Key Issues in the Development of Government Agency Guidelines for Research and Evaluation with Mäori

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Abstract

One of the most important issues facing government researchers in New Zealand is the impact that 'difference' can have on the research process. The issue of difference is especially important when the intended research or evaluation requires a significant amount of engagement with Maori. A popular strategy for Government agencies in New Zealand in response to this issue is to develop research and evaluation guidelines for use in projects that require engagement with Maori. Using the Ministry of Social Development's recently completed *Guidelines for Research and Evaluation for Maori* project as a background, the presentation will provide an overview of some of the issues government officials face when tasked with developing guidelines, including the heterogeneous nature of Maori/Indigenous 'communities', and variations in interpretations of the Treaty partnership.

Background

One of the most important issues facing government researchers in New Zealand is the impact that *difference* can have on the research process. Difference, here, refers to variations across and between 'groups' in terms of world-view, values and cultural practice. Groups can be defined or constituted by descriptive categories such as ethnicity, gender, class, age and/or sexual orientation.

The issue of difference in research and evaluation came to the fore as a result, in part, of feminist and indigenous challenges to the dominance of the Eurocentric, male-centred research domain (see Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1990 and Smith, 1999a). The issue of difference is important in the New Zealand context, where researchers are often required to engage with Mäori, Pacific and immigrant communities and organisations. Because of real and perceived variations in cultural practice and language, these groups are constructed within the policy and research environment as *the Other*. The construction of this notion of difference encourages the belief that different standards and practices are required for engaging with 'the Other', as opposed to the 'norm', i.e., Pakeha New Zealand.

The rise to prominence of the issue of difference in both the research and policy domains in the 1980s and 1990s saw the development of a *biculturalisation strategy* (see Sissons, 1990 and Tauri, 1998 for a fuller discussion of biculturalisation). The biculturalisation strategy itself gave rise to a number of programmes that enabled agencies to signal their commitment to the 'Treaty partnership', and, theoretically, deliver culturally sensitive services. The strategy essentially began in the early 1980s (Sissons, 1990), and resulted in the development of te reo and tikanga classes, noho marae (marae visits), Treaty of Waitangi courses for public servants, and the inclusion of Treaty competencies in public sector recruitment processes (Tauri, 1998). Two popular biculturalisation-related responses associated with policy development and research are *consultation guidelines* and *research and evaluation guidelines*.

The issue of difference, be it culture, age or gender, highlights the complexity of the research environment. This complexity is further underlined by the fact that current governmental structures and processes restrict public sector responses to indigenous challenges to the legitimacy of state practice, in terms of enabling Maori a significant measure of control of the research process. Under the current state governance structures, responsiveness strategies, consultation and research guidelines may represent as sophisticated a response as indigenous peoples can expect to their critique of institutional practice.

Government officials, tasked with developing tools and processes for enhancing research practice with Mäori, face a number of issues that restrict the degree to which they can accommodate the concerns of Mäori commentators. In developing the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation's *Guidelines for Research and Evaluation with Mäori* (MSD, 2004), the following issues, in particular, required attention:

i) the heterogeneous nature of the contemporary Mäori population (the issue of difference within the Mäori population itself); and

ii) variations in interpretations of the Treaty and the political context within which government research takes place.

The substantive part of this paper will begin with a brief outline of indigenous critiques of government-led research and evaluation activities. The discussion will serve as the basis for a rationale that supports i) the development of guidelines for research and evaluation with Mäori, and ii) the importance of recognising and responding to difference (in all its guises) for government research and evaluation activities. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the issues outlined above, and how they influenced the development of the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation's guidelines.

Setting the Scene: Indigenous Critique of Government Research

Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality.

Mick Dodson (1994: 2)

The research and evaluation activities of government and academic institutions have been the focus of powerful critiques from various indigenous commentators. Many view the research and evaluation activities of government officials and academics as a continuation of the exploitation of indigenous people (see Melville and Rankine, 2000; Smith, 1999a). The depth of concern expressed by indigenous commentators towards these activities is reflected in Dodson's quote above (in relation to the Australian context) and the following comment from the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (1999: 2-3):

> There are historical reasons why indigenous and aboriginal peoples may legitimately feel apprehensive about the activities of researchers. In many cases, research has been conducted in respectful ways and has contributed to the wellbeing of aboriginal communities. In others, aboriginal peoples have not been treated with a high degree of respect by researchers. Inaccurate or insensitive research has caused stigmatisation. On occasion, the cultural property and human remains of indigenous peoples have been expropriated by researchers for permanent exhibition or storage in institutes, or offered for sale. Researchers have sometimes treated groups merely as sources of data, and have occasionally endangered dissident indigenous peoples by unwittingly acting as information-gatherers for repressive regimes. Such conduct has harmed the participant communities and spoiled future research opportunities.

Indigenous concerns with government research activities include a perceived absence of indigenous people from key stages of the research and evaluation process including selection of the research topic, project scoping, research design and data gathering (Smith, 1999b). Indigenous commentators also argue that research conducted by government agencies is based on Eurocentric world-views and theories (Irwin, 1992). Government research practice has been criticised because of the role it plays in the surveillance of indigenous populations by state agencies (see Jackson, 1998). Many indigenous peoples consider themselves the *objects of social inquiry* generated within non-indigenous frames of reference that largely ignore their own explanatory frameworks, or simply incorporate them, piecemeal, into the mainstream (Anderson et al, 1998; Tauri, 1999). Further complaints made against government research are i) that indigenous knowledge and cultural practice is appropriated without sufficient input from indigenous peoples, and ii) research results are often disseminated in inappropriate formats, or not at all (Bishop, 1998).

These issues highlight why indigenous commentators and research participants often describe government and academic research processes as "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (Smith, 1999b: 1). For many indigenous

peoples, research is viewed as a process that constructs them and their communities as 'problem populations' that require extensive surveillance and intervention, while the developmental potential of their cultural frameworks are ignored (Tauri, 2000).

A significant area of focus of the Mäori critique of the governmental process has been the research activities of the public sector. The Mäori critique of government research practices is intertwined with the Mäori political and cultural renaissance that began in the early 1970s. One of the key drivers of the Mäori renaissance was the search for 'space' that would enable Mäori to achieve self-determination (Walker, 1990). Part of that process involved Mäori beginning to critically examine and respond to the social problems that were affecting their communities (Pearson, 1990). Understanding their experiences of neo-colonial society required the development of inquisitorial frameworks that were ethical, reflective of Mäori world-views, and made critical Mäori-led social inquiry possible (Jackson, 1998; Smith, 1999a).

Smith (1999b) writes that the Mäori challenge to the sector (and to private and academic research as well) was founded upon three interrelated 'arguments': the *decolonisation argument*, the *Treaty of Waitangi argument* and the *kaupapa argument*.

The decolonisation argument centres on the issue of *power*, in particular the power to set the research and evaluation agenda, define research and evaluation problems and prescribe research questions. A number of Mäori commentators (most notably Bishop; 1998, Jackson; 1998; Irwin, 1994; Smith, 1999a and Taki 1996) contended that Mäori are largely excluded from these processes.

Commentators argue that decolonising the research process requires critical changes to 1) the way the sector interacts with Mäori, and 2) the processes used to make decisions about what to research and how to research it. The decolonisation argument challenges the sector to empower Mäori by enabling them to either lead or have significant input into projects that take place in their communities. This would effectively reverse the situation that has dominated to the present, where the role of Mäori has largely been consigned to that of recipients of government research activity. Instead, Mäori would become partners with the Crown in research activities, to the mutual benefit of both parties. The decolonisation argument has been influential in the development of Mäori-centred methodologies, such as kaupapa Mäori research, and the creation of research institutes dedicated to 'by Mäori, for Mäori' research, especially in the tertiary sector (Cunningham, 1998).

The Treaty of Waitangi argument provides the foundations for the decolonising argument outlined above. This argument centres on Mäori interpretations of the Treaty, in particular the notion that it created a partnership between the Crown and Mäori (or, more accurately, between the Crown and Iwi). The Treaty partnership provides Mäori with the right to be directly involved in governmental processes, including the process for deciding what needs to be researched, the distribution of the research-related spending, and the way(s) research is carried out (see further discussion below).

The Treaty argument has had a significant effect on the research activities of Government institutions. For example, almost all Government agencies' consultation and research guidelines begin by outlining the 'partnership principle' that purportedly underpins the framework (see, for example, consultation and evaluation guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education, 1999; Ministry of Justice, 1998 and Te Puni Kōkiri, 1999).

The kaupapa argument centres on the development and use of research and evaluation techniques that enable Māori to transcend the colonial context and empower themselves through culturally appropriate research strategies (Smith, 1999a). The kaupapa argument typically involves a detailed critique of government and academic research processes, alongside the construction of research frameworks - such as kaupapa Māori research - that challenge the primacy of official practices.

Responding to the Māori Critique: Issues and Limitations

> *Much of the research done on Māori in the past has proven to be of little benefit to Māori themselves, tending to emphasise negative statistics without attempting to provide the information necessary to effect positive change.*
>
> Jahnke and Taiapa (1998: 39)

Government responses to the Māori critique have, on the whole, been largely unimaginative and agency-centred. Institutional responses often comprise a set of rules for engaging participants - what is generally referred to as the 'tick-the-box approach'. Consultation and research guidelines developed along these lines generally lack a critical basis; namely a discussion of *why* guidelines are required and the specific issues (for Māori) they are designed to address. The effect of this lack of critical foundation is evident in the type of advice and activities in tick-the-box guidelines, which focus primarily on enabling agencies to gain access to Māori communities, rather than engaging *with* these communities as Treaty partners. This is not to say that these types of guidelines are not useful. However, by their very nature, they impose 'one size fits all' regimes on engaging with Māori. This approach has been criticised because it ignores the complexities of Māori social organisation, identity political and the research process, an issue dealt with in more detail below.

Smith (1999b: 13) highlights some of the key weaknesses of the tick-the-box approach to developing research guidelines:

> It has been suggested that research in Māori communities can be reduced to a set of simple steps or procedures because they assume that the single most important issue is access to Māori communities… There is a danger that such 'procedures' become fixed criteria for determining ethical practices and good conduct. But the reduction of Māori attitudes, values, and experiences with research to simple procedures, while helpful to outsiders, masks the underlying issues and is a deeply cynical approach to a complex history of involvement as research objects.

Prompted by Mäori critiques of government process and problems arising from a number of projects involving Mäori participants, the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation opted to develop a set of best practice guidelines in order to enhance the Centre's research practice with Mäori. During the development of the guidelines, several issues arose that had a significant impact on the design of the guidelines. Two issues, in particular, stand out as highlighting the complexities involved in developing tools for improving research practice with Mäori. These were 1) recognising difference and diversity in the Mäori population, and 2) divergent interpretations of the Treaty and the political realities within which public service research takes place. A brief outline of each of the issues, and how they impacted the construction of the guidelines, is presented below.

Recognising difference and diversity in the Mäori population
A review of agency consultation and research guidelines reveals that many are shaped by the orientalist assumption that indigenous populations are homogeneous groupings that coalesce around one overarching world-view and cultural framework (see Blagg, 1997). In contrast, Durie (1994: 214) argues that "Mäori live in diverse cultural worlds. There is no one reality nor is there any longer a single definition which will encompass the range of Mäori lifestyles". The relevance and importance for day-to-day life of what are commonly referred to as traditional values and cultural practices are not necessarily the same for *all* who self-identify as Mäori. Nor is it accurate to assume that *all* Mäori define their ethnic identity according to traditionalist constructs. Continuing high levels of inter-marriage, rapid and almost universal urbanisation, shifts in family formation and a heightened awareness of ethnic identity issues mean there is no single Mäori reality (Durie, 1995; Kukutai, 2003).

The diversity in Mäori lived experience and identity highlights an important issue that researchers and evaluators have to consider - that we cannot categorically state that there is 'one way of doing research' that is appropriate for *all* Mäori. We need to consider, and respond to the issue of diversity when we construct guidelines, in order to ensure that we are not trapped into a 'one size fits all' framework (MSD, 2004). This requires us to construct and employ flexible processes for engaging with 'different' communities, including different Mäori communities.

The issue of diversity and difference is also important for government researchers and evaluators because it can influence the choice of methods that are used for specific projects. Some advocates of kaupapa Mäori research, such as Taki (1995) and Wihongi (2002) take an essentialist approach and argue that research with Mäori must be based on kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) 'method'. Methods that encourage face-to-face contact and enable participants to enter direct dialogue with the researcher(s), are viewed as 'essential' for the conduct of culturally appropriate research with Mäori. Methods that remove the researcher from direct contact with participants, such as telephone interviews and mail-out surveys, are rejected as incompatible with the 'Mäori world' (MSD, 2004).

The position of Taki and Wihongi is challenged by other Mäori commentators, including a number of kaupapa Mäori exponents, including Cram and Lenihan (2000) and Bishop

(1998). The challenge is to the exclusion of particular methods on the basis that they do not involve face-to-face contact. Cram and Lenihan (2000) prefer that the decision to use or exclude methods, including quantitative methods, be made only after a *process of interrogation* of their appropriateness has taken place. This process should involve consideration of the methods against the ethical and cultural appropriateness of their application for specific research topics and, if we accept the idea that Mäori are a diverse, heterogeneous population, their appropriateness for the particular individuals and 'group(s)' of Mäori who are likely to participate in a research project.

Based on the issues discussed here, it was decided that CSRE's guidelines would not stipulate that only certain methods could be used for research and evaluation with Mäori. It was recommended that, where possible, CSRE staff should negotiate with Mäori communities and entities about the methodology and methods to be used for a particular project, and/or defend the use of preferred methods to participating communities and groups.

Divergent interpretations of the Treaty and the political realities of the government research paradigm
An inescapable fact of the social research and evaluation field in New Zealand is that Government is the principal source of funding for this body of activity. Government, therefore, has significant power when it comes to defining what should be researched, how and by whom. Furthermore, government researchers work under strict accountability structures, such as the Public Service Code of Conduct, that are underpinned by powerful legislation, namely the Public Finance Act 1989, the State Sector Act 1988; and the Official Information Act 1982. These behavioural frameworks and legislation severely limit officials' ability to respond to Mäori critique of their research processes. In particular, it makes it almost impossible for them to present Mäori with the degree of authority over governmental processes and resource that some argue is their right under the Treaty.

The contested terrain of Treaty rights and obligations further complicates this issue. The kaupapa Mäori research paradigm is, for example, based on the rights practitioners believe Mäori have been granted through the articles of the Treaty of Waitangi. A significant amount of Mäori Treaty dialogue focuses on the *Crown's obligations to Mäori*. What are not often discussed are the rights that Government (representing the Crown) believes the Treaty provides it, a belief that it actions through the daily ritual of 'governing'. For example, the English version of Article 1 is interpreted as providing the Crown with the right to *govern and make laws*. This right formed the basis of the Principles of the Treaty developed by the then Labour Government in 1989. Principle A, the *Principle of Government*, reads:

> Article 1 gives expression to the right of the Crown to make laws and its obligation to govern in accordance with constitutional process. This sovereignty is qualified by the promise to accord the Mäori interests specified in article 2 an appropriate priority. This principle describes the

balance between articles 1 and 2: the exchange of sovereignty by the Mäori people for the protection of the Crown (Orr, 1989: 1).

That the Government is one of the Treaty partners, and the Treaty gives it the right to govern, underpins the legitimacy of government research units, including the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation, to undertake research involving Mäori. Article 1 is also interpreted as providing Government and, by extension, agencies and officials with the authority to set the policy and research agendas, including deciding what to research and on what issues Government's research spend will be focused (MSD, 2004).

The current Government has expressed a desire to develop policies and services aimed at reducing social inequalities (see MSD, 2003). To help achieve this aim, Government requires accurate information on the nature and extent of social inequalities, and 'what works' to reduce them. A significant amount of the information Government requires for the social inequalities work programme, is derived from research and evaluation activity. Given that Mäori are significantly overrepresented in statistics related to poor social outcomes (see MSD, 2002), then it is safe to claim that a truism of the Government research and evaluation environment is that you cannot avoid having to engage with a wide range of Mäori, Mäori organisations, häpu and iwi.

Although Government interpretations of the Treaty can be used to legitimise agencies' current domination of the research process, the unavoidability of having to engage with Mäori, means that they cannot also ignore their obligations to their Treaty partner[1]: namely, the protection of Mäori interests (Article 1) and the active protection of their taonga (Article 2). Mäori commentators have interpreted these Treaty obligations to include active Government protection of all forms of cultural knowledge Mäori believe should be protected, which includes all or any data derived from research involving Mäori participants. Research and evaluation guidelines are one institutional response that, if constructed with a view to engaging with Mäori and encouraging their participation in the research process (as opposed to simply consulting with them) has the potential to enable Government to meet its Treaty obligations.

With this goal in mind, CSRE's guidelines were based around six practice-based principles.[2] The practice-based principles and related advice, serve a dual purpose: 1) to enhance research practice with Mäori, and 2) to assist MSD and Government to meet specific Treaty obligations. For example, Practice Principle 5 - 'protecting knowledge' - is underpinned by guidelines that encourage CSRE staff to identify - via negotiations with Mäori participants - strategies for the storage and destruction of data, especially when the research involves gathering culturally sensitive and valuable material. This

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[1] It should be noted that there are also significant differences in Government/agency and Mäori interpretations of what exactly are Government's 'Treaty obligations'. See Orange (1997) for a fuller discussion of this area.

[2] The six practice-based principles each related to a key area of the research and evaluation process, including: planning for Mäori participation, engaging with Mäori participants and stakeholders, developing effective and appropriate methodologies, protecting knowledge, encouraging reciprocity, and supporting Mäori development.

advice, if followed, will enable CSRE researchers to *actively protect taonga*, thus enabling them and the Crown to meet their obligations under Article 2 of the Treaty.

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