights is the need for research for, with, and by Indigenous academics, and the need for allies in the Academy who recognise the importance of decolonisation and diversity within anthropology.

**Keywords:** Indigeneity; decolonisation; reflexivity; hybridity; strengths-based.

### Introduction

As an Aboriginal Australian, entering the world of anthropology was a baptism of fire. Understanding the complexities and nuances of such a vast academic field will be the work of a lifetime. But doing so as a member of one of the most studied populations in the world has been like taking up the micro (and macro) scope of anthropology and having it constantly, and invasively, turned upon oneself. And yet, having just finished my doctorate, I still look forward to pursuing an anthropological career. Rather than turning my back on the discipline which has for so long disciplined me I have decided to make sense of it by using my Indigeneity — the lived experience of being an Indigenous person — as a foundational epistemology. In doing so I believe that it is not only possible to 'Indigenise' anthropology, but the logical and inevitable outcome of being who I am and doing what I do. For me, diversity is defined by and inextricably linked with decolonising work. This work involves identifying hegemonic and discriminatory discourses, histories, and disciplinary norms, and challenging them by undertaking anthropology which acknowledges subjectivity and privileges the perspectives of those who have traditionally been *othered* by it. By becoming an anthropologist, I implicitly and explicitly generate diversity within the field of anthropology.

Anthropological methodologies and methods have long been criticised by Indigenous peoples. Cecil King, who is Odawa from the Wikwemikong First Nation and retired Professor Emeritus of Queens University, wrote, "We have been observed, noted, taped, and videoed. Our behaviours have been recorded in every possible way known to Western science, and I suppose we could learn to live with this if we had not become imprisoned in the anthropologists' words" (King, 1997, reprinted in Robben & Sluka, 2012: 207). King goes on to describe the ways in which anthropological terms have re-defined Indigenous lived experiences within Western constructs:

Anthropological terms make us and our people invisible. The real people and the real problems disappear under the new rhetoric. Indian, Métis, and Inuit problems defined incorrectly lead to inappropriate solutions, irrelevant programs, and the reinforcement of the status quo. (King, 1997, in Robben & Sluka, 2012: 208)

Western constructions of Indigenous realities, truths, and knowledges have had a profound impact on Indigenous communities and can serve to perpetuate harmful norms and colonial agendas. Knowing this, I wanted to re-examine anthropological norms used in my practice to more effectively decolonise my research. My doctoral thesis ethnographically investigated how culture as a qualitative concept may be transformed to produce cultural determinants of health in epidemiological research. It followed the development of the first national survey in Australia to quantify the relationship between culture, health, and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians — the *Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing* (henceforth, the Mayi Kuwayu Study) (see [www.mkstudy.com.au](http://www.mkstudy.com.au)). My thesis explored the influence various social, political, and historical factors had on the development of the Mayi Kuwayu Study's methodology and survey structure from the perspectives of its researchers and key stakeholders. Unlike other national health surveys, the Mayi Kuwayu Study is led, governed, and owned by its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. One of the major findings of my thesis was that Indigeneity is a form of expertise which can be embedded within an epidemiological project and shape its research processes.

In this paper I outline the underlying issues present in anthropology which I have needed to confront in order to practice what I refer to as an 'Indigenist anthropology' (after Rigney, 1999). Lester-Irabinna Rigney, a descendant of the Narungga, Kaurna, and Ngarrindjeri peoples of South Australia and Professor of Education at the University of South Australia, argued that "Indigenist research is research by Indigenous Australians whose primary informants are Indigenous Australians and whose goals are to serve and inform the Indigenous struggle for self-determination" (Rigney, 1999: 118). According to Rigney (1999: 116), Indigenist research is informed by three key principles:

- Resistance against oppression of Indigenous Australian perspectives
- Political integrity, and the undertaking of research by Indigenous Australians
- The privileging of Indigenous voices in the writing up of research

The complexity of my positionality within the Academy has been brought into focus by undertaking Indigenist research as an anthropologist. In seeking to understand how this positionality may be harnessed, I have been guided by the ways in which Indigenous paradigms of research operate. I explored the epistemological foundations created by trailblazers such as Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Beatrice Medicine, Margaret Kovach, and others, as examples of Indigenous paradigms. To give an introduction into how I have (re)positioned my Indigeneity as Indigenist anthropology, this paper has been organised around four principles — Resistance, Reflexivity, Relationality and Respect — which reflect these foundations. I do not claim that this overview is comprehensive. I offer it simply as a potential starting point for those, like me, who seek ways to be diverse within the Academy.

## **Resistance**

Anthropology as a discipline problematises the world in which people live. The complexities of what constitutes anthropological knowledge have been extensively debated since the 1980s through the postmodern movement (for examples, see Clifford, 1983; Freeman, 1983). This movement, also known as the 'postmodern turn' across the social sciences (Seidman, 1994), occurred in anthropology as a result of increasing critiques about the authority of anthropologists to represent non-Western peoples and methodologies (Clifford, 1983). Although the discipline has always been diverse in its practices, the legacy of past research continues to negatively impact on the lives of Indigenous peoples today. The history of anthropology's influence on Indigenous peoples has been discussed in several publications by Indigenous academics (for examples, see Kovach, 2009; Medicine, 2001; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 1999).

The seminal work *Decolonizing methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a Māori academic from the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou iwi and Professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Waikato, directly criticised the work of anthropology, which she argued "made the study of us into 'their' science" (Smith, 1999: 11). She wrote:

The ethnographic 'gaze' of anthropology has collected, classified and represented other cultures to the extent that anthropologists are often the academics popularly perceived by the indigenous world as the epitome of all that is bad with academics. (Smith, 1999: 66-67)

In the early days of anthropology as a discipline, the anthropologist was thought to be in the privileged position of 'outsider' in the field, who would be able to objectively engage with participants in the field without becoming

‘part of the field’ (Moore, 2012: 87). The ethnographic writing of the anthropologist’s observations of what occurred during their time in the field formed the basis of their contributions to the Academy and professional reputation (and still does). As American anthropologist James Clifford (1983: 120) stated, “ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority”. Therefore, anthropologists and their ‘knowledge’ should never be considered value-neutral (Clifford, 1983; D’Amico-Samuels, 2010; Davies, 2008; King, 1997; Medicine, 2001; Smith, 1999; Tedlock, 1991; Wagner, 2016).

While many modern anthropologists would no longer consider their research to be objective in this way, this history and its underlying assumptions continue to negatively impact Indigenous communities. The representation of Indigenous peoples in historical anthropological writing has led to the construction of an ‘ethnographic present’ which casts Indigenous peoples “in a stilted, static stance” (Medicine, 2001: 290). Reflecting on research in the twentieth century, Margaret Kovach, a Plains Cree and Saulteaux academic and Associate Professor with the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, argued that:

ethnographical research design was employed as qualitative ‘objective’ studies of the ‘other’... These early qualitative studies were responsible for extractive research approaches that left those they studied disenfranchised from the knowledge they shared. (Kovach, 2009: 27)

This process of *othering* and the lack of attribution for the intellectual property of Indigenous participants in research remains a very real concern for communities who are approached by anthropologists and other researchers today. In Australia, this legacy has generated a “deficit discourse” which permeates contemporary social science research (Fforde et al., 2013). The deficit discourse has been defined as,

a mode of thinking, identifiable in language use, that frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and disempowerment... such a discourse adheres to models of identity still embedded within the race paradigm, and is interwoven with notions of ‘authenticity’, commonly expressed by language about who is a ‘real Aborigine’ and who, in deficit comparison, is not. (Fforde et al., 2013: 162)

Speaking from my experience in Australia and the UK, when Indigenous individuals move outside these bounded spaces of existence they lose their authenticity as being truly ‘Indigenous’ in the eyes of non-Indigenous people. Individuals who don’t look or act stereotypically ‘Indigenous’ are often questioned about their identity (Paradies, 2006). Yin Paradies, an Aboriginal-Asian-Anglo Australian and Chair in Race Relations and Indigenous Knowledges and Culture Coordinator at Deakin University, wrote an account of this identity conflict in Australia using his own Indigeneity as an example:

Due, in large part, to my grandmother being a member of the Stolen Generations, I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity, I have little contact with my extended family, and the majority of my friends are non-Indigenous. Also due to this same history, I am a middle-class, highly educated professional working in the field of Indigenous research. As such I am frequently interpellated as Indigenous and called upon to deploy my Indigeneity in a professional context, while at the same I am labelled by some as an inauthentic ‘nine-to-five black’<sup>i</sup> or a ‘coconut’<sup>ii</sup>, who has stolen the place of a ‘real Aborigine’<sup>iii</sup>. (Paradies, 2006: 358)

As Paradies described, this deficit discourse also stains the halls of the Academy. By existing as an Indigenous person within the Academy, our authenticity — in being either a ‘real Aborigine’ or as an academic capable of ‘objective’ work — is questioned and it often falls to us to legitimise or justify our presence in these spaces. This is an example of the Academy’s opposition to diversity. As much as anthropology reproduces itself (Clifford 1997: 197), so does the Academy, invested as it is in legitimising certain kinds of knowledge, and knowledge bearers, above others.

I have been fortunate that I have had supportive mentors (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) within the Academy in Australia<sup>iv</sup> and the UK who have acknowledged my Indigeneity, encouraged my curiosity, and made me feel as though I belonged and deserved to be there. In this way, my diversity was facilitated by those around me, who, with their institutional authority, transferred some part of this power to me. I have thus chosen to use this power as a form of resistance to discover how I, as an Indigenous person and academic, can enact diversity in anthropology.

## **Reflexivity**

Indigenous paradigms of research require a ‘critical reflexivity’ (Herising, 2005: 136). As a form of self-reflection, reflexivity requires researchers to be aware of their positionality in their research and is an ability that is argued to be central to good social science inquiry (Dahms, 2008). The concept of reflexivity is well-established in anthropology (see Davies, 2008, for a comprehensive discussion). Here we can see how an Indigenist research model may work alongside anthropological practice, through a process of acknowledging why and how research has been conducted, and in the writing of ethnography to expand on it.

In the early stages of my doctoral studies I directed a significant amount of intellectual and emotional effort towards understanding what my place as an Indigenous person could be in the Academy. Through this process it became clear that my positionality did not fit neatly into traditional anthropological conceptions of insider-outsider research. The ‘subject’ of my anthropology, the Mayi Kuwayu Study, was housed at my undergraduate university in my hometown of Canberra, where I had lived for 24 years prior to pursuing my graduate degrees in the UK. The majority of my ethnographic work involved interviewing and observing other researchers, including epidemiologists and public health experts, many of whom were also Indigenous. And yet, my research was being undertaken from an anthropological perspective — a field which my participants were aware of but largely unfamiliar with. The legacy of anthropology, then, was one I bore alone in the field. Further, much of my ethnographic writing was undertaken in the UK, outside the context of my subject, and was a place that offered me some perspective and distance from many of the issues I was writing about.

Insider-outsider research has been widely critiqued in the literature for its oversimplification of researcher identities and interactions (for examples, see Medicine, 2001; Narayan, 1993; Nelson, 1996). A common theme across these texts is experiences of hybridity or multiplexes of identity which come into play for ‘insider’ anthropologists working with participants at ‘home’. Beatrice Medicine, descendant of the Sicasu and Minneconjou bands of the Lakota Nation and anthropologist, discussed the complexities of being an Indigenous person and doing anthropology in her book *Learning to be an anthropologist and remaining “native”* (2001). She wrote, “The ambiguities inherent in the two roles of being an ‘anthro’ while at the same time remaining a ‘Native’ need amplification. They speak to the very heart of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ anthropology” (Medicine, 2001: 3). In her book Medicine went into detail about how her Indigenous identity impacted on her role as an anthropologist (and vice versa). She emphasised the importance of analysing anthropological ‘truths’, and the influence that the Indigeneity of the researcher has on creating new ways of conceptualising Indigenous lived experiences.

This suggests that we should not distinguish between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in anthropology, as all researchers, whether in the natural or social sciences, are integrated into their research (Davies, 2008: 3). Researchers are both insiders *and* outsiders, not on a spectrum but within a dynamic web of relations (Narayan, 1993: 671). Undertaking this approach through my research aligns with what Indian-born American anthropologist Kirin Narayan called “enacting hybridity” (Narayan, 1993: 681). Drawing on the work of other authors, Narayan breaks the term down to explain that ‘enacting’ means that when the researcher relates their experiences through text it embodies theory, and that ‘hybridity’ represents the inclusion of both the personal and professional identities of the author into their writing. Therefore, in the writing of my anthropology I endeavoured to make evident the presence of my identities in the text, as well as the identities of my participants (see below).

## **Relationality**

One of the key aspects of an Indigenous paradigm is that knowledge is regarded as relational, or collectively owned by all, rather than the property of an individual researcher (Wilson, 2001: 176). In acknowledging this, researchers must consider their relational accountability to people, places, and others when conducting research (Wilson, 2001: 177). Kovach expanded on this concept when she wrote:

An indicator of a relational approach in research can be found within process and content...Indicators that this holistic epistemology is present include explicit reference to personal preparations involving motivations, purpose, inward knowing, observations, and the variety of ways that the researcher can relate her own process undertaken in the research. Another way to assess process is to see the inclusion of story and narrative by both researcher and research participant. (Kovach, 2009: 34-35)

An Indigenist research model can therefore be relational, in so much as the research reflects the positionality of the researcher (Wilson, 2001; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Medicine, 2001). This raises issues for the traditional

one-author approach to publishing in anthropology, which tends to privilege the viewpoint of the anthropologist above the participants they co-produce knowledge with. Given the nature of my research as a doctoral project, I am required to be the sole author of my thesis as it represents my original contribution as an academic to the Academy, and thus authority within it (see *Resistance*).

Despite this institutional pressure, I maintained a relational approach by relating my research processes throughout my thesis and by including the narrative of my participants alongside my own. One method I used to achieve this was to explicitly identify my research participants, with their permission, in the text. I believe that if the contributions of participants can be explicitly attributed, the researcher becomes directly accountable to them and others in the research and writing process. To do this well I have needed to take extra measures to ensure these individuals understood how they would be identified and why. First, I transcribed all my interviews and gave these transcripts back to the participants to review and edit. Once I had received their feedback, I then began to integrate them into the thesis. Where I directly quoted interviewees, I took these quotes and the surrounding text and sought their feedback a second time to ensure that they agreed with how I had represented their voices in my work. Naming people in my thesis thus made the participants' presence clear and facilitated their contribution to collective knowledge.

## **Respect**

Kovach (2009: 35) outlined that Indigenous paradigms of research utilise the ideology of respect. The ideology of respect for Indigenous peoples goes beyond conducting ethical research in the Western sense. It touches upon Indigenous cultural concepts which according to Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaq academic from the Potlotek First Nations and Professor Emerita at the University of Saskatchewan, includes the responsibility to ensure Indigenous knowledges are protected, and responsibility to the Indigenous collective you work with in the production of research (Battiste, 2007). This collective responsibility means conducting yourself in a way that your Indigenous family and ancestors would recognise and approve of, and when enacted represents a continuation of your cultural connection to them:

we can only go so far before we see a face — our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver, our brother hunting elk for the feast, our little ones in foster care — and hear a voice whispering, 'Are you helping us?'.  
(Kovach, 2005: 31)

My Aboriginal identity motivated me to undertake this research and acted as a guide for navigating the representation of my participants within the thesis. This has been a liberating process for me and I have taken it as an opportunity to learn more about myself as an Indigenous person in the world, and as a chance to use my research to benefit other Indigenous people. However, it has been a struggle at times to maintain emotional distance from my work. Researching Indigenous issues involves wading through decades of literature which makes salient the deficit discourse which has positioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and therefore myself, as second-class citizens in Australia. The personal impact of this cannot be understated, and it is in challenging this discourse and researching how others do so that I am able to regain my agency.

This agency, which I define as the ability to embrace my identity through my work, also relates to my ability as an individual to contribute towards the Indigenous collective and practice respect. These are key aspects of diversity to my mind. If an academic institution or a discipline is to support diversity, it must also respectfully support individual and collective self-expression. At times, this may challenge traditionally accepted forms of knowledge, including its collection and dissemination. From an Indigenous standpoint this is part and parcel of the decolonisation of the Academy.

Drawing from the approaches outlined above, I chose to use a *strengths-based* research agenda in my thesis which aimed to highlight the positive impact that Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and ways of being have on Indigenous lives (see Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty et al., 2018). This agenda does not try to deny the realities of Indigenous experiences of disadvantage but strives to disrupt dialogues which focus on narratives of failure and the inferiority of Indigenous individuals and communities (Fogarty et al., 2018: vi). Combining four principles from Indigenous research paradigms together with a strengths-based approach in my work may therefore be described as Indigenist anthropology.

## Final reflections

My complex positionality as an Indigenous person, an anthropologist, and an insider/outsider enabled me to examine how diversity might be integrated within anthropological practice by addressing some of the methodological issues in both 'being' and 'doing' research. It has been my aim that my research contributes to an increasingly dynamic, reflexive branch of modern anthropological enquiry undertaken by, with, and for Indigenous peoples which I refer to as Indigenist anthropology. I suggest that for the Academy and for anthropology to support diversity it must also practice Resistance, Reflexivity, Relationality, and Respect. As more people like me seek to know themselves and others through the medium of anthropology, we will need to be supported by allies in the Academy for us to take back control over how the world knows us now and for the future.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> "A term used to indicate an Indigenous person who does not mix with other Indigenous people outside the work context" (Oxenham et al., 1999: 112, as described in Paradies, 2006: 364).

<sup>ii</sup> "A derogatory label that indicates a person is Black on the outside (i.e. skin colour or superficial behaviour) but White on the inside (i.e. personality, beliefs, etc.)" (Dudgeon and Oxenham, 1989, as described in Paradies, 2006: 364).

<sup>iii</sup> Paradies 2005.

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