

**DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES:
RESEARCH AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**
by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, Zed Books, London

Carla Wilson
Knowledge Management Group
Ministry of Social Development

“Research” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. (p.1)

This line, from the introduction to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, sets the scene for an extensive critique of Western paradigms of research and knowledge from the position of an indigenous and “colonised” Māori woman. Tuhiwai Smith’s book challenges traditional Western ways of knowing and researching and calls for the “decolonization” of methodologies, and for a new agenda of indigenous research. According to Tuhiwai Smith, “decolonization” is concerned with having “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices”.

This review focuses on how Tuhiwai Smith’s book can inform non-indigenous researchers who may be involved in research initiatives with indigenous communities. In particular, what a non-indigenous researcher needs to be aware of when researching with indigenous peoples; how non-indigenous researchers can improve their practices with indigenous peoples; and, most fundamentally, whether it is appropriate for non-indigenous researchers to be involved in research with indigenous peoples.

In a sense this review has a very “ethnocentric” focus. An important audience for the book would be indigenous academics and researchers who may be developing indigenous research agendas, methodologies and protocols. A review that focuses specifically on whether this book is useful for a non-indigenous researcher could be read as continuing to (re)inscribe a Western “ethnocentric” view: that any work by indigenous peoples can only be identified as “legitimate” and “real” knowledge if it fits within a Western framework and has value for the dominant non-indigenous culture. However, this review is not intended to negate the views and perspectives of indigenous peoples and offer the “real” review, but rather to offer another reading of Tuhiwai Smith’s book from the perspective of a non-indigenous researcher.

Tuhiwai Smith’s book is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the history of Western research and critiques the cultural assumptions behind research by the dominant colonial culture. The second part focuses on setting a new agenda for indigenous research.

In the first part of the book, Tuhiwai Smith adopts a feminist and critical theory framework. She deconstructs the assumptions, motivations and values that inform Western research practices (the methodologies, the theories and the writing styles) through exploring the Enlightenment and Positivist traditions in which Western research is viewed as a scientific, “objective” process.

Under this Western paradigm, colonisers, adventurers and travellers researched the indigenous Other through their “objective” and “neutral” gaze. Tuhiwai Smith draws on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* to describe how travellers’ and observers’ representations (formal and informal) of indigenous peoples were encoded as the authoritative representation of the Other, thereby framing the wider discourse and attitudes towards indigenous peoples. Their stories became accepted as universal truths, marginalising the stories of the Other. Tuhiwai Smith describes this as “research through imperial eyes”. Tuhiwai Smith’s words are an important reminder of the power of research and representation. Her comments highlight the need for researchers to critique their own “gaze” and to reflect on the potential for their representations to be encoded as the “truth”, and for alternative readings to be marginalised.

Western culture has frequently identified itself as the ethnocentric centre of legitimate knowledge. Tuhiwai Smith, however, critiques dominant Western discourses of knowledge and objectivity by demonstrating how Western stories and “regimes of truth” are situated within a particular cultural, social system that needs to be “decolonized”. Western research brings with it a particular set of values and conceptualisations of time, space, subjectivity, gender relations and knowledge. Western research is encoded in imperial and colonial discourses that influence the gaze of the researcher.

Tuhiwai Smith’s book makes it clear that research through “imperial eyes” is not just something for the history books. She rejects the term “post-colonialism” as it implies that colonialism is finished business and argues that colonialism continues to have a profound impact on indigenous peoples. Tuhiwai Smith points to research and technological advances by corporations and governments, particularly with regard to the environment, which fail to recognise indigenous belief systems and knowledges. This book provides a timely reminder that colonial paradigms continue to evolve and to marginalise indigenous groups and that non-indigenous researchers need to consider how their “worldview” may (re)inscribe the dominant discourse of the Other.

The second part of the book is targeted at indigenous researchers and those working with, alongside and for indigenous communities. This part focuses on setting an agenda for indigenous research and addresses some of the issues currently being discussed amongst indigenous communities. Tuhiwai Smith continues to position her discussion on “decolonization” within feminist and critical critiques of positivism. She

advocates the value of research for indigenous peoples and the need to retrieve spaces of marginalisation as spaces from which to develop indigenous research agendas.

Tuhiwai Smith explores research practices that offer alternatives to Western paradigms and that eschew racism, ethnocentrism and exploitation. Her often highly theoretical text is balanced by references to a wide range of indigenous peoples case studies and initiatives, including her own research experiences. These research case studies help to confirm that an indigenous peoples' research agenda is something "real" that is evolving and currently developing amongst indigenous peoples, and is not simply an abstract or theoretical "wish list". It would be useful to see further detailed work produced by Tuhiwai Smith that outlines the research frameworks and methods of indigenous peoples' research projects.

The book provides a detailed study of development in Māori research and follows the transition from "Māori as the researched" to "Māori as the researcher". Tuhiwai Smith discusses the validity of Māori knowledge and ways of knowing and again uses many relevant case studies to situate her argument. Tuhiwai Smith provides a comprehensive overview of Kaupapa Māori research, the process of privileging Māori values and attitudes in order to develop a research framework that is "culturally safe". Within this Kaupapa Māori framework, Tuhiwai Smith touches on the issue of whether it is appropriate for non-Māori researchers to participate in research with Māori. She argues that within Kaupapa Māori research at present, being Māori is an essential criterion for carrying out research. However, she also suggests that those who are not Māori are not precluded from participating in research that has a Kaupapa Māori orientation.

Tuhiwai Smith does not explore the issue of non-indigenous researchers in great detail and I did not gain a clear understanding of her views on this issue. However, she does stress that the purpose of this book is to develop indigenous peoples as researchers and to address the issues indigenous people face. The role of non-indigenous researchers is marginal to this primary objective. Tuhiwai Smith mentions that she does have views on this topic and I would be interested to read more about her views on the relationship between non-indigenous researchers, indigenous researchers and indigenous communities.

Tuhiwai Smith comments that when reading texts she often is excluded from the focus and needs to orientate herself to a text that focuses on Britain or the United States, for example. She also comments that indigenous peoples often do not see themselves represented in texts or if they do see themselves, they often do not recognise the representation. Thus her book specifically places the experiences of indigenous peoples at the centre of the story, and is especially valuable in that it places the experiences of Māori in the New Zealand context at the centre of the (his)story.

While the brief of Tuhiwai Smith's book goes beyond the New Zealand story, I have some concerns about the way that the book potentially universalises the experiences of indigenous peoples. Tuhiwai Smith positions herself as a Māori woman but her book addresses the experiences of all indigenous peoples. While I recognise that many indigenous peoples have experienced colonisation and marginalisation of their knowledges and truths, I felt uncomfortable with the extent to which the book claims many of the experiences as universal to all indigenous peoples.

Tuhiwai Smith problematises the use of the term "indigenous" in the introduction and acknowledges that this term appears to collectivise many vastly different experiences. However, I fear that its extensive use throughout the book may serve to universalise the multiple experience of indigenous peoples and therefore potentially (re)inscribe Western discourses regarding the sameness of the Other. While it is important to recognise shared experiences between indigenous and colonised peoples, it is also important to recognise difference. It would have been useful if this message was integrated throughout the text, not simply in the introduction.

The focus of this review was to consider the value of this book to a non-indigenous (Pākehā) researcher involved in research with indigenous peoples (Māori). However, the prime focus of this book is on developing a research agenda for "insider" research within indigenous communities. The current and future role of the non-indigenous researcher is marginal to the "decolonizing methodologies" agenda. While all my questions were not answered, the book provides a valuable reminder of the need to reflect on, and be critical of, one's own culture, values, assumptions and beliefs and to recognise these are not the "norm". The detailed insight into New Zealand history, and the alternative readings of this history, provides a particularly valuable lesson of the need to be aware of, and open to, different worldviews and ways of knowing. It also reminds researchers to consider whose stories are being privileged and whose stories are being marginalised in any representations of the Other.