

Chapter 9

Countering Epistemological Exclusion Through Critical- Ethical Research to Support Social Justice: Methodological Comparisons Between Australia and the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of neoliberalism in the west such as Australia and the UK and its insistence on impact measurement can lead researchers into an unquestioning adoption of scientific methods of measurement and data collection. We argue that if methods are not appropriate for the participants or context they are likely to reproduce existing societal inequities and positions of marginalisation and powerlessness. The theoretical position for fit-for-purpose research and evaluation tools, and specifically for social science methods is put forward theoretically and substantiated with cases drawn from diverse communities in Australia and the UK. Further, we will use autoethnography to share our experiences to argue that any research or evaluation endeavour should have as many benefits for the participants as for the researchers and wider stakeholders, a measure we argue should be the acid test for research ethics. The implications of these findings for researchers, evaluators, practitioners and policy makers are drawn out.

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INTRODUCTION

We are two seemingly culturally disparate researchers from opposite ends of the globe who are collaborating over our shared interest in doing research differently. Both of us have worked in community and education sectors and in practitioner-oriented roles. When we first met near Kaz's hometown of Keswick in Cumbria, our differences were keenly met as opportunities to learn from each other. Wicked problems (Grint, 2008) were quickly identified in our shared discomfort of dominant research paradigms that are persistently being applied in a variety of situations, which we identified as raising major ethical concerns for the communities with whom the research is being undertaken. We shared our different yet similar experiences of undertaking research in diverse (what would commonly be termed 'underprivileged') communities, realising that whilst the contexts varied, our social justice values meant that similar tensions were arising in our practices as researchers. In this chapter, we will use autoethnography to weave our experiences as researchers into the analysis of traditional research methodologies and the pervasiveness of their use in education and community-based research. We will also argue that in the age of the Anthropocene, including, valuing and validating Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing is crucial in solving wicked problems and avoiding the re-production of knowledge that is known not to contribute to social justice or change (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Autoethnography is a systematic description and analysis of personal experience that allows understanding of wider cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). We are using it here to bring our personal experiences of countering epistemological exclusion to the fore so as to inform other researchers. This method itself is often subject to epistemological exclusion, however, as Wall (2006:56) says: "the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says what I know matters". Our individual subjective experiences can be understood as individual political acts against the mighty 'traditional research' movement that may lead to wider change (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). We hope that our 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973, p. X) of our experiences and practices (Alazewski, 2006) will enable other researchers to consider how they research in a socially just way and avoid being or creating further epistemological exclusion. In using our experiences, we will offer some viable alternatives to traditional research that we will argue are more fit for purpose, ethically conscious and equally as rigorous as ways of understanding complex human issues. We will begin by introducing ourselves and contextualising this paper.

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