

AN ESSAY ABOUT INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGY

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Indigenous peoples' interests, knowledge and experiences must be at the centre of research methodologies and construction of knowledge about indigenous peoples.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999, 119)
(Narungga Nation, Australia)

This short essay was originally written for a doctoral seminar presentation, held at the University of Tromsø on 25 March 2004, and was afterwards adapted by the author for this publication. The following general considerations about indigenous methodologies are inspired by the author's experiences as a Saami scholar, as a university teacher in the Department of Saami, and as a visiting scholar at different institutions of Maori Studies (at the University of Auckland and the University of Waikato, among others) in New Zealand during the Spring of 2003. The enclosed reading list consists of articles and books recently written by mostly indigenous scholars, from different parts of the world, who discuss the indigenous perspectives of research. These perspectives represent alternative ways of thinking about research processes. However, the indigenous approaches to research on indigenous issues are not meant to compete with, or replace, the Western research paradigm; rather, to challenge it and contribute to the body of knowledge of indigenous peoples about themselves and for themselves, and for their own needs as peoples, rather than as objects of investigation. In this essay the author intends to articulate methodological issues, which are primarily important for indigenous researchers in the light of the indigenous perspective.

Research and Indigenous Peoples

Over the past few decades, scholars involved in research on, with and about indigenous peoples have been discussing a great variety of issues relating to indigenous research, which may be viewed from an indigenous perspective, or from an outside perspective, or from the

perspective of a collaboration between a particular indigenous people and outside experts. Some of the most important issues are as follows: critiques of previous research, conducted by outside researchers (Smith 1999; Rigney 1999; Gegeo 2001); indigenous approaches, the decolonization of methodology and the human mind (Crazy Bull 1997a; Smith 1999); indigenous epistemologies and epistemological racism (Bishop 1996, 1999; Scheurich & Young 1997; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2001); culturally safe research, protection from misinterpretation (Archibald 1992; Moody 1993; Warrior 1999; Stover 2002); mystification and fragmentation of indigenous knowledge (Kawagley 1995; Deloria [1995] 1997; Grenier 1998; Nakata 1998; Struthers 2001); the invention of tradition (Deloria [1995] 1997; 1999; Mihesuah 1998); the notion of objectivity (Heshusius 1994; Rigney 1999); legitimation, power and control over research on indigenous issues (Cook-Lynn 1997; Bishop & Glynn 1999; Harrison 2001; Harvey 2003); intellectual property and ownership of indigenous knowledge (Everitt 1994; Mead 1995; Abdullah & Stringer 1997); mutual benefit between the researcher and the studied indigenous community (Irwin 1994; Crazy Bull 1997a,b; Bishop 1996); interdisciplinarity and the accountability of indigenous research (Champagne 1998; Hernandez-Avila & Varese 1999), etc.

In the Western understanding, research in general may be defined as an investigation or experiment aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts. Research includes collecting information about a particular subject, revising accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, and the practical application of such new or revised theories or laws (as defined, for example, in the Merriam Webster Dictionary). This definition implies discovery, observation, collection, investigation, description, systematization, analysis, synthesis, theorizing and codifying by means of the language of theory, comparison, verification, checking hypotheses, etc. Any research project usually starts with the setting of a research problem or a research question. In relation to indigenous peoples, their entire existence seems to be a problem or a question for researchers, often formulated as "*The ... (insert name of indigenous group) problem*" or "*The ... (insert name of indigenous group) question*" (Smith 1999, 90). The Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, author of the excellent *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), a must-read for researchers in any discipline dealing with indigenous

issues, argues that “problematizing the indigenous is a Western obsession” (ibid., 91). Research has been used as a tool of the colonization of indigenous peoples and their territories. Looked at from the indigenous peoples’ perspective, the term ‘research’ has been linked with colonialism. The way in which scientific research has been implicated in the excesses of imperialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s indigenous peoples. The quest for the decolonization of research and, indeed, of the human mind has recently become one of the hottest and most discussed issues in indigenous research, primarily among those who belong to the growing generation of indigenous researchers. The process of decolonization requires new, critically evaluated methodologies and new, ethically and culturally acceptable approaches to the study of indigenous issues. These approaches may differ in various ways for indigenous and non-indigenous scholars. Addressing indigenous scholars, L. T. Smith emphasizes that the decolonization of research methods is “about centring our concepts and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith 1999, 39). “Our purposes” are those of indigenous peoples, and “our own perspectives” are the indigenous approaches that allow indigenous scholars to decolonize theories, develop indigenous methodologies and use indigenous epistemology; these approaches allow indigenous scholars to make visible what is special and needed, what is meaningful and logical in respect of indigenous peoples’ own understanding of themselves and the world. This whole process allows indigenous research to break free from the frames of Western epistemologies, which are in most cases very different from the indigenous ones and are, indeed, suited to Western academic thought, but which are nevertheless foreign to indigenous ways of thinking.

Indigenous and Western Perspectives on Research

Simply defined, methodology is about how research does or should proceed. Thus, methodology is a body of approaches and methods, rules and postulates employed by research. Indigenous methodology is a body of indigenous and theoretical approaches and methods, rules and postulates employed by indigenous research in the study of indigenous peoples. The main aim of indigenous methodologies is to

ensure that research on indigenous issues can be carried out in a more respectful, ethical, correct, sympathetic, useful and beneficial fashion, seen from the point of view of indigenous peoples.

Western academic research, which has usually been aimed at solving “indigenous problems” or searching for answers to a series of questions about indigenous peoples, has given power and control to the non-indigenous world because over the past few centuries this research has been affiliated to the interests of a particular (academic) group, or individuals, who have been almost exclusively non-indigenous (cf. Cook-Lynn 1997; Bishop & Glynn 1999; Mihesuah 1998; Harvey 2003). Academic and political careers, economic and professional gain, the profitable use of indigenous territories, natural resources and indigenous knowledge: these are just some of the benefits the non-indigenous world has obtained with the help of research on indigenous issues. This research has disempowered indigenous peoples who have long been used merely as passive objects of Western research (Smith 1999, 61). Indigenous peoples are tired of research primarily because of their experience of being treated as objects, but also because research – taking extensive indigenous knowledge away – has given very little or nothing back to indigenous peoples, who have been used as sources of information. Looking at Western research from an academic perspective, collecting information about indigenous peoples may be seen as a contribution to the body of knowledge. Looked at from an indigenous perspective, however, collecting information may be termed ‘stealing’, because the stolen knowledge has been used to benefit the people who stole it (Smith 1999, 56).

Any research is indissolubly related to power and control, and indigenous scholars take these issues seriously nowadays, making indigenous research part of the decolonization process, which implies an assignment to indigenous peoples of the right to self-determination, not only from a political or economical point of view, but also with respect to research (Smith 1999; Rigney 1999). For indigenous peoples, this means being able to make decisions about the research agenda and methodologies for themselves without any outside influence. Indigenous scholars from Australia, Aotearoa–New Zealand, the US and Canada have brought to academic discussions the indigenous peoples’ project of reclaiming control over indigenous ways

of knowing and being, a project that implies better control over research on indigenous issues. This requires a shift in the research paradigm: the use of indigenous approaches and the development of indigenous methodologies that are suitable for both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers. There are, indeed, some extreme opinions that only indigenous researchers may conduct research on, with and about indigenous peoples.¹ The notions of essentialism and cultural relativism have been used as theoretical weapons against such a research paradigm (Mihesuah 1998, 14). Indigenous methodologies do not reject non-indigenous researchers, nor do they reject Western canons of academic work (cf. Chippewa American Indian scholar D. Champagne 1998, for example; see also Porsanger 2002). But indigenous methodologies do articulate that indigenous scholars cannot be privileged just because of their indigenous background, because there are a great variety of “insider” views. Insider research has to take seriously the notion of accountability, which is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility, as well as the notion of respect and – most of all – the notion of a thorough knowledge of indigenous traditions and languages by so-called “insider researchers” (see Mihesuah 1998; Bishop & Glynn 1999). Indigenous methodologies require scholars to think critically about their research processes and outcomes, bearing in mind that indigenous peoples’ interests, experiences and knowledge must be at the centre of research methodologies and the construction of knowledge concerning indigenous peoples, as emphasized by the Australian scholar from the Narungga nation, L. I. Rigney (1999, 119).

Approach

The indigenous approach may be defined as an ethically correct and culturally appropriate, indigenous manner of taking steps towards the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge about indigenous peoples. Indigenous approaches are based on indigenous knowledge and ethics that determine the means of access to knowledge, the selection and use of “theoretical” approaches, and determine in addition the tools (methods) for conducting research. The Western paradigm for

¹ Such an extreme exclusive position has a long history. More than 30 years ago the sociologist R. K. Merton used the term “extreme insiderism”, referring to the opinions of some African-American researchers, that only African-American people can understand African-American people (Merton 1972, 15).

research articulates theory and scientific methods, which are chosen in order to explain a particular phenomenon and guarantee an objectivity of research, however, in order to create a desired result (McCutcheon 1997, 2).² Processes of theorizing and measuring what is considered to be “scientifically acceptable” have been based on Western philosophy and imply a notion of objective research, which was recently questioned by – among others – feminist and indigenous researchers who articulate different epistemologies (e.g. Heshusius 1994; Rigney 1999). As the Lakota scholar Cheryl Crazy Bull puts it, the scientific method in general “requires the researcher to remain outside the research experience, to investigate through observation and discovery, and to draw conclusions based on those observations” but, seen from an indigenous viewpoint, such a method does not guarantee objectivity (1997a, 18).

When discussing the indigenous approach, one of the well-known Native American scholars, Elisabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux) argues that, “[w]hile it is important that scholars become theoretically informed, Indians should define their own perspectives on Indian history and culture instead of relying solely on the thoughts and dictates of anthropology and history theorists” (Mihesuah 1998, 13). The Alaskan Yupiaq scholars, George P. Charles Kanaqluk and Oscar Kawagley, have shown in their studies that “theoretical”, “ready-to-use” methods must be re-considered and re-worked in indigenous research, and that the researcher should not start from a theoretical point, but rather from that of the indigenous ethical protocols, in order to develop methods that will suit the local culture (Kawagley 1995; Kanaqluk 2001). According to L. T. Smith, “Particular methods within indigenous methodology have to be chosen in respect to indigenous ethics, explicitly outlined goals of research, and the considered impact of the outcomes of research on the particular indigenous people. In the process of disseminating of research results there is a need for reporting back and sharing knowledge.” (Smith 1999, 15). Smith argues that any research project has to be thoroughly considered, not merely as a single contribution to the body of academic knowledge, but rather in respect of indigenous peoples’ interests and needs.

Arguing that indigenous scholars should not look to Western

² For historical and political-philosophical considerations about Western theory from an indigenous point of view, see L. T. Smith (1999, 19–57).

research for answers, but rather to shift the paradigm, Ch. Crazy Bull emphasizes that “[c]ontinuing our use of Western methods would separate us from our understanding; knowledge would be external rather than integrated into our lives if we do not put our own tribal mark on research” (1997a, 19). Different indigenous ways of putting the “tribal mark” on research have already been developed. In Maori studies, for example, Maori cultural and ethical protocols and metaphors have been used in order to create a specific Maori research methodology called *Kaupapa Maori* (cf. Smith 1999, 183–195; Bishop 1999; Irwin 1994). The Maori concept of *whanaungatanga* has been proposed as a methodological frame for research. As a concept, *whanaungatanga* has a great array of meanings, which may be translated as “relationships”, primarily those between kin, the extended family (*whanau*), individuals, ancestors, spirits, the environment and many other aspects of the holistic Maori understanding of connectedness. The Maori scholar Russell Bishop has used the epistemology of *whanaungatanga* in order to create a Maori approach to research relationships, for which “[w]hanaungatanga consists literally of kin relationships between ourselves and others and is constituted in ways determined by the Maori cultural context. A key element, however, is that it is not just a matter of kin connectedness and task engagement but it is also a matter of there being a focus on the group rather on the self” (1996, 215). This particular indigenous methodology is based on indigenous epistemology and ontology. It articulates a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched who must become “a family”: be interconnected in a reciprocal way in the frames of the particular research project with which they are involved. Epistemology, which deals with ways of knowing especially with reference to the limits and validity of knowledge, is indeed one of the most essential basic elements of indigenous methodologies. In indigenous research the use of indigenous ontologies, which deal with assumptions about the nature and relations of being, and of reality, may open new perspectives, which may differ from those that are familiar and “scientifically accepted” in Western research. Finally, indigenous axiologies, which deal with the nature, types and criteria of values and value judgments, are of great importance for indigenous methodologies, especially in respect of research ethics (for discussions about these issues, cf.

Akan 1992; Rigney 1999; Bishop 1996, 1999; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2001; Kanaqluk 2001).

Indigenous ways of thinking, understanding and approaching knowledge have long been dismissed by the academic world because they have been considered not to belong to any existing theory (Cook-Lynn 1997, 21) or, often, they have been reduced to some nativist or even illogical and contradictory discourse (Smith 1999, 14). The quest for indigenous methodologies has often been interpreted by the academic world as a political gesture on the part of indigenous peoples in their struggle for self-determination. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that indigenous methodologies already form part of the body of knowledge about indigenous peoples, and that they have a theoretical value. For some Western scholars, still following the traditional Western research paradigm and way of thinking, it may come as a surprise to learn that indigenous methodologies have been designed within Western academic institutions, and not in the jungle or rainforest, or snow-covered tundra. Indigenous approaches have been developed by indigenous scholars and also by those who share the same way of thinking, who have been educated within the Western academic system, but who make every effort to utilize indigenous peoples' epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies.

The "theoretical" value of indigenous approaches has been denied, because "theorizing" has been evaluated on the premises of Western academic knowledge and epistemology. Indigenous academic theorizing, which utilizes indigenous approaches, epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies, has had a short history, but the body of indigenous academic knowledge is growing (Mihesuah 1998; Gegeo 2001, 503). It should be mentioned, however, that the great majority of contemporary indigenous academic publications are contained within the field of education.

How to proceed?

Some of the most important issues for indigenous methodologies may be itemized as follows: defining the indigenous agenda for research projects; looking at research and theory from an indigenous perspective; including or consulting indigenous peoples, not as objects but rather as participants, to predict possible negative outcomes, to share and protect knowledge, to use appropriate language and form in

order to communicate research results back to the people, etc. Reporting back is one of the most important imperatives of indigenous research. All these issues are based on the principles of respect, reciprocity and feedback, which are crucial for indigenous methodologies. Any scholar who conducts research on, with or about indigenous peoples should pose and answer the following questions, which are directly connected to the above-mentioned methodological issues and, further, to power relations in research (the questions are formulated according to L. T. Smith 1999, 10):

Whose research is this?

Who owns it?

Whose interests does it serve?

Who will benefit from it?

Who has designed its questions and framed its scope?

Who will carry it out?

Who will write it up?

How will the results be disseminated?

Indigenous scholars should answer these questions looking at their research projects through the prism of the indigenous research agenda which, according to L. T. Smith (1999, 115–118), should include healing, mobilization, transformation and decolonization on many levels. The indigenous research agenda should take into consideration survival, recovery and development, which are conditions and states of being, through which indigenous communities are moving (see Figure 1). This research agenda is multi-dimensional, broad and ambitious in its intent, and focuses strategically on the goal of self-determination on the part of indigenous peoples (Smith 1999, 116–117). It requires considerable commitment on the part of the researcher to figure out how to put this abstract agenda into practice in relation to a particular research project (cf. Smith 1999 for more on this subject). Other indigenous scholars formulate the indigenous research agenda in more tangible terms, for example to preserve, maintain and restore indigenous traditions, languages and cultural practices; to revitalize, to regain physical, psychological and spiritual health, to cultivate economic, social and governing systems, and to maintain sovereignty and preserve nationhood (Crazy Bull 1977a, 17). New

research questions originating from an indigenous perspective may be inferred from the indigenous research agenda (Struthers 2001, 126). On the other hand, the agenda restricts indigenous research by setting ethical and methodological requirements concerning what has been called “scientific freedom” in Western academic research, because the protection of indigenous knowledge is one of the most important concerns of indigenous methodologies.

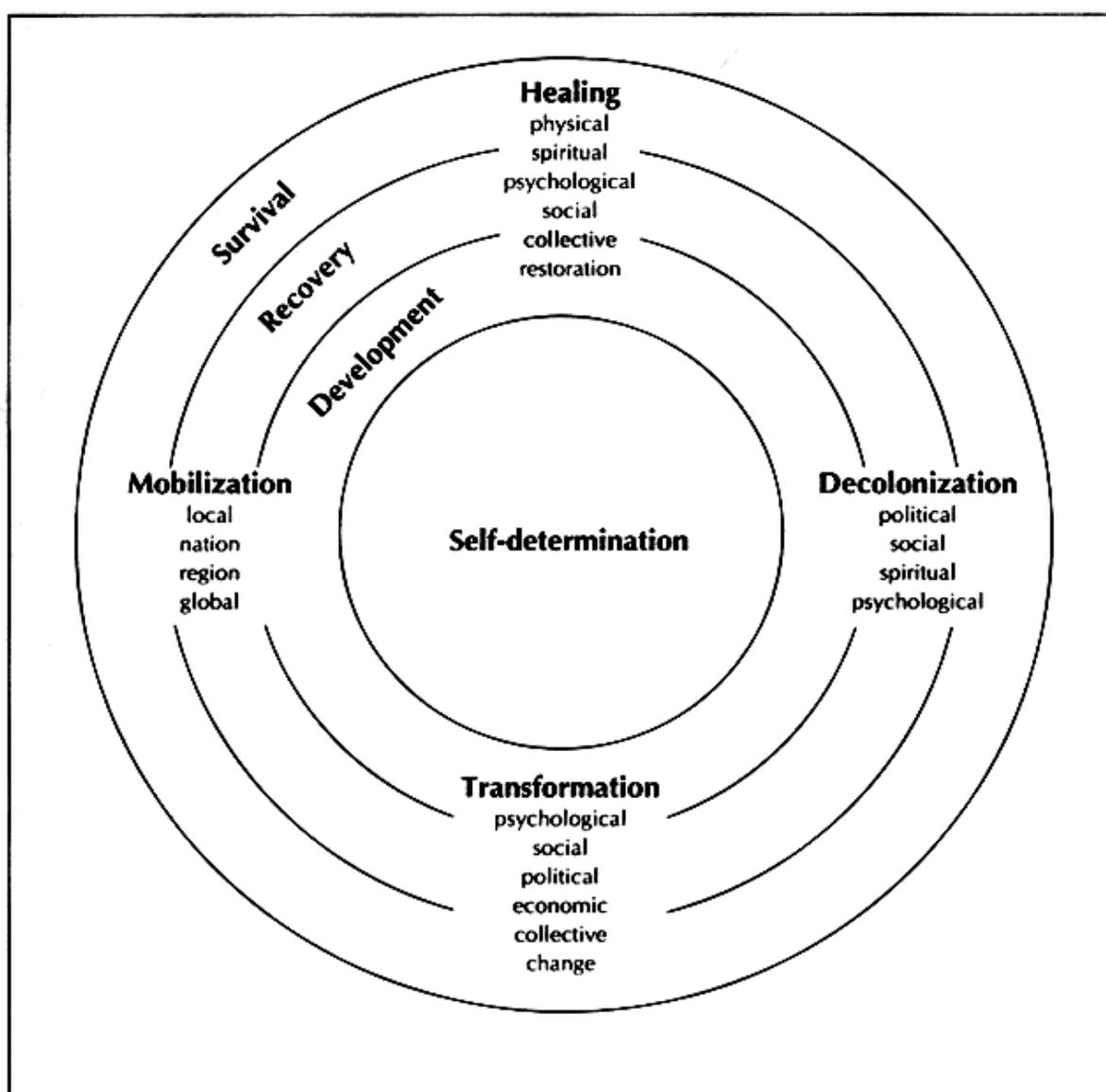


Figure 1 (Smith 1999, 117)

The indigenous peoples of Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand, the US and Canada have quite recently established conditions, by which no research on any indigenous issue is any longer welcome without consultation and/or collaboration with the indigenous people/community studied, or without clarification of the role of the studied people/community in the research and the impact of the research on the studied people/community (cf. Crazy Bull 1997a; Mihesuah 1998, 183–184; Smith 1999, 119).³ The regulation of research is an essential part of any indigenous methodology. The regulation of research also reflects power relations. R. Bishop has proposed an interesting and useful model for the evaluation of power relations in research (cf. Figure 2.; Bishop & Glynn 1999, 55). Although this model has been applied to education studies, it is also applicable to other indigenous research projects, regardless of whether they are conducted by indigenous or non-indigenous scholars. Bishop poses a set of questions related to five main issues: the initiation of a research project; the evaluation of accountability, i.e. an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility; representation in object–subject research relationships; the legitimation that relates to authority and the epistemological background of a research project; and the evaluation of benefits. Bishop sets these questions within complex relationships of dominance and subordination in majority–minority relations.

It is obvious that almost all of the above mentioned elements of indigenous methodologies are indissolubly connected to indigenous ethics, which penetrate all stages of research from the initiation of a research project to knowledge production and dissemination of the research outcomes. Some academic institutions might consider research ethics as merely part of the initiation of a research project, when there is a need to submit an ethics application to an academic institution. (It is worth mentioning that the submission of ethics applications is an obligatory condition of academic research work – especially when related to human and indigenous issues – at most universities in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the US but, surprisingly enough, not in Norway.) Although an ethics application is indeed an essential part of the initiation of any research project on indigenous issues, research ethics should not be considered purely in

³ Concerning strategies of collaboration between indigenous groups and outsider experts in programmes for indigenous communities, cf. Bishop 1996; Harrison 2001.

this narrow sense. In indigenous methodology, cultural and ethical protocols, values and behaviours are, in the words of L. T. Smith, “to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of final results of a study and to be disseminated back to people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood” (Smith 1999, 15).

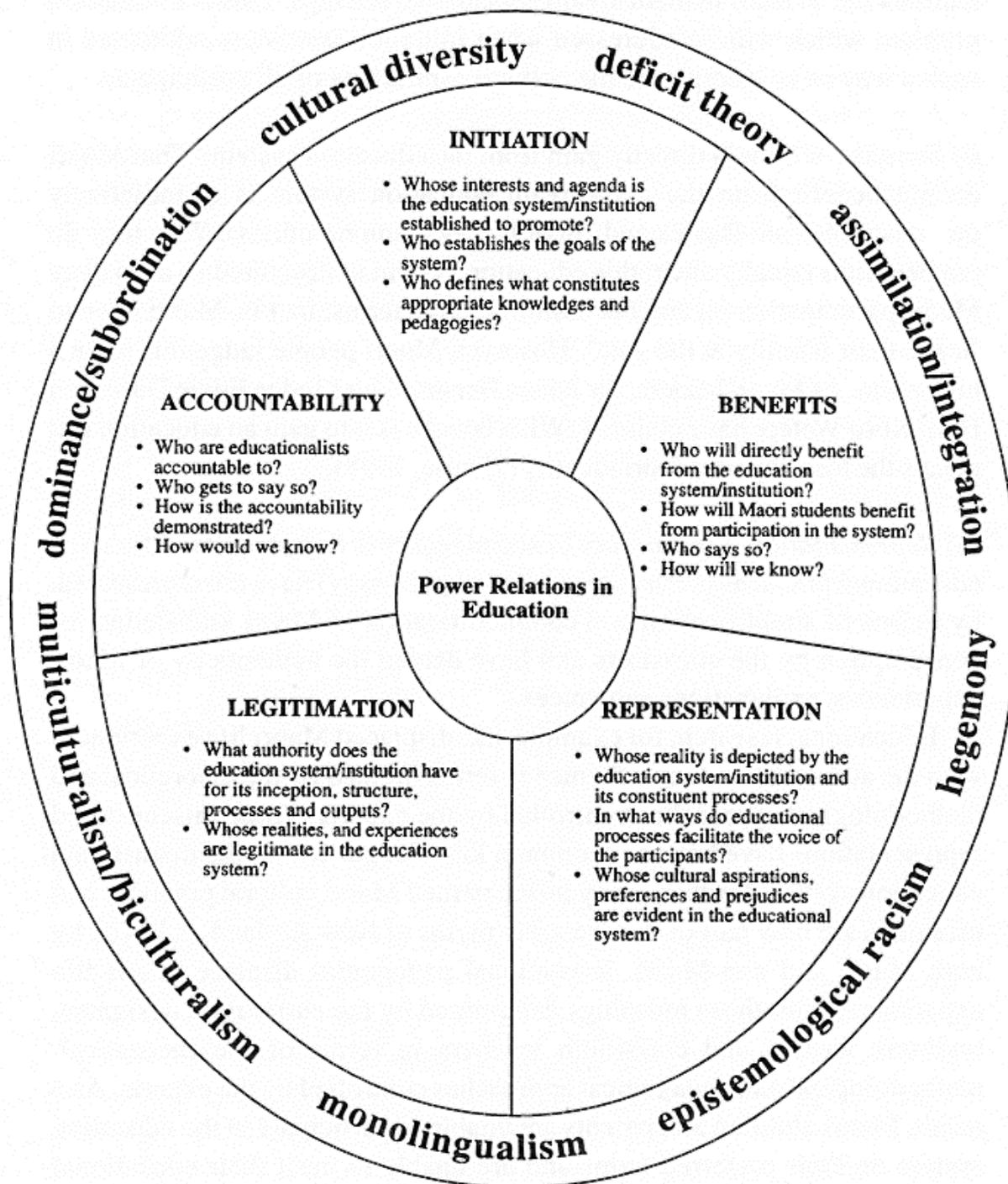


Figure 2 (Bishop & Glynn 1999, 55)

Indigenous methodologies have a great array of purposes and objectives, which cannot all be covered in this short essay. Indigenous methodologies should be designed to ensure that the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples will be observed; to protect indigenous knowledge from misinterpretation and misuse; to demystify knowledge about indigenous peoples; to tell indigenous peoples' stories in their voices; to give credit to the true owners of indigenous knowledge; to communicate the results of research back to the owners of this knowledge, in order to support them in their desire to be subjects rather than objects of research, to decide about their present and future, and to determine their place in the world. Following these methodological issues, indigenous research will strengthen indigenous peoples' identity, which will in turn support indigenous peoples' efforts to be independent: not only legally, politically or economically, but first and foremost intellectually.

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