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Creating an Accessible Commons

Ethnographic knowledge beyond academia

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ABSTRACT | As an anthropologist working outside of academia, I have observed the potential for anthropology to influence and to be influenced is constrained by publishing restrictions. In this article, I discuss how we might address this by opening a flow of knowledge between researchers, research participants/contributors, and decision makers. Through the lens of an indigenous research paradigm, Kaupapa Māori, I consider how this opening up of a knowledge commons can support more ethical explorations of the roles and responsibilities of anthropologists to students, participants, decision makers, business, and communities. In particular, I highlight how anthropologists should create a knowledge commons that expands opportunities to ease structural inequality.

Keywords: kaupapa Māori; ethnography; inequality; the commons; knowledge

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Introduction

'Do anthropologists actually have any impact?' This question was posed by a student during a presentation at the 2017 Society of Medical Anthropology in Aotearoa Symposium. The responses explored how social scientists are adding significant and diverse value in many spaces, including in shaping the experiences and knowledge of students. The Society also reflected on the potential to expand the influence of ethnographic frameworks for knowledge production and communication by making connections with the public. As an anthropologist working outside of academia, I have observed how anthropology's pubic potential is constrained. In this article, I discuss how we might address the discipline's limited reach by opening a flow of knowledge between researchers, research participants/contributors, and decision makers. I consider how this opening up of knowledge can support more ethical explorations of the roles and responsibilities of researchers to students, participants, and communities. I highlight how we might use a knowledge commons to expand our opportunities to ease structural inequality, and allow often ignored knowledge to be made more visible to students and decision makers.

This discussion is informed by my experience as a Māori anthropologist working with private business and government as a service design researcher. I ground my research approach in a kaupapa Māori paradigm. This paradigm privileges a Māori worldview and the experiential knowledge of Māori about themselves and the worlds they live in. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) foundational discussion on the decolonisation of research methods highlights a set of core responsibilities, identified by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, that are common to kaupapa Māori projects. A responsibility that is of particular significance for this discussion is that research 'must be about challenging injustice, revealing inequalities, and seeking transformation' (Pihama 2001: 111). The projects I contribute to in my role as a service design researcher often have the intent of creating social change. My team is hired to conduct design research with users in an attempt to understand and design for their needs and experiences when creating or changing services, policies and strategies. Although my ability to pursue them through kaupapa Māori practice is constrained in many ways in this corporate context, this lens of responsibility has helped me see the opportunities where ethnographic knowledge could provide useful contributions, but, for many reasons, isn't.

My argument is informed by discussions I presented this year at the Victoria University of Wellington 50 Years of Anthropology Celebrations Symposium and in the Society of Medical Anthropology in Aotearoa Symposium Roundtable: 'Challenging Key Ideas in Medical Anthropology'. During both conversations the responsibility of anthropologists to prioritise de-colonising spaces, knowledge, and interactions surfaced. Drawing upon my previous research on indigenous historical trauma and healing, I argued that the socio-political context of colonization must be considered when designing spaces, places, discourses, tools, and interactions, so as to avoid causing (re)traumatisation and in order to open possibilities for healing. Therefore, an ethical approach to anthropological engagement is one that considers our roles as beneficiaries of colonialism so that we may design our discipline around practices that ease the burden of inequality and address unequal power dynamics.

At the centre of commoning practices is sharing knowledge; a pursuit which is in contrast to current publishing structures. These structures make knowledge inaccessible to those who cannot purchase journal subscriptions, those who do not know about journals, and those who are not proficient in key words and terms that are required to do a search. This limits non-academics to publicly available knowledge often produced by large corporate entities, or knowledge that has not been peer reviewed, and it keeps conversations informed by this research between the few who can access it. This gate-keeping of ethnographic knowledge through subscription-based journal access makes it difficult for the insights, recommendations, and experiences that social scientists and research contributors offer to inform policy, strategy, and service design.

In part, limited public engagement with ethnographic research is shaped by the fast pace at which knowledge is expected to be formed in corporate contexts. This pace constrains the ability of workers to explore the ins and outs of a research topic. Where contracts and a culture of working 'at pace' creates strict time-frames and a focus on uncovering solutions, workers often work to pre-determined hours allocated for tasks, such as writing research questions. This makes it difficult to deeply explore a particular context. This type of fast ethnography can be incredibly fruitful when conducted by skilled practitioners but, at its most basic level, it requires an understanding of the cultured nature of experience, and insights into how structure shapes agency. Ethnographic research is a key source of this knowledge. However, those without pre-existing ethnographic knowledge rely on mainstream cultural frameworks and accessible knowledge to design research and analyse information. I have observed, and experienced myself, the frustration of seeking-out research to inform projects that directly affect change, and being locked out, or not knowing where to start. Without having robust frameworks for thinking about social phenomenon such as inequality, culture, or language, the analysis of information and design of solutions rely on the pre-existing knowledge of the participants of the research and the researchers. As a result, ethnographic knowledge is often left out.

To counter the structural forces that constrain people's agency, the cultural mechanisms through which inequality is naturalised must be made visible to those whose agency is drastically constrained by structural inequality, as well as to those who benefit the most from it. In the examples I have discussed above, those who have the most power to (re)produce social structures are not exposed to knowledge that might provide them with the tools to re-imagine cultural 'truths', limiting innovation and reproducing the status quo.

If the criteria for acceptance of ethnographic products are diversified, we can open opportunities for communities traditionally excluded from mainstream conversations to participate in forming the narrative about themselves as well as affirming their right to learn about their histories and presents. Making this knowledge accessible is an important form of reciprocity within research contexts where participants' agency is often/usually constrained. Especially when engaging with indigenous peoples, researchers and academics should be conscious of a history of exploitative research, as well as 'research for research's sake'. Ideally, we can build a commons that opens the opportunity for participants to access and join in conversations about how their knowledge is being received by others, enabling them to share openly and access the referenced ideas. However, this requires anthropology to communicate in ways that are accessible and

meaningful to these groups and to enable knowledge that is useful to them, actively connecting them to the knowledge they want.

Without intentionally designing the networks, collaborations, categories, and relationships to be transparent and decolonising, commoning is still at risk of furthering these inequalities. The positions of control for the commons must include representation of the diverse realities of indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups to avoid exacerbating structural inequalities. It requires anthropologists to explicitly engage in the knowledge of marginalised groups and to apply it in their field sites and their classrooms. It also requires a serious prioritisation of the type of knowledge that is published, and practices that enact our responsibility to make the link between power and suffering visible. For example, how might anthropology leverage a knowledge commons to support indigenous peoples to resist the effects of colonialism? And, how might anthropology publish knowledge that makes it easier for decision-makers to be informed by ethnographic knowledge?

From my observations, government and private sector decisions about funding, about who gets to sit at the table during important decisions, whose voice or communication is seen as having authority, take place everyday with people who often do not have deep knowledge of the topic being considered. If we posit that ethnographic knowledge should inform important cultural and political decisions, then a wide audience must be able to discover, access, and apply our ethnographic findings. Should we meaningfully employ a critical and genuine pursuit of accessibility, this will open up new pathways for researchers and participants to shape and understand the structures that influence society.

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