# Research Engagement with Māori Communities

**Joanna Kidman**

**Abstract:** In 2006, I was awarded a National Research Fellowship by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, the National Institute for Research Excellence for Māori Development and Advancement hosted by Auckland University. The purpose was to explore the ways in which collaborative research relationships with Māori communities can be effectively and appropriately developed. The working hypothesis was that the epistemological dimensions of academic inquiry are broadened when indigenous peoples are directly engaged in research processes which affect their communities. This brief note outlines the theoretical and methodological processes through which the monograph, *Engaging with Māori Communities: An Exploration of Some Tensions in the Mediation of Social Sciences Research*, was developed (Kidman, 2007).

**Keywords:** collaborative research engagement; Māori communities; social science

Collaborations between academic researchers and indigenous communities often involve lengthy and complicated negotiations. When I was awarded a National Research Fellowship by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga in 2006, I decided to explore the ways in which these kinds of research collaborations could be developed effectively. There were two potential courses of action in planning a project of this nature. One option was to follow my heart as a Māori sociologist and go directly to a range of hapū and iwi-based communities and work alongside them to identify their priorities for social research initiatives and perhaps further develop a set of guiding principles for social researchers. The second option was to analyse the institutional and epistemological environments that social researchers work within. The first preference is always to work with communities, but after discussions with mentors at Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, and once I had begun to study more closely at the literature in this field, the second option was agreed upon—that is, to explore tensions in the structure of academic social research itself. Thus, we decided that the question of research engagement with Māori communities would be approached by problematising academic research establishments and environments. This posed an immediate dilemma because Linda Smith (1999) had already explored these matters thoroughly in her book *Decolonising Methodologies*. However it was of particular interest to see what has happened in the ensuing years and whether there has been significant change in the way in which the academy promotes research engagement with Māori.

There is a growing body of international literature about social sciences research engagement with indigenous communities, although much of it is comprised of descriptive accounts of researchers' field experiences which, while interesting, do not necessarily provide helpful guidance for future researchers beyond the vague insistence that indigenous research partners should be treated with respect. There are relatively few researchers who actively theorise the institutional, political, and conceptual frameworks surrounding the research engagement process with indigenous communities. Moreover, most scholarly publications are written by non-indigenous researchers who have had positive experiences in their research communities. There is an emerging literature by native researchers but at present their works appear less frequently in the international journals.

In reading these texts, it was apparent that, with one or two notable exceptions, most of the academic researchers who had written about collaborative research relationships with indigenous groups had skimmed rather lightly over the structural impediments in their own institutions and disciplines which can hinder effective collaboration. Certainly, collaboration is a necessary goal for researchers who plan to engage with indigenous communities. The word conjures an agreeable image of indigenous people and researchers united in a common purpose; of building cultural alliances; and of mutually beneficial relationships based on trust and good-will. Yet academic articles devoted to the significance of 'collaborative' research with indigenous communities often seem to miss the point.

Perhaps it is the earnest conviction of writers who adopt a tone of churchy solemnity when discussing native peoples, or the laudable, but rather sappy, idealism that inflects some cross-cultural research studies which is a little unconvincing. The focus in these papers lingers on the sincerity of the researchers; the trials and difficulties *they* encountered in building a dialogue; the belief that being treated with kindness and respect by an indigenous community equates with being accepted by that community. While these studies provide a vehicle for enthusiastic researchers to debate their own scholarly integrity and commitment to social justice and race relations, the concerns and priorities of the indigenous communities seem to fade into the background.

It seems that the problem with most of these studies is that they are initiated by researchers rather than by indigenous communities. In New Zealand, the results of hapū or iwi-commissioned research are often quite different from researcher-initiated investigations. In the Treaty claims sector, for example, while the system is very far from ideal, researchers are commissioned on behalf of iwi and hapū to write historical narratives for Treaty claims. Their studies are reviewed by claimants and passed through an intensive process of scholarly appraisal before researchers themselves take the stand and give evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal. During Tribunal hearings, historians are routinely and combatively challenged by Crown lawyers, and they must therefore be able to defend their analyses under sustained questioning. In the cut and thrust of cross-examination, romantic or idealised academic perspectives do not last very long. Researcher biases are exposed and interrogated, and their interpretations of historical events are questioned, usually at considerable length. In this environment there is little room for equivocation. You have to get it right the first time.

While much has been written about the epistemological basis of academic disciplines, researcher-initiated investigations in the social sciences in New Zealand universities are not generally examined as closely nor in such an antagonistic environment. In a small country like New Zealand, we run into our critics more often, and for that reason we tend to stage our disagreements in the most refined terms; over a glass of sherry and a vol-au-vent at the conference dinner, or in hissed undertones while waiting in the library check-out queue. Our pitched battles are waged under the cover of politeness because the day might come when we are called upon to work at close quarters with our academic opponents, and for that reason academic enmities are usually (although not always) reasonably discreet.

Moreover, when we question our disciplines in the social sciences, we tend to challenge the work of disciplinary practitioners overseas, rather than mount direct attacks on local researchers in our fields. Our niceness is often insufferably monotonous, but it is also a kind of social cement in the small commons of the nation. Nevertheless a closer examination of our academic research practices here in New Zealand is important if we are genuinely committed to improving the quality of our work with Māori communities. If I had opted to focus primarily on Māori community perspectives of social research, the emphasis of the work would have been quite

different. However in problematising academic research environments, my attention turned towards non-Māori colleagues and emerging researchers in the social sciences. The arguments in the following pages are made with them in mind.

The monograph is comprised of a series of papers about the epistemological and institutional tensions which emerge when academic researchers engage with Māori communities. The argument is based on the idea that academic disciplines and institutional frameworks are structured in ways which mediate the research relationship.

In the initial stages of this work, I noticed that many social theories of community research engagement are predicated on a series of broad assumptions about the constitution of scholarly and indigenous 'communities'. For example, indigenous 'communities' are frequently theorised unproblematically as a mandated 'unity of unities', or alternatively, their very existence is problematised. These assumptions guide the mediating structures used by research organisations when attempting to form research collaborations. Where there is broad and mutual agreement about the nature of tribal and academic communities, mediating structures can lead to positive research collaborations and outcomes. However, collaboration can quickly run adrift when misunderstandings occur over scholarly and/or tribal community priorities, mandates, and needs. When this happens the kinds of mediating structures that are set in place effectively discourage constructive communication between groups.

In a chapter on mediating structures the ideas of the sociologist, Peter Berger, regarding communication between communities and institutions have been outlined and these theories are linked to a discussion about research engagement between Māori communities and universities. This discussion examines how academic ways of thinking about community, and particularly the tendency to problematise the concept, can stand in the way of establishing effective mediating structures.

The following chapter includes an exploration of the ways in which the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the current international political climate have affected the ability of academic researchers and indigenous peoples to construct responsive collaborative relationships. In the aftermath of 9/11 there have been profound losses of indigenous and academic rights and priorities, and these have had a devastating effect on the production of knowledge, especially as it relates to the needs of indigenous communities. These factors need to be taken into account when developing a research relationship.

The mediation of meaning is central to the way in which academic knowledge is produced. In this chapter, I explored how the structures of disciplinary knowledge can undermine research with Māori. Within the social sciences, there are numerous historical, theoretical and institutional silences surrounding Māori communities. As a result, local knowledge remains under-theorised and largely excluded from the intellectual life of the academy. These silences permeate the epistemological structures of academic disciplines and threaten the quality of dialogue between researchers and Māori. A brief history of those silences within the New Zealand academic context form the basis of this section of the monograph.

In the final section of the monograph I considered the work of university ethics committees in mediating the research relationship with Māori communities, with reference to the process of informed consent and concepts of 'harm' in social research. Indigenous communities around the world are mounting challenges to the primacy of university ethics committees with regard to research that is undertaken in indigenous communities and these challenges are considered in the final chapter.

The mediation of knowledge, institutional structures, disciplinary paradigms and ethical protocols underpin the nature of the research relationships between academic researchers and Māori communities. Taken on their own, each of these factors, if left unexamined, complicate the development of collaborative projects. Together, they threaten the ability of researchers and community members to work productively together. However, there is a way forward. If the nature of these mediating structures that exist within the academy can be brought to the forefront of our attention- if the dusty old silences that sit beneath our assumptions about knowledge and collaboration, can be laid bare, it is possible to find new ways of beginning and maintaining research relationships. New beginnings and sustainable, healthy research relationships with mutually beneficial outcomes are certainly worth the effort.

## References

Kidman, J. (2007). *Engaging with Māori Communities: An Exploration of Some Tensions in the Mediation of Social Sciences Research*. University of Auckland, New Zealand: Tihei Oreore Series, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga.

Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonising methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

## Author Notes

The main research project was supported by a National Research Fellowship provided through the Capability Building programme of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga. Appreciation is also extended to Professor Wally Penetito for his comments and feedback and to Emeritus Professor Les Williams and Jane Rangiwahia for their ongoing support.

Joanna Kidman is a Senior Lecturer in Education at He Pārekereke: Institute for Research and Development in Māori and Pacific Education, Victoria University of Wellington.

E-mail: Joanna.Kidman@vuw.ac.nz