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Decolonising Research Practices

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Editorial

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It is an exciting time for those working with Indigenous Knowledges. Now more than ever, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars are questioning the foundations, boundaries, limitations and assumptions of Western research and creating ‘spaces’ for Indigenous philosophies, research and pedagogies to live in the academy and other institutions. One such ‘space’ emerged through the creation of an Indigenist research cohort in 2011, within the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Education at Charles Darwin University. This special issue grew out of relationships formed between members of this learning community and an invitation to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous early career researchers to share their reflections on decolonising knowledge practices.

Much has been written, particularly in Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Canada, about the need to decolonise Western (dominant) research practices (Chilisa, 2011; Christie, 2014; Martin, 2008; Moreton Robinson, 2003; Sherwood, 2010; Smith, 2012; Smith 2002). Since Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal text *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* was first published in 1999, the ‘Indigenous research’ landscape has shifted significantly. As Smith (2012) states, Indigenous peoples and communities have gone from being research ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, with their knowledges subjugated, to now being recognised and taken seriously as agents and knowledge experts.

The work of Smith (2012) and other Indigenous scholars has provoked revolutionary ways of thinking about ‘the roles knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonising and social transformation’ (Smith, 2012, p. 24). The articulation of Indigenist research practices (Chilisa, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999; Wilson 2008) has offered both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers a theoretical framework and research methods for carrying forward this decolonising movement. Yet, to what extent have developments in decolonising and Indigenising research practice transformed us as researchers and the institutions within which we work?

This special issue offers insight into the transformative potential of doing decolonising research: for the researcher, their collaborators and the relationships through which their research is enacted. It also highlights some of the complexities and successes involved in undertaking and applying research that decolonises and evolves Western philosophy and institutions.

The articles in this collection make two distinct contributions to the literature on decolonising and Indigenising research: firstly, they sustain the challenge to the supremacy and privileging of Eurocentric ideologies within the academy, and secondly, they build on the foundational work undertaken by Indigenist scholars to evolve, adapt and apply decolonising and Indigenising knowledge practices to new contexts.

The scope of this issue focuses on recent research emerging from early career researchers and practitioners in the fields of health, education and defence. While these papers respond to Australian contexts, they also highlight a diversity of approaches being used in international contexts. Each in their own way, the researchers contributing to this issue explore how they encountered and navigated systemic barriers and systems of power as they pursued their research questions. Collectively, these papers reflect the philosophical work that is required for researchers to create space for difference and diversity, predominantly through approaches that generate ontological and epistemological openness. Working together, between and through multiple knowledge systems, is a strong common thread between the methodologies reflected upon in this issue. Additional core themes that weave together these contributions include, negotiating our situatedness to people, place and institutions, the central importance of relationships as part of the research process and stories acting as a place and space for research.

Storytelling as ‘yarning’ is explored by PhD candidate Robyn Ober, who in her paper writes about Aboriginal English as an academic discourse in Indigenous Tertiary Education. Ober unpacks her choice of this methodology, which for her was based on the cultural embeddedness of these approaches within Aboriginal society.

Similarly to Ober, Stuart Barlo reflects upon his use of yarning as a methodology in his own doctoral research, in this instance, to explore the restoration of contemporary Aboriginal men’s dignity. Barlo draws attention to the transformative potential of research, reflecting on how his collaborators trained him to decolonise his research practices and develop culturally safe and ethical research methods.

Ethical issues related to research methodology are further discussed by Sam Osborne, who reflects on his doctoral research, ‘Staging standpoint dialogue in tristate education: privileging Anangu voices’. With the distinct aim of privileging Anangu voices in the research, Osborne adopts the Pitjantjatjara language term ‘kulini’ (*listen to, hear*) to articulate how he performed ‘ethical listening’ as an ‘outsider’ located at a cultural interface.

Exploration of the strengths and limitations of insider/outsider perspectives is taken up and further developed by Debbie Hohaia in her paper. She highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of conducting decolonising research both within and external to two military organisations and a Yolŋu community in North East Arnhem Land. Hohaia explores the tensions and inherent roles and responsibilities she enacted as a researcher, employee of the Australian Defence Force and as Indigenous woman from New Zealand, when undertaking her doctoral research, ‘The potential benefits to the Australian Defence Force educational curricula of the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems’.

Also reflecting on research that deals with the key theme of insider/outsider perspectives are Indigenist researchers Moana Tane and Matire Harwood. They offer methodological insights from Tane’s pending PhD thesis: ‘Talking about Smoking in East Arnhem Land: Denormalisation, Stigmatisation and Leadership’. In this research collaboration around the deeper meanings and beliefs about ‘ŋarali’ (tobacco) within the context of Yolŋu tradition, history and culture, Tane and Harwood highlight the generativity of decolonising research for both researchers and collaborators.

Lisa Hall articulates processes that enable respectful and mutually beneficial collaborations with seven Aboriginal Teachers from central Australia, through her recently completed PhD, 'Moving Deeper into Difference – Developing meaningful and effective pathways into teacher education for Indigenous adults from remote communities'. Hall's insights point towards the generative potential of paying close attention to the ontologies and epistemologies that we enact when we work together.

Nia Emmanouil offers the final paper for this collection. She demonstrates how a methodology of ontological openness enabled her to decolonise her doctoral research practice and make visible the ontological politics of place being enacted on the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The methodology developed here points towards the broader implications of supporting respectful dialogue between Indigenous and Western peoples and realities. It challenges new forms of colonisation that continue to define engagements between Indigenous peoples and the State, particularly through neoliberal development agendas.

This issue provokes the reader to consider what *makes* research, or knowledge production, 'decolonising'. In presenting accounts and reflections of *doing* such generative work, these papers offer interventions for other researchers to deconstruct and disrupt their own research practice.

Dr Debbie Hohaia, Dr Lisa Hall and Dr Nia Emmanouil
Editors

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