Decolonial Research Methods: Resisting Coloniality in Academic Knowledge Production (Webinar 2)

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Tēnā koutou katoa. Greetings everyone from Aotearoa New Zealand. I'm in a place called Wanganui. I greet your mountains and your waterways. I greet your lands and I greet your peoples, your ancestors and I greet you. It's an interesting time, isn't it, that we can meet around the world in a pandemic. And I just want to acknowledge the huge impact that I know COVID-19 has had on many communities across the world, on indigenous communities, minority communities. I know there's a huge equity issue in relation to the pandemic, that just brings out so many of the issues that we talk about, in relation to colonialism and inequalities, and inequities and society, and social injustice. So it's kind of ironic, in a sense, a pandemic has brought us together, across the oceans and across the lands, to talk about decolonizing methods or decolonial methods in this time. So I can't see you all, but I'm just so thankful that you've been able to join. I was very impressed with the numbers of people who have registered, and then seeing where you're from, you know, in the chat. It just went by so fast. But to those of you who got up really early this morning, thank you. For those of you who got up in the middle of the night, thank you. For those of you here on Aotearoa, it's good to see you, too. Some of you are in my class, but I can see that there are others. So Leon, and the network, thank you for inviting me today.

So I guess what we're talking about is methods, research methods, and in particular decolonising or decolonial research methods. And I know, you know, for many researchers, when they're thinking about decolonising methods, they really want to get right down into the method, the specifics of methods. And I'm going to tell you right now, I don't start there, because I think to talk about and think about, and put into practice decolonising methods and decolonial methods - and I'll use both those words, they have slightly different meanings, but I'll use them both - to put those into practice to implement thing is our fast kind of field of knowledge and strategies and ideas and ways of thinking, and an imagination that you need to help you in terms of the methods that you ultimately choose to have. Methods in a disciplinary sense, in an academic sense, are just so tightly connected to the way the world is viewed, to the way knowledge is viewed, to the way society and humanity is viewed. So you not should not be surprised that methods on their own are not neutral. And many of you, I know would know the very sort of famous quote about the master's tools cannot undo the master's house. And, you know, I think about that quote, a lot. My husband Graham, who's also an academic, we have big arguments about it. Because at one level, you know, some tools are neutral and can be used for multiple purposes. My argument is that many of the tools designed to colonise indigenous peoples were very specific. And they were designed specifically to destroy indigenous peoples. One example that I know those of you who are indigenous in Canada, I'm just going to forewarn you that, you know, a recent example of how powerful that tool was, was in the design of residential schools. And the fact that now, hundreds of years later, well over 100 years later, people are finding the remains of children who attended those schools. So what kind of mind designs that kind of school, and then purports to say it's about education, it's about educating indigenous peoples, as opposed to disappearing them, murdering them, destroying their language? What kind of knowledge system not only enables that to happen, but rewards itself, honours itself and is proud of the things that it's done?

So that's just one tool. Many of you from different countries, I'm sure each of you could come up with one specific tool designed by colonialism to do a specific task of destroying indigenous peoples, removing them from the land, and slaving them destroying their relationships to land, removing their people, destroying their bodies, appropriating their bodies, taking their wealth. So I can go on and on and on. Those are not neutral tools. Methods are not neutral methods. And so I think one of our tasks as educators when we're thinking about teaching new research methods, is to step way back from the method. It's not yet time to bake a cake, or to make a pie, or to make a stew. It's a time first, to think about knowledge and where knowledge comes from, to understand decolonising and decolonialality. It's really important to think about coloniality and colonising - what it does mean to colonise? And you know, I know people find that hard because it's like an abstract idea to them. But for indigenous peoples, from my people, my iwi, the communities I come from it's not an abstract idea. It's a real story. It's the story that has left us, in a sense, with these huge intergenerational issues that we are trying to address, that we are trying to rise above, that we are trying to revitalise and regenerate. So those ideas about colonialism are not abstract ideas. They're not simply about what happened 500 years ago, 600 years ago, 400 years ago, 300 years ago, 200 years ago, 100 years ago, yesterday. All right? They're not just things that happened a long time ago and then stopped. They are a continuous line of ideas and strategies that have continued to influence our lives and to disrupt our indigeneity, to get in the way of our aspirations to be self-determining peoples, to have sovereignty, to have our knowledge back, and our control, and have our lands, and our economies back and our control. So to me, these aren't distant ideas. Colonialism is not a distant idea. And decolonising is not a distant idea. So I think when you're thinking about decolonising methods, it's really important to me not to think about something you're doing which is, you know, just about addressing a distant past. It is urgent, because it's addressing a present that exists now. And as well as kind of understanding that story of colonialism, that, deep down, the way in which science has implicated colonialism, the way in which the knowledge project of modernity is implicated in colonialism, I just think that's a really fundamental understanding that you need, before you even begin to think about a research question, or what is research, before you think about research ethics and before you think about a research method.

Now, I know for some people, this could be completely overwhelming. But you know, I started my journey in this, actually thinking about methods, first and foremost, because as a graduate student, that's what you're confronted with, eh? You're confronted with reading and theory, and then the method and then your question, and you get anxious about that time - what are you going to do? And it's really, because it threw me into a sort of contradictory space, a difficult space that I started the work that ultimately became decolonising methodologies. And I do describe a little bit about that in the book, because at the time, when I was reading research methods in the social sciences, you know, reading about ethnography and participant observation, the fundamental assumption of those approaches was that you as a researcher was going to be, you know, an outsider. You're not going to be from that community. So all your preparation is about preparing you to go in. All right? To prepare you to see, to understand what it is you're seeing, to understand what it is and to have tools that help you do that. And my question then, was, what if you're not from that community? You can't pretend. Well, not in my community, if I went and pretending I was someone else they'd give me raspberries, and probably swear at me. It's not that kind of community. So what does it mean to have to read texts where the fundamental assumption is, you know, the researchers are from somewhere else, and they're coming into a community? And how do you convert that? Do you just kind of colour yourself in brown and think, "Well, I'll just do what they do but I'll just be a brown one". I found it obviously impossible, to do that kind of work. So I spent my master's degree really struggling with research methods, reading research methods, and tried to unravel where methods came from, the connection between methods and methodologies and theories. And then that grew into the connection between those and disciplines. And then that grew into, oh here's some interesting disciplines that are so grounded in colonialism, that grew out of European, sort of, what I'd call adventures on our lands. They're travellers tales, they're engineering, they're you know, sort of quest for discovery, all this kind of way in which colonialism was lauded and talked about was also, remember, about growing knowledge, growing European knowledge, expanding disciplines. And so the history of specific disciplines are also really grounded in colonialism. You know, geography is a good example. Anthropology is a good example. To me history is a good example. So many of the social sciences are there because that's my area, but I think the sciences as well, in terms of science and technology, that they too have grown out of and benefited from colonialism and be the colonisation and destruction of indigenous peoples and their lands and languages.

But I still see something as even more fundamentally important than those because the whole European and English classification system of knowledge, the categories by which we come to know, the categories, we used to sort. You know, all of you will know about binaries, about the way in which, you know, binaries simplify sort of complex ideas, but also the extent to which a binary is used to play some moral judgement on things which are seen as good, i.e. eye literacy, and things that are seen as not good, illiteracy. And then the way those binaries are used by association to portray the other, portray, you know, categories of humans who are seen as not on the right side of that binary way of looking at the world. So, I think it's really important to go in a sense to the story of knowledge, the story of disciplines, the story of the particular field that you're in, to get a sense of, you know, what a colonising knowledge system is about. And I don't want you to get depressed by that. I don't want you to get... well you can get angry by it. But in the end, I think it's really important to understand it if you intend to further this purpose of decolonising it. Understand what you're trying to decolonise and what you need to do to build a decolonising approach in your work. So that's what's really important.

But that's just one part of it. Right? Many of you can do that, and I know, be academically, you know, well suited to explore that side, to explore the story of knowledge. But there's a practice part that I think I've written about in Decolonising Methodologies, and I know many other indigenous scholars write about as well. You know, and the practice part is really about. well what kind of researcher do you want to be? What's your project? What is your purpose? How long are you going to keep that purpose? Is this a life goal? Or is this something that just gets you through the qualification? It gets you to a particular point. I think in the indigenous world, you know, indigenous scholars are very clear that our work has to connect to the survival, the survivance of indigenous peoples, and to work to support our pursuit of self-determination, sovereignty, freedom, what you might think, you know, what term you might use, that it's also a pursuit of social justice. So that makes it a really sort of clear purpose. And, and what it also means is that in our practice, the things that we have to do alongside research that help make that work. So in our practices, we have to think about ways to build our communities, to advocate for our communities, to champion our communities, to support our communities, to find ways to enhance and shine a spotlight on the awesomeness and fantastic aspects of our communities. And we kind of have to do that proactively because the dominant sort of story, the dominant narrative, in most countries that have indigenous peoples, actually, I'd say in all countries that haven't digitus peoples, is there a problem. All right? They're a problem - there's something wrong with them. And if they make a noise like we do here in Aotearoa, then, you know, a lot of that sort of addressing the problem of indigenous peoples is trying to sort of work out how to manage the risk of that, how to continue to stay in control and have power while mitigating and satisfying to a small degree the aspirations that indigenous peoples might be expressing. So, I'm going to sort of... So that practice, just to close off this part of it, is... I think I write about it in the book as being, you know, understanding what it means to be a good person, a good human, a good relation. And I know, you know, other scholars have talked about this, and the US and Canada. To my friends in Canada, you know, they have this wonderful expression, "All my relations". And it's not just an expression of humans, but it is our role in nature and the environment, and all those other entities, that we have this responsibility to be good, caring, nurturing, responsible for other entities and the environment, to be human and to be a good human being. So the practice of indigenous researchers is as important, as, you know, understanding the story of colonialism, and reading everyone is writing about decolonising methods and, you know, decolonial theory. That's one side of it, it's often the sort of pure theoretical side, but I think the practice side is equally important.

So there are a number of things that are happening that, you know, might illustrate, but I've just talked about. In Canada, at the moment, there's an interesting case where a scholar has been called out for fraud. And the fraud is of assuming an indigenous identity, claiming to be indigenous and basically occupying a very senior role in the research world, in the health research world, in Canada. It's one of a number of cases that have arisen and I know mostly of the ones in North America. But I know in other places where the appropriation of indigenous everything, is a kind of... It's like people feel they have the right to appropriate all that we are, even our identity. You know, it's bad enough colonialism ripped off, you know, most of our stuff. But then when the very identity of being indigenous, the identity that we've had to struggle for, is then appropriated by someone who's not indigenous, it's just this kind of continuing sort of trauma. And that's... You know, I find it a really kind of interesting kind of occurrence. And you think, why do we have to spend our emotional labour doing this? And the problem is because our identity is often at stake all the time, because we have to defend our identity, especially when things get bad, to stand up and be indigenous. In many parts of the world, even as I speak, that's a dangerous thing to do, to claim an identity. And then when things become, you know, a little bit more safer, but more secure, when there's resources when there's status, and to have others, you know, claim that identity as a way to gain status, you know, that is really a kind of slap in the face.

So this so what I'm trying to reinforce is within our communities, and I think it has to happen also in those communities, Leon, where you're developing decolonial methods networks and that, it has to come with this ethic of practice. You know, how do we treat each other? As scholars? How do we treat and support younger students? How do we support graduate students? How do we review each other's work in a blind review process? Do we simply replicate the bad, vicious habits of scholars, who over generations had slammed the work of black scholars, brown scholars, you name it, any scholar who is diverse in any which way? Or do we consciously practice a different kind of way of being a community of researchers? How do we develop reference lists? How do we, you know... What are our citation practices? How do we build collaborations across not just elite academic institutions, but into maybe community colleges? I work now on a tribal university in Aotearoa New Zealand, but their researchers are doing amazing work, who are not in academic institutions at all, who work often independently, or in smaller organisations. And, you know part of, I think, building a community is to really understand where the power of researchers really lies, and to use that power when you have it. To reach out and to be inclusive, to think about ways to build capacity, and smaller organisations that do have really active decolonial researchers doing awesome work - how are they included? - then to funding and then to networks where they have access to those resources. So that's the kind of second part, which is the practice part, the practice of being a decolonial researcher. And, you know, in my work, in the university system, here in Aotearoa, my work as Māori scholar, we've been very deliberate, very purposeful, about building out graduate and postgraduate students, about creating cohorts, not just in institutions but across New Zealand, you know. So one of those cohorts is known as the MAI network. It's a network of Māori doctoral students. It's been going now since the early 2000s, was designed initially by Graham Smith, who made a declaration that we were going to graduate 500 Māori with PhDs in five years, got on to the newspapers, and people thought, "Oh, how are you going to do that?". And then others thought, "Yeah, that's exactly the kind of goal that we should aim for, that we should be deliberate about these things". And that's what we set out to do. And then my role became - I became director of Māori Centre of Research Excellence - was to roll out the MAI doctoral programme across the country. And I'm really pleased to say it's still going. We've exceeded the 500. And I think the new goal is, you know, well over 2000, in terms of just purposeful building of capacity, purposeful building of researchers who we know have the skills to work with our communities and to work in the decolonising ways. So that's number two.

The third part is probably more available to, you know, some of us then to others. And that's really to help in the revitalization of indigenous knowledge, indigenous culture, indigenous research methods that we know indigenous peoples have. And the reason I say not everyone is able to do that work is you can't do it without indigenous people. You can't do it without a community there. And it's one of those areas that, as, you know, academic researchers, is very hard to admit sometimes, that you're not the person who can do that work, that you're not the one who should do that work. And even though you know, it's important, and even though you're thinking, you know, I really, you know, it's my duty to do it, I can do it, I can save them. No, because that just reinforces the problem. So that, you know, much of it is how do you then become a good academic ally, who works alongside someone indigenous? And, you know, that can be really difficult. I know, in the New Zealand context in research, especially, especially in the health research arena, Māori health researchers have been very insistent that, for those who are applying for funding, you know, that they have to step aside. If they're doing anything in the Māori health research space, and they're not Māori, they need to step aside from being the principal investigator and they need to promote someone to do that, who is indigenous and they need to work alongside them, to support them to be a leading researcher. Now, I know in a lot of countries they would find it incredibly challenging. And many senior researchers would object on all kinds of grounds that, you know, "How dare someone tell them, that they can't be the principal investigator of their own research?". Because it's, you know, theory reputation, it's their CV, it's their track record. Well, if you want to change power relations, sometimes you have to implement strategies and policies and practices that do shift people around in terms of power, that does remove power from certain researchers, and certain research methods and approaches, and does transfer that power or redistribute power to other modes. You know, that work has been undertaken in New Zealand really for the last 20-25 years in the research space, particularly in health research. You know, I began one part of my early career as a Māori health researcher and had the opportunity to serve on the New Zealand Health Research Council and chair the Māori health research committee. And a lot of the work that that committee did was to build the capacity of Māori health researchers. And, you know, there's been several iterations of that work and of that committee. But it means our Māori health research capacity at the moment, and the time of the pandemic has been, you know, absolutely brilliant. We never thought we'd get to a day when we could look to our own researchers to be providing us with the science, right? Not only with the science, but with the advocacy, because we know that they're advocating for Māori communities, whether it's around, you know, vaccination, whether it's around treatments, whether it's around priorities and ICU beds, a wide range of activities that it's taken decades to produce that kind of capacity, but we have it. So that's, you know, that's another part of decolonial and decolonising methods and approaches. It is about building towards something and is about building something better. It is about changing the way we do things often and our understandings.

So those are three broad areas that I've laid out. All right? So the first one is the academic, sort of the knowledge part, knowing the story of colonialism. The second one is building the practice, a sort of deliberate conscious practice of being a decolonial research community. And the third one is really this revitalising and bringing back and enriching and enhancing and celebrating and honouring indigenous knowledge, indigenous peoples knowledge, and also other forms of knowledge that we know have been suppressed. And bringing the research part of that through and kind of understanding how you can work with that as a researcher.

I want to drop down now. I'm conscious of the time. And now I'm going to talk about methods, particular methods. So, let's just start with a simple example. You know, an interview is an interview, is an interview. That's a simple method in the social science. And yet all of you I'm sure know that the reason you do an interview, the reason you ask someone whether you can talk to them, varies. There's a diverse range of reasons you might want to interview them. The nature of an interview, what what is expected in an interview, the kind of discourse that emerges in the interviewing, the questions that you ask in an interview, the responses that you get, and the way you interpret that interview, just numerous methodologies that help you choose that method. And the many of us who sort of, you know, experimented in that space, when there weren't that many approaches that we could... I mean, when I was studying, there was no such thing as a decolonial kind of approach to an interview. But, you know, it's the same thing as a too. It's not this innocent activity and nor are the people that you're going to interview simply subjects, or people who have no knowledge about what it is you're doing and trying to do. I mean, I think asking questions is always a position of power, if you're the one asking questions. And so I know, you know, many have developed different ways, different methods of interacting with someone. One of the most common indigenous methods used at the moment, it's around storytelling. How do you... How do you sit with someone and have them tell a story? How do you even elicit a story from someone? And what do you do with that story? When you get it? Do you even recognise it as a story? So we can if we were just filling out its form and just wanted to do it really efficiently so no one asked us will ask us any complicated questions, you know, just say we're just going to do an interview, they're going to be an hour long and we're going to ask these kinds of questions. If my students said that to me, I'd know that they have no idea what they're doing. For a start off, you try and interview a Māori person for an hour, all right, that just not possible. Six hours, three hours, 15 minutes, then a meal, and then two hours and a meal, five days. There's no such thing as interviewing someone like in-out, thank you very much. There's a diverse kind of, well, not a diverse... There's a whole cultural framework that's at play, when you think you are going to interview someone. In fact, if they do give you an hour, you've got a problem on your hands. And the problem was, why did they let me interview them for an hour? Why didn't they just talk to me? Why don't they ask questions? Why did they just say "yes, no, I don't know"? All right? So that context in which we try and build relationships, we try and kind of work beside and co-construct, for want of a better word, what it is we're seeking, I think are really important sort of tools that, you know, there are methods and research.

But there's a whole lot of other, I think, exciting methods that are emerging as people get more confident. And with the use of different media, different forms, creative practices, being able to build something together. You know in Nova research and Canada where they made baskets together, that was the method. Here in Aotearoa, you know, many of our traditional practices that we still practice have been adapted also as research practices, because we know those places are ones where people talk. All right? And that's how do you create a context in which our people talk in a relaxed and mostly natural way. I mean, they're never stupid enough to not know that all researchers in the room, but there are many contexts in which they will relax and be very open about what it is they want to share with you. I know these, you know, range of new sort of creative practices, performance practices, ideas in the postgraduate space for different ways of thinking about methods that, you know, could be wielded for sort of decolonial kind of agendas.

So I know that's just a sprinkling. In the Decolonising Methodologies third edition, which has just come out this year, I've introduced another chapter, which is called Twenty Further Projects. And I think with the 25 projects, and then the 20 further projects, it sort of gives you a sort of range of different ways you can think about research.

So I'll just end with some kind of simple statements. I think if we want to decolonise, then thinking in colonial ways, theorising in colonial ways, reading colonial texts, be really familiar with the colonial mentality, then applying colonial methods will not deliver a decolonial approach. In order to work in a decolonial way, we have to think differently about everything. We have to be clear about the kind of purpose that we want to achieve through research. To what extent can research advance the goal of decoloniality? And to what extent is there a community being established and built that can help you do that? Because nor is it a field in which, you know, the single white saviour researcher is going to cut it in a decolonial field. This is a field in which indigenous people, people of colour, people who have been marginalised collectively are going to cut it. And it's a way of disrupting established norms, the status quo, but it also has a discipline to it. You know, there's a there's an outcome that people want, and there are communities who have a view on whether we're successful or not, for who there is something really important at stake. It's our lives that's at stake. It's our soul that's at stake. It's our future that's at stake. So there's urgency to this work. I don't regard it as simply you know, one more methodology that we learn and it goes on the bookshelf. There's a genuine urgency. And so I'll stop there, Leon, and invite people to think about some questions. So thank you very much.