

Epistemic hegemonies, Indigenous methodologies and the dialectic turn

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Abstract

This conceptual paper reflexively explores an emerging turn towards a dialectic engagement in the development of Indigenous methodologies, using insights from Bourdieu and Foucault in a deconstruction of discourses regarding hierarchies of positionalities, which are associated with the construction of epistemic authority. The paper draws on examples from the authors' completed study with Indigenous communities in Costa Rica and Malaysia in exploring localized understandings of key concepts that may form a potentially fruitful terrain for further dialectic engagement. The challenges of this process are considered within the context of superior-inferior hierarchies of knowledge and being, as implicated in the colonial 'Other' versus the 'Indigenous' identity. The paper considers how the benefits of an interrogation of these discourses of the oppositional binary, create the conditions for the dialectical production of shared and expanded knowledge.

keywords: Indigenous methodologies, dialectic, epistemic, Costa Rica, Malaysia

Introduction

In this conceptual paper, we examine the potential for a turn towards dialectic engagement of epistemic rationales, emerging from differing traditions, positionalities and understandings, within a research process enmeshing both researchers and participants.

A critical examination of these epistemological considerations is timely given the growing awareness of the ethical implications of potentially insensitive research with Indigenous, often marginalized, people. This is generating an important critical body of literature exploring the complexities of such work, largely arising within the nested domains of Indigenous *Weltanschauungen* and an increasingly diverse and accessible academy. An adaptive term, *Weltanschauung* roughly translates as ‘worldviews’, offering space for distinctive, comprehensive perspectives to emerge, encompassing unfamiliar but rich varieties of knowledge and experience

The curtain of surety and assumption regarding work with unfamiliar, remote or ‘exotic’ people has been torn aside by these critiques (Chilisa, 2012), revealing ethical pitfalls where the ethics of representation, no new consideration for qualitative researchers, is resurrected against competing claims to legitimatised knowledge (Pickering & Kara, 2017). Lynes (2002) comments that cultural backgrounds inevitably influence how others will be viewed and interpreted, implicating all. It is this topic that we explore in more depth in this paper as both a highly pertinent and fraught research terrain.

In rejecting a colonialist objectification of the ‘Other’, which few, if any, would defend, a much deeper descent into reflection is demanded. What is proposed is the opening of a discursive terrain of dialogues to closely reflect upon the critiques offered by Indigenous methodologies, emerging as authoritative additions to ‘mainstream’ research approaches. This also demand an interrogation of certainties and postures in reflexively retreating from resting on claims of certainty or authority of which the very structures of epistemological hierarchies are constructed. Our aims, therefore, are to excavate cleavages of understanding in studies with Indigenous communities. This is of no small import given that the research team was composed of both Indigenous and non-indigenous researchers, where the unrevealed bedrocks of

our individual *Weltanschauungen* demanded a continual excavation of deep subjective analysis from the very beginnings of collaboration to the final stages of dissemination, but without yielding to the assumption that mastery over ambiguities was achieved. Indeed, Gagnon-Bouchard and Ranger (2020) would argue, that decolonization demands rupturing the rationalization of mastery, including, maybe, academic knowledge generation. These positionalities can form differences of assumptive, cultural and disciplinary understandings, whereby the very word ‘cleavage’ is fruitfully ambiguous in meaning both to separate and to join. Commensurately, apparent positions of polarised dichotomy, relating to Indigenous versus Western/coloniser knowledge, can yield and, arguably, need to move towards, a more productive dialectic, illuminating rather than contesting discourses of epistemic authority.

Theoretical frameworks

In our reflective discussion and in contrast to earlier publications overtly privileging Indigenous perspectives we draw from a corpus of meta-theorization from Bourdieu and Foucault to offer alternative illumination of our research with indigenous communities. In doing so, we acknowledge our exposure to potential criticism for employing theorization that has not always arisen from indigenous philosophies. Yet if unusual perhaps, this is not inappropriate. Bourdieu’s oeuvre conceptualizing the *habitus*, *fields* and *capital*, for instance, provides us with ways of understanding the arbitrariness of cultural constructs within human societies shaping both ideas and ways of knowing about the world, as well as the practices enacted within them. *Habitus* in its functionality is both a ‘structuring structure’ and a ‘structured structure’ moulding the dispositions of actors enveloped within them (Bourdieu, 1977), whilst reproducing the conditions that provide the structural normativities structuring them (Bourdieu, 1980). The normality of ontological assumptions played out within the *habitus* through social conditioning, Bourdieu refers to as *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1998). We have learned to appreciate the power of this analysis within our own heterogenous research team, in which the milieu of practice and culture, that we each inhabit, has shaped how individually we interpreted and related to the research study in its aims, steps and outcomes.

Bourdieu's *fields* of activity, represent 'social microcosms within the social macrocosm' (Forchtner & Schneickert, 2016: 296), containing the social/symbolic, cultural and economic capitals of practices (Jenkins, 1999). Just as each *field* contains micro-elements of distinctiveness, bounded by their own dominating rationales and organizational bureaucracy and disciplinary processes, these *fields* of capital also compete against one another. These conflicts of cultural capital drill down to oppositional epistemological schemata engaged in their own peculiarities of contestation and struggles for supremacy.

Theorization of power and conflict is also evident in Foucault's analyses, where power is deemed relational, rather than a crude instrument of brute oppression and control (Parker and Frampton, 2020). For Foucault, power is altogether more subtle and invidious:

In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (Foucault, 1991, p.194)

Power, therefore, does not belong to one group exerted over another, as a contingency of its condition, but is a shape-shifting, creative and regenerating force that is shared, albeit unequally and not statically, across actors. What is deemed normal, what can be said or done in this particular society, in this particular slice of historical time, are rhetorical questions contained within these regulations and expressions of discourse as power. What is constructed as knowledge within groups forms another commodity within these discursive productions of power, governed by its own 'policing' mechanisms,

truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements (*Baumgarten* and Ullrich, 2012, p. 4)

Foucault is not claiming that any particular truth exists beyond the shifting sands of discourse; rather statements/claims compete with statements/claims without hope of a

successful appeal to the status of truth (Mills, 1997). For instance, Foucault questions the concept of ‘tradition’ in which history, transience and difference are dispersed in the search for an immutable origin upon which current modes of thinking and being are impressed (Foucault, 2000).

In reference to Foucault, Mika and Stewart (2016) consider the power of the colonial ‘Gaze’ on the Indigenous ‘Other’, which is replete with expectation and assumption: the ‘nobility’ of the ‘Native’ creates one such perceived trope, as well as that of the underprivileged or benighted, or indeed, as Bryson (2001) observes in his humourist traveller account of Australia, the *invisibilized* Aborigine living in plain view.

Since discourse, for Foucault, is a productive mechanism, we may duly expect an explanation of what is thereby influenced or produced (Fadyl et al., 2012). An example of this is Razack’s (2009) challenge to the neo-colonial discourse that implicates HE regarding the ‘superior positioning’ (and knowledge) of Northern countries towards those of the Global South; or that of non-Indigenous schemata over Indigenous ones (or vice versa). Within any ‘regime of truth’ (Parker and Frampton, 2020), some things cannot readily be conceived of or expressed for these lie dangerously beyond that which is viewed as an orthodoxy. By posing such ideas these disrupt the very terrain under interrogation: an example comes to mind, which touches the raw of academic sensibilities in its implications for research, particularly our own. To wit: what status of knowledge generation can a research study occupy that produces no conventional ‘findings’?

In his ‘archaeological’ abstraction of knowledge, Foucault (2000) excavates the relationships of ideology, here labelled the ‘sciences’, whereby we locate ideology’s functioning in science’s structuring of its objects, systemization of statements/claims and formulation of concepts and approaches. Thus, scientific knowledge is reproduced via articulation, modification and redistribution, both confirming and validating it. Commensurately, we can appreciate the reproductive complexities at work in the processes of crafting Indigenous conceptualizations of knowledge into a coherent pedagogical theorization for application in HE (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Higgins & Kim, 2019).

Literature Review

Research literature testifies to a troubled history vis-à-vis research studies with Indigenous communities and where such studies are mostly led by non-Indigenous researchers (Ball & Jaynst, 2008). Nominally, this was the case in our study, although practically, hierarchical distinctions and authority were flattened in keeping with a commitment to decolonization, with intriguing implications for methodological and interpretative considerations, as discussed further. We remain mindful that while sensitivity towards ‘decolonization’ earns non-Indigenous/‘settler’ researchers kudos (Tuck & Yang, 2012: 10), deserved or otherwise, such engagement throws up paradoxes and dilemmas that are not easily negotiated or reconciled.

Exley et al. (2018) invite researchers to reveal the messy realities of research as lived, negotiated experiences influencing research designs; and where conventional research ethics protocols can cause rather prevent harm in Indigenous communities. While in research encounters parallel ontologies also influence data: what it *is* and *how* it may be recognized (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., forthcoming). This in turn raises implications for how such work is reported and disseminated; a further aspect of our own complex research journey.

Attempts to distance research activities from the damage wrought by, often, brutal colonization remains fraught, where in reference to Canada, Sylvestre et al. (2018), rehearse how research has been implicated in the stigmatization and exploitation of Indigenous communities. Chilisa (2012) condemns the belittling and marginalization of Indigenous ways of knowing by Euro-Western epistemologies, with Tuhiwai Smith (2012) followed by Tuck and Yang (2014) commenting scathingly on how research is very negatively perceived by Indigenous groups.

Tomasselli (2016), reflecting on research with the Kalahari people, resurrects some of the key questions regarding not only who/what is studied, how and with what aims, but who gets the ‘blame’ for the calumnies of colonization. From the Australian context, Swijghuisen Reigersberg (2011) ruefully comments on the politicization of the research terrain where the needs and wishes of Indigenous communities need to be balanced with the demands of ‘western-orientated’ scholarship, where institutional funding implications and researcher compliance to these are inhibiting factors. In

response a robust challenge is offered by Mukherji (2004) questioning whether methodologies originating in the West can hold universal application to different cultures at all. The inference suggests mutually exclusive methodological dichotomies of fundamental geocultural-politico-philosophical incompatibilities; where potentially syncretic or dialectic models of research do not seem promising.

Indigenous methodologies

A strongly emerging canon of scalding critique underscoring the grim historical backdrop to research with Indigenous communities challenges the viability of contemporary research work. Yet positive paths can be fostered through the formulation, appreciation and adoption of Indigenous methodologies. These offer not a singular meta-pathway but the potential for a ‘rebraiding’ of several theoretical insights (Higgins & Kim, 2019, p. 114).

For example, the four dimensions to Indigenous research that Chilisa (2012) proposes cover the targeting of local phenomena to contextualize and prioritize lived understandings; sensitivity and adaptability of research towards Indigenous contexts; integrating Western approaches with Indigenous theorization/understandings; and finally, ontological assumptions informed by Indigenous paradigms. Kovach (2015) in turns describes Indigenous methodologies as embracing that which is holistic; receptive, grounded in relationships; using collectivity and legitimate ways of sharing knowledge, particularly through stories; where ‘creation stories’ are the hallmarks of Indigenous narratives (Tuck & Yang, 2012) The centrality of the relational is further emphasized by Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and endorsed by Sàmi scholar, Rauna Kuokkanen (Gagnon-Bouchard & Ranger, 2020, p. 41) for whom the transactional exchange assumptions underpinning capitalistic Western paradigms are replaced by the ‘logic of the gift’ within Indigenous ontologies, once again privileging the relational.

Manulani Aluli Meyer (2001) adopts the evocative and culturally congruent symbols of ocean and land to explore Hawaiian Indigenous epistemology across seven interconnected domains of knowledge, where here too relationship is pivotal as well as sources of holistic nurturance. In reference to epistemology and heurism Wilson (2008) refers to the question of ownership of knowledge given that the Western

approach is said to construct knowledge as autonomously discovered and individually possessed, in opposition to Indigenous paradigms of knowledge as collective, relational transcending individuality. Commensurately, Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that coloniser mentalities both greedily claim territory as land and territories as new knowledge. Mika and Stewart (2016) point to the West's schemata of rationalizations of the 'truth', which inexorably and almost inextricably foregrounds understandings. Finally, Smith (2012) positions knowledge systems along binary oppositions: Euro-Western epistemologies underpinning Westernised academes, and the *peripherized*, non-Westernised beliefs and value systems of peoples subject to historical colonization.

Such critiques build upon radical intellectual foundations of an earlier corpus, referencing Said's analysis of 'Orientalism' as the projected, gendered canvas of colonialization and its fantasies (Said, 1978; Ashencaen Crabtree, 2020). This returns us to the Foucauldian Gaze as assumptive and anticipatory of the Indigenous 'Other' (Mika and Stewart; 2016); while Tuck and Yang (2012) reference Frantz Fanon's (1965) disquisition of the alienating impact of colonialism on the psyche of subject people. Alatas' (1974) early analysis of the 'captive mind' posits that colonization usurps original value systems, cultural knowledge and its generation with the alien paradigms of the colonizer. In calling for a more authentic decolonization in the academy beyond trite or superficial exercises, Tuck and Yang (2012) point to the implicated trend of 'settler innocence', which we read as constituting strategies of psychological defence as much as complacent intellectual opportunism.

Indigeneity as identity

A creeping orthographic move from a small 'i' to a capital 'I' signifies politicization in the semantic understanding of the term 'indigenous', from descriptor to identifier. Discourses that articulate an authenticity of 'Indigenous' cultural forms, imply unbroken legacies predating colonialism, 'predicated on primordial attachments' (Levi & Maybury-Lewis, 2012, p. 76). While 'Indigenism' claims a distinctive 'ethnophilosophy' of Indigenous peoples encoding language, cultural expressions, myths, metaphors, folklore, values, rituals, artefacts, and taboos (Jaime, 1995). Diachronicity is assumed in this discourses: an 'it has always been...' notion, serving to bound the Indigenous former as separated off from the colonial latter and any

subsequent profound social changes – including academia, its rationale, cultures and practices. Freire’s body of pedagogical work is founded on exploring these fault lines between the demarcated worlds of the oppressed and oppressor, coloniser and colonized, but where arising epistemic and empirical domains must be addressed to deconstruct discourses of power through dialectical engagement.

What I want to say is that it is impossible to access meaning simple through reading words. One must first read the world in which these words exist (Freire, 1997, p. 304)

These worlds in which the words exist are shaped through the cultural variations of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), and the internecine competition of *fields*. Words build the skeletal architecture of contested cultures, as represented by Foucauldian discourses (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2012); in which the words pertaining to the worlds of understanding between Indigenous communities and insider/outside, as in our study, required continual decoding of inter and intra-dialogic exchanges. Yet, in casually adopting the ethnographic lexis to ‘decode’ as interpretative, we acknowledge Tuck and Yang’s (2014) critique of ‘code’ as often constituting the objectivization and manipulation of marginalized people.

Highly relevant to the communities we studied, Indigeneity can be tied to the politics of the autochthonous, where in reference to Malaysia, semantics surrounding concepts of ‘original’ settlers bind social and political entitlements (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2018). However, these privileges are conspicuously framed and garnered by the dominant ethnic group, the Malays, earlier sojourners from the Indonesian archipelago (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2021). While the even earlier indigenous people of West Malaysia, commonly referred to the ‘Orang Asli’, meaning ‘Original People’, are not privy to the privileges of this claimed indigeneity through strategies that Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 9) identify as similar to other settler colonial endeavours to ‘destroy or assimilate the Native’ (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016). Weaving in Hegelian dialectics, Tamma and Duile (2020) explore how Indonesia also replicates these autochthonous political dynamics, which, like Malaysia, are tied to land rights, but where colonialism in Indonesia is framed within concepts of ‘plural’ society. The issue of ethnic identity as distinctive is one that underpins multiculturalism and how

competing claims by ethnic groups can be accommodated within States, particularly where a national, racialized discourse of Whiteness is promoted (Townsend-Bell, 2014). Civic participation in the political sphere in respect of ethnic representation, is a model that can be seen among the Sàmi people of Scandinavia (Knoblock & Kuokkanen, 2015), as well as the Bribri of Costa Rica, for example (Boza Villarreal, 2016); although less so in the case of the Orang Asli (Parker et al., 2019).

Politics of recognition

The stark polarities offered by the colonized and the coloniser binary implicates the signature of an Indigenous identity, whether self-identified or as so badged by colonizing cultures (Mika and Stewart, 2016). Identities are delineated not only within ethno-classifications of multicultural societies, but in opposition to the colonial 'Other' (Schram, 2014), where oppositional differences hold potential for elevation to a dialectical unity. Indigenous identities are contingent upon the claim of difference upon which the premise of indigenous determination and authority is based. Such assurances stand, philosophically, if not politically, at odds with the postmodernist trends of Eurocentric cultures, legitimizing plurivocalities of marginalised voices, including Indigenous worldviews that serve decentred meta-discourses (Ashenkaen Crabtree and Husain, 2012).

Emerging from European disillusion with progressive certainties, de Beauvoir views the human condition, not so much as 'absurd', but as fundamentally ambiguous, where meanings are essentially constructed, acting not unlike self-created myths (Slattery & Morris, 1999); although as Meyer (2001) argues that these kinds of intellectual critiques of identity constructions are alienating to Indigenous people. More constructively, Gedifew (2020) moves the argument of the 'politics of recognition' into the territory of Hegelian dialectics, in which the consciousness of self is a reflection of affirmed recognition by the Other, where equalities and freedoms can be jointly gained, when not obliterated by the mutual struggle for supremacy and one prevailing discourse, or arguably postmodernist deconstructions of voice and identity.

Contextualizing the study: the communities

Our study extended our previous work with an Indigenous community in Malaysia

experiencing devastating changes to the integrity of their previously thriving and unspoilt ecological environment, located in an area of outstanding beauty and Indigenous local industry in West Malaysia (Parker et al., 2019; Hezri and Chan, 2012). Since the early nineties the traditional territories surrounding the villages of the 'Jakun' Indigenous community at Tasik Chini, State of Pahang have been subjected to a ferocious incursion of heavy mining industry located very close to the community and the freshwater, once tidal, lakes upon which the Jakun livelihoods and lifestyles depended. This has resulted in heavy metal pollution which is endangering the entire eco-system in a descent into a stagnant eutrophic state (Shuhaimi-Othman et al., 2008). Indiscriminate logging of the surrounding forests and the inexorable growth of monoculture palm oil plantations, have caused further ecological damage to the area, with resulting serious impact on fauna, flora and the local communities (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016).

Like Malaysia, Costa Rica is an equatorial nation of rich biodiversity, a postcolonial nation of rising affluence but with marginalized, minority Indigenous communities; where the retaining of traditional Indigenous territories together with the maintaining of traditional lifestyles and cultures, are both under conspicuous pressure. Finally, both communities reside in United Nations Biosphere Reserves, reminding us of the human impact on diverse ecological systems, which, in turn, affects Indigenous people. The circumstances of these awards are, however, contestable: at Tasik Chini, Biosphere status was sought by the local university to safeguard and conserve the environment once industry had moved in (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016). Sadly, the hoped for protection has not transpired (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2018; Parker et al., 2019). The environmental situation in Costa Rica is different to that of Malaysia, where another type of hugely profitable industry is blamed for restricting the access of Indigenous people to lands for hunting, gathering and cultivation (Sylvester et al., 2016b; Isla, 2015). This is the eco-tourist industry, duly monopolizing large swathes of previous Indigenous territories for its usage, generating an incredible \$2.85 billion annually to the Costa Rican economy (Tafoya et al., 2020).

Methodology

An interdisciplinary research team, experienced in undertaking research with Indigenous communities, was forged from across four international universities in three countries, Costa Rica, the UK and Malaysia. In terms of positionalities two of our research collaborators, one female and one male, self-identified as Indigenous and were each familiar professionally and personally with the two communities participating in this study, bringing anthropological as well as a humanities-based, ethno-cultural knowledge to the team. Ethnobotanic knowledge, sociological and social policy disciplines were offered by the White Canadian and British female and male researchers in the study.

A comparative two-year interdisciplinary study, this aimed at bringing together two Indigenous communities, known to the research team from previous work, in order to explore issues relating to external exploitation of traditional Indigenous territories and Indigenous land rights. Our descriptor of ‘Indigenous’ for the participating groups was adopted following the self-identification of the specific communities, their association with national collectivities of ethnic groups of such status, government recognition of this, political self-representation, census demographics and general social consensus of this fact.

The original aim of the study was to foster a transnational forum of Indigenous knowledge sharing, with the potential that this could feed into larger social activist movements nationally and globally. Commensurately we were also interested in how the communities viewed the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) as potentially offering efficacious international policy tools for Indigenous wellbeing and self-determination, particularly as both Malaysia and Costa Rica were signatories to the UNDRIP.

The fluid research design was construed as sensitive to and shaped by Indigenous methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2015). It enabled a cycle of dialogues where participating Indigenous communities could share experiences, concerns and ideas with those from a matched country, unlikely to be encountered under normal circumstances. Funding was secured for Indigenous representatives, chosen through

local processes, to visit each other's communities to learn more about issues each faced in terms of the challenges of maintaining preferred lifestyles. The rationale behind this novel approach, conformed to the non-prescribed research methods of 'Indigenous Métissage' conceptualised by Indigenous scholar, Dwayne Donald (Higgins & Kim, 2019: 114). The rationale offered was that it was through the experiential and perceptual understandings of Indigenous communities themselves that a clearer understanding could be gained of the impact and costs on those communities of capitalistic rationales, methods and means. The dialogues carried the potential for a co-construction of Indigenous knowledge through which new understandings might dialectically emerge from this collective 'togetherness'; but without assuming any superficial solution could arise to such deep-seated, endemic problems. The discussions included our original Jakun participants, and the Bribri Indigenous community of Bajo Coen in Talamanca, Costa Rica (Sylvester et al., 2016a). The Costa Rican Bribri were deemed particularly appropriate participants owing to some interesting commonalities with the Malaysian context.

Whilst the study was subject to conventional university research ethics procedures, the research design, was revised in the light of concerns arising in the team to ensure that it was primarily conducted within the communities by the Indigenous research team members to avoid misrepresentation of community beliefs and practices by non-Indigenous outsiders. This formed a condition for the conduct of research and altered the logistics of the study and the roles played by other members of the research team. The outcome of the study was also subject to change owing to the more direct ownership of the research process and data gathering under the wing of the communities. The altered output took the form of a translated 'bio-cultural' book of ethno-philosophical stories and legends from Costa Rica and Malaysia. This took a literary format as specifically requested by the Bribri and agreed by the Jakun. The latter choosing to contribute their own accompanying illustrations as well, although the Bribri viewed artwork as not part of their own particular cultural gift for this exercise (García Segura et al., 2020).

Discussion

Although the discussion focuses on the conceptual issues, some compass bearings are offered to readers where these arose in relation to the research process, enabling them to track our ruminative and experiential journey, where continued deep reflection of what has been learned deepens and modifies our understanding of the experiential journey travelled.

Beginnings: what may be known and by whom?

In preliminary discussions, non-Indigenous researchers agreed not to collect community data to prevent the contamination of misunderstandings. While it is not disputed that misrepresentations can and have occurred, particularly in anthropological studies with unfamiliar people (Pickering & Kara, 2017), we can view this concern as not only about a level of factual or scientific accuracy but in terms of the privileging of the emic ‘insider’ perspective, hinging primarily on the question of who has the right to speak of these things and who has not. As such, this forms an interesting example of the power-knowledge discourse. It might seem self-evident that a more accurate description of beliefs and the niceties of practices would be gained from those that adhere to them rather than non-practitioners. However, it is questionable if it then follows that it is illegitimate to step on this experiential and perceptual terrain. Rhetorically, can one can only really ‘know’ from direct experiences of phenomena or via particular emic lenses of perspective that are shaped by the regulatory fields of the *habitus*? If that were the case most qualitative research, would be unviable. Furthermore, claims that the *habitus* of one will be completely impenetrable to the understanding of those inhabiting another demands justification. An alternative argument may be that a different, etic perceptive construal of phenomena by ‘outsiders’ is intrinsically invalid, even if couched in cautious qualification. Yet, if this were the case no dialectical engagement is possible and thus, one might tentatively suggest, most research as inquiry would constitute a futile exercise.

However, there may be another misapprehension at work with regards to who can access certain cultural knowledge (and in Malaysia community research activities like ours can be additionally controlled through heavy-handed paternalistic State intervention via the police authorities). We may note that etic ‘outsider’ (and presumably emic ‘insider’) researchers should respect the right of communities to

withhold knowledge in research (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Ball & Jaynst, 2008). This uncontentious statement overlaps with cut-and-dried research ethic protocols: the right to withdraw information – and, consequently, this statement may be otiose. However, much more is meant, in hinting at a status associated with select knowledge; a ‘sacrality’, which needs to be guarded by the adept to retain its power. Not all, therefore, can be privy to knowledge that holds esoteric emic status. The safeguarding functionality of resistance to outsider research inquiry becomes more critical if the discourses of insider knowledge occur in contested terrains of epistemic competition (Foucault, 2000). These may be enacted both symbolically as well as semiotically in a construction of the polarities between Indigenous and Eurocentric epistemologies (Chilisa, 2012).

Constructing aims and processes

The research process was strongly pedagogic. A rationalization emerged from these Indigenous discourses regarding the balancing of dominant worldviews by imparting particular Indigenous values, ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being in the world, as symbolized in cultural constructs. Instruction thus became aimed at the education of non-Indigenous people. One particular key Bribri concept dominated the evolving rationale of inquiry, participant engagement as well as logistics, this being *Ulàpeitök*:

Ulàpeitök is a traditional form of Bribri collaboration and translates to lend (peitök) a hand (ulà) (Sylvester et al., 2020, p. 48.)

Examples of *Ulàpeitök* were provided to those in the research team unfamiliar with Bribri concepts. A flexible portmanteau of a concept this described the neighbourly helping of one another in practical ways, perhaps not dissimilar to the rural Irish custom of communal assistance in harvesting (Scheper-Hughes, 1979); and not unlike the Malaysian *gotong-royong*, community action idea (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2015). Within a communitarian discourse *Ulàpeitök* may suggest a commodified construct: a ‘one good turn, deserves another’ transactional mindset (Gagnon-Bouchard & Ranger, 2020), yet apparently it is not viewed as exchanges of favours but rationalized as a constituting collective weald (Meyer, 2001). The function of *Ulàpeitök* is community cohesion and cooperation of working together, tying the community into a closer networks. Arising through the *habitus* of localized

Indigenous communities it proved adaptive in being extended to non-Indigenous people encountering the communities, but of outsiders who could neither hunt, fish, cultivate or craft in Bribri ways. Any transaction of exchange to these people would therefore be framed from within a Bribri conceptualization of what assets of value such groups held that could be requested, congruent with a Foucauldian analysis of power as relational (Parker and Frampton, 2020).

Furthermore, these assets would be evaluated from within the Bribri framework of understanding, where accordingly data gathering can be subjected to discretionary understandings of *Ulàpeitök*, as took place here. The logic of these rationales suggested that reciprocation would be expected within the bounded value systems expressed of what was acceptable to the community and what was not (Sylvester et al., 2020). The taking of consummables, including bottled water, was not considered appropriate in implying that Bribri hospitality was inferior. Nor were gifts of comestibles, toys, and other tangible goods of worth, as offered to other Indigenous communities in previous studies, considered suitable reciprocation, although monetary *honorariums* were and justified as resourcing provisions for visitors, reflecting the realities perhaps of parallel but overlapping cultural worlds of systemic values.

The difficult question of obligation and reciprocation forms a perennial dilemma for researchers; and when this involves tangible exchanges, ethics committees are likely to adopt coy responses. We posit that material, rather than intangible reciprocation, is more likely to arise in unidirectional research processes, rather than when research is co-constructed, and particularly where perceived hierarchies of difference between participant and research groups are not addressed.

Material reciprocation may conform to logical and reasonable proportionality of exchange (or *gifting*) necessary within given contexts, such as maybe research with Indigenous communities, but where assumptions and implications need careful critique. However, here we may also need to acknowledge the caveats raised by Tomaselli (2016) of the potential harm of the economic commodification of data transactions, saturated with capitalist discourses and resulting in dysfunctional research relations.

Bribri researcher and community member X explains that monetary compensation for communities differs based on who is doing the research and how the research is designed. Specifically, outsiders with no relationships to Indigenous people paying people for their knowledge can result in such economic commodification and furthermore, can, and has, resulted in Bribri people providing erroneous information to outsiders because such research interventions are seen as extractive and not culturally appropriate. Research based on long-term collaboration with local, Indigenous researchers, allows for research to be designed based on the needs of local communities. In our case, this meant using research funds so that community hosts could purchase, harvest, and prepare culturally appropriate food for gatherings (rather than bringing outsider food and traditions to the community), ensuring that participants were adequately compensated for valuable time dedicated to this project.

Collating data

The original proposal visualized that outputs from the study would include the development of bio-cultural ‘storybooks’ shaped within and by the communities with researcher facilitation, outlining daily experiences and understandings of maintaining traditional culture and lifestyles and the challenges thereof. This information was aimed at creating ‘vignettes’ linking to relevant international policy such as the UN SDG and the UNDRIP, and to offer alternative approaches towards inclusive and respectful policy articulations and practices. However, this original plan was altered.

Instead, an ethno-philosophy of Indigenous beliefs as articulated in traditional stories became the communities’ chosen form of expressing their particular bio-cultural legacies for wider readership, in keeping with Tuck and Yang’s (2012) observation of a unique cultural signatures. The resulting multiply translated book, accessible to both communities, was rich in symbolism and concepts, in which each community had total autonomy to use the books as they wished, as well being available for teaching purposes across the four collaborating universities (Sylvester et al., 2020). These stories contain Bribri explanations of aetiological concepts, including the tale of the Bribri anti-hero, Öglasi, whose insatiable, destructive greed creates an imbalance in the cosmological eco-system composed of deities, animals and people. Öglasi degenerates into an unnatural monster who must be destroyed by the archetypal

hero/heroine, in the form of a literally self-sacrificing wife, restoring balance to the universe.

The Jakun presented a favourite story of the creation of Tasik Chini, a story immersed in rich motifs found across the great myths of the world: a wrong against the deities that must be righted, a great flood that punishes the guilty, the omen-ridden weapon/tool that only the just can wield, divine forgiveness and restoration of universal forces. That this story is very important to the Jakun community is evidenced by the fact that it features, with some slight variation of detail, in the published output of the preceding research laying the foundation for this study (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., García Segura et al., 2020).

In collating the book divergent opinions occurred: one non-Indigenous team member editing the material referred to ‘creation myths’. This was disputed by an Indigenous colleague as inferring a ‘*mentira*’ (a lie), ‘*irreal*’ (not real) and ‘*supersticiones*’, which needs no translation. This mismatch of semantic understandings generated genuine surprise and suggested forms of Bourdieusian misrecognition (Webb et al., 2020). While the term ‘myth’ may colloquially be used in these pejorative ways, used correctly its meaning is entirely neutral and makes no claims either way regarding falsehood or veracity. The status of such claims is in fact entirely irrelevant to the concept of myth, which simply means ‘story’, (Smart, 1984), which by coincidence was the preferred term for the book contents and thus used. Of arguable utility is Hooke’s (1963) approach towards examining the functionality of the myth as an insightful guide to understanding particular cultures and their ecologies.

While diplomacy and sensitivity is a research requisite, the change of terminology limited the discursive potential for a deeper and more theorized development of syncretic meanings, thus inhibiting a dialectic development of ideas about myth as particular forms of story-making. From beyond the Bribri framework one can accept that the ‘story’ is not a lie. However, this also implies a binary opposition at work, which may not be intentional. The dilemma being constructed is that if such stories signify a truth, what kind is it and what purpose does it serve; what Foucauldian discourse of power is being brought to bear as a ‘truth’? If accepted as a truth, does it only function within the cultural milieu of the Bribri: a truth of and for ‘the people’

only, or is a truth for outsiders as well? If so, can the stories of other cultures ‘speak’ to it and contribute additional meanings, or is that not possible? Do we understand from this therefore that the rationalities of truth are those universally struggled with (Mika and Stewart, 2016)?

Myths differ from stories in that they offer explanations rather than description (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016). They are also often ambiguous and call for attention, being rarely simplistic and often layered in complexities, yielding a multiplicity of subtle meanings through the devices of retelling/re-reading, deliberation - and sometimes deeper discussion. On the other hand, their meanings are also experienced at visceral levels and particularly psychologically, as Freud (1899) so lucidly realised. Nor do myths operate as crude, factual events but illuminate deeply symbolic ‘truths’ about the human condition. However, this condition is ontologically and psychologically experienced very differently across time, space and context, as we know from contemporary popular culture in the global North, where myths are continually adapted and rehearsed to address contemporary modes, but also ancient anxieties (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2021). Jung (1959) provides explanations about why so many mythological tales resemble each other globally: being responses to innate, unconscious human archetypes of a common humanity seeking resolutions to primeval mysteries of an existential being (Slattery & Morris, 1999).

Dissemination and endings

A final aspect that generated contending views in the development of co-authored published output was the conceptualization and application of the term ‘poverty’, which formed part of the proposal rationale, given the impact of mainstream capitalism serving to marginalize Indigenous communities globally. Early assumptions were made by the non-Indigenous PI that were based on first-hand knowledge of the Malaysian socio-cultural-political context implicating Indigenous communities, and in conjunction with the humanitarian-focused politics of development underpinning the UN SDG. These related to the question of poverty as affecting indigenous communities, as well as other marginalised communities and connects with the impoverishment of Indigenous communities in terms of territorial dispossession and the commensurate attacks on culture, spirituality, livelihoods and

social cohesion to name but some impacts, as recognized by the UNDRIP. Thus poverty theorization forms the pillar of social policy action and research, and as such is applied to developed nations almost as much as developing ones (Townsend, 1979) In short, it is the empirical, conceptual and theoretical foundation at the basis of any understanding of social justice and social equality (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., forthcoming).

Yet, poverty as a term was roundly rejected in reference to the Bribri from which an Indigenous colleague and interlocutor drew distinctions between the abstracted domains of academic discourse and the real-life application of poverty concepts or standardised measurements applied to the Bribri and other Indigenous groups. The rationale provided was that discourses ‘can perpetuate marginalizing discourses that open space for people to try to help/save Indigenous people via interventions that are not culturally appropriate.’ The coding of poverty was one we understood as repudiated in its mortification of the Bribri community (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

As a team we respect this argument and cede that it may be one that other Costa Rican ethnic minorities accept. Nonetheless, it also raises further unanswered questions regarding the imposed discourses of power and *habitus* dispositionality implicated in the legacy of Spanish colonialism. These may or may not articulate with contemporary, postcolonial reverberations in addressing plurality, diversity and inequalities. With regards to ontological ‘knowns’, Hall and Patrinos (2012) discuss the high poverty ratios among Indigenous groups in connection with health and education impacts, together with the questionable success of poverty reduction measures in particular Latin American countries (excluding Costa Rica). Accordingly, noting that some Indigenous communities have retreated to geographical and economic self-isolation but describe this under the circumstances as a compromised ‘triumph’ (Hall and Patrinos, 2012, p. 344).

Yet, equally germane, the Bribri stance stands at odds with how other Indigenous groups articulate their concerns in terms of socio-economic disparities affecting minority ethnic groups nationally and globally. For instance, the International Labour Organization reports that the global population of 476 million Indigenous people, 80 per cent of whom live in middle-income countries, are three times more likely to live

in extreme poverty than non-Indigenous counterparts (Dhir et al., 2020; UN News, 2020). The Jakun community have also articulated many concerns relating to material poverty (Authors' Own, 2016a); but ultimately these areas could not be meaningfully explored within these discursive ideological incongruences; and thus, the question of the relevance of the UN SDG or the UNDRIP formed abandoned strands of inquiry.

Overcoming dialectic (dis)engagement

In earlier papers, we note Tuhiwai Smith's dismissal of research as the dirtiest of words in Indigenous eyes (Sylvester et al., 2020). However, a closer reading makes it clear that something more radical is being advocated. She argues that Indigenous empowerment forms part of international linkages relating to cultural revitalization projects, which not only embrace self-identifying Indigenous people, but ethnic groups like the Welsh and the Basque, to name but two (which coincidentally is the exact dual lineage of the PI, who was unambiguously identified as a homogeneously Western, non-Indigenous person (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Research does not need to be rejected according to Tuhiwai Smith's thesis but requires development within wider, inclusive frameworks of discursive exchange. Perhaps surprisingly, the 'insider' position is also scrutinised as problematic on the grounds that the Bourdieusian *doxa* of assumptions needs continual interrogation through reflexive and critical positionality (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 140). This is perhaps most fruitfully engaged with as part of a more profound, reiterative exercise in self-reflexivity involving entire research teams in exploring situational social assumptions.

What illumination can therefore be brought to bear arising from this study? The mobilization of political Indigenous empowerment may yet bring greater enfranchisement to millions of marginalized lives, in the meantime the 'stories' from Indigenous people enable readers to reflect on their meanings. However, meaning as semiotics are co-constructed in which readers necessarily bring their own frames of reference that 'speaks' with the text, in which perhaps new reference points are plotted. These discourses, as Foucault points out, do not exist in isolation, but in continual engagement with other discourses, in which the Indigenous perspective

(accepting for the moment, a presumption of homogeneity) forms an exciting new discourse that takes its place within and among others. A caveat remains: privilege can be asserted and may indeed dominate at times, as seen through the practices of colonialism, but these will be overshadowed in turn by other discourses in which the analytic tool of deconstruction remains relevant.

It is indisputable that the voices of Indigenous people have been subject to the violence of silencing in the dominant hegemonies of discourse in conjunction with material, social, cultural and political oppressions. The stories and values of Indigenous people play their part in amplifying their words - an altogether excellent thing. So much we may agree. Yet, these injuries are not likely to be healed if an uncritical positionality is taken in which the dysfunctional status quo of assumed hierarchies of superior and inferior (Razack, 2009) is merely reversed in an unstable see-saw of power plays. Bourdieu's fields of capital may be played out in economic terms, but so too in social and cultural domains, in which the privileging of certain epistemic knowledge over others, forms another existential threat mastered through supremacy claims. We may know much, but so do others. Together we may learn more. We return consequently to a dialectic in which the freedom of self-affirming self-knowledge is only achieved through the recognition of the 'Other' as our similarly engaged equal (Gedifew, 2020).

Conclusion

To conclude, we have conceptually and reflexively mined some of the key experiential and epistemic meanings that arose in the undertaking of research with Indigenous communities in Costa Rica and Malaysia, where we argued that a dialectical engagement can overcome the rigidification of epistemic scaffolding erecting knowledge claims as situated within hierarchical positionalities. The politics of Indigenous political enfranchisement in terms of identity, belief schemas and ontological practices foregrounded our work, whereby the analytical frameworks offered by Bourdieu and Foucault enable the application of the probing of connotation and nuance of discourse influencing rationale, process and outcome. In so doing, we raise important questions regarding whether the rebalancing of neo-colonial discourses in favour of assumed marginalized voices goes beyond empowerment, heralding a decisive, if as yet early turn towards the dialectical, in which a Hegelian

communality is emphasised (Siep, 2014). We posit that even more can be gained by disrupting discourses of oppositional positionalities, steeped in hierarchies denoting superior-inferior epistemic status inhibiting dialectical generation of knowledge production.

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