Indigenous communities, disasters, and disaster research: surviving disaster research on, with, and by Māori.

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Abstract

This paper presents insights into the impacts on Māori of the Christchurch earthquakes, and draws on personal research experiences to discuss disaster research with impacted minority communities. Three topics are discussed. The first is the role of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) in disasters. If IK such as *Mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) is to be 'integrated' with science to somehow build societal resilience, which systems are these integration processes building the resilience of, for whom?

The second issue I discuss is the role of Indigenous culture in the response phases of disasters. My concern is that our culture is in danger of reification, posited as a necessary and sufficient condition for our resilience, and as researchers we are poorly equipped to deal with culture as a pedestal adornment. Drawing on the experiences of two previous and one current project, I discuss some of the ethical, practical, and logistical challenges of working with Indigenous individuals and collectives and challenge the assumption, often codified by Indigenous researchers ourselves, that 'to be indigenous is to be resilient' (see, e.g., Rotarangi & Russell, 2009, p. 209).

Indigenous disaster knowledge

A significant 'addition' has been made to environmental discourse over the past generation of researchers: Indigenous Peoples are back in the fold. In a range of areas including conservation and

wildlife management (Stevens, 2014), ethnobotany (Turner, Ignace, & Ignace, 2000) and fisheries (Plagányi et al., 2013), the knowledge and skills held by Indigenous communities are increasingly (if still problematically) drawn into the 'administration' of the planetary environment. I use the word 'administration' deliberately because bureaucracy is a modern phenomenon that cuts across all cultures and I seek empathy with non-Indigenous people! My point is that while Indigenous systems of experiential knowledge, developed through continual observation and interaction with local environments, may be *valid* for modern development practices, their *implementation* remains difficult, contested, and fraught.

To the many disciplines now reassessing IK, we add disaster risk reduction (DRR). Many Indigenous communities hold ancient knowledge accrued through generations of occupation upon lands and alongside waters with characteristic environmental hazards to which these communities have adapted. The 2004 Boxing Day tsunami struck around the Indian Ocean killed 230,000 but many local communities recognised the warning signs and reacted accordingly (Becker, Johnston, Lazrus, Crawford, & Nelson, 2008). Eriksen and Hankins (2013) explore the potential to retain Indigenous fire knowledge through training and employment strategies with wildfire management agencies. They focused on the comparative knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal elders, cultural practitioners and land stewards in connection with modern political constructs of fire in Australia and the USA. The findings emphasise linkages between the integration of Indigenous and state agency fire cultures, and the ways in which different types of knowledge are shared or withheld.

Pro-actively reducing risk from environmental hazards is perhaps the prime value of IK in disaster management, with many Indigenous communities enacting DRR strategies in their planning (e.g., village locations), design (traditional home architecture) and life styles (Shaw, Sharma, & Takeuchi, 2009). The role of Indigenous spirituality in enabling Indigenous health is also emerging (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009). However, historical colonisation and contemporary oppression have limited the extent to which many of these communities can continue to act upon their traditional insights.

Urbanisation is also leading to a fragmentation and redundancy of much of this knowledge for those Indigenous communities that relocate (or are forcibly relocated) away from their traditional territories (Lambert, 2014).

Indigenous communities in disaster and emergency management

If IK is now contributing to how societies understand and manage environmental hazards, what of the communities that embody this knowledge? Wadsworth, Serrao-Neumann and Low-Choy (2013) have researched the part played by Indigenous Ranger Programs in the response to Cyclone Yasi which struck coastal North Queensland on 3rd February 2011. Effective mobilisation of this network is a testament not only to the strong relationships within and between Indigenous communities in North Queensland but also the overall value of the Ranger Programs in delivering skills and resources critical to the immediate response of communities facing natural hazards and disasters.

In Ōtautahi/Christchurch, Māori cultural institutions and practices have had an important role in both the immediate response to the disaster and the subsequent (drawn out) recovery. I'm proud to promote the work done by Māori researchers at Lincoln University where three interlinked projects have contributed greatly to our understanding. The first project comprised interviews of Māori first responders (Urban Search and Rescue, police), managers in the CBD at the time of the February event, Māori teachers and others with important roles such as marae managers (Lambert & Mark-Shadbolt, 2012; Lambert, Mark-Shadbolt, Ataria, & Black, 2012; see also Paton, Johnston, Mamula-Seadon, & Kenney, 2014). Interviews were initiated primarily through personal contacts and snowballing – the Māori world remains a very small network and we also collated as much secondary material as we could which has proved invaluable in 'joining the dots' given the paucity of strong statistical data on Māori (see Statistics NZ, 2002). A second project (funded by Te Puni Kokiri) investigated the social and economic resilience of whānau through the disaster and involved more

extensive interviews including with those who left the city after the disaster (as we found, it wasn't always, or only, because of the disaster; Lambert, 2012; Lambert & Mark-Shadbolt, 2013).

The third project, due to finish at the end of this year (2014) involved working with a Kaupapa Māori provider in researching the post-disaster support networks for Tangata Whaiora (mental health clients). This project was funded by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, a Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE) hosted by Auckland University.[1] The following section will deal with this project in more depth.

Māori mental health support post-disaster

The Ngā Pae project came about through a personal contact with a Lincoln University colleague who is a Board member of the provider. The organisation had been praised by the Ministry of Health for their response to the earthquakes and the Board was interested in knowing more about what it was they had done that was effective, and what lessons could be learnt for other providers and for future disasters. They also wanted the stories of their clients recorded to acknowledge the tremendous personal and community challenges that had been faced.

The project had to gain approval from the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee (HEC) who posed over 40 questions to my application with particular concern for the selection, approach and engagement of Tangata Whaiora. For an institution like Lincoln with its farming college background, the keywords 'Māori' and 'mental health' are neither common nor, I suspect, comforting!

The actual research approach was finalised in consultation with Te Awa staff and Board members, with the Whānau representative on the Board engaged to facilitate interviews. One key option was

[1] I have been consistent and fulsome in my acknowledgment of Ngā Pae's assistance in this research while expressing concerns on its CoRE rebid proposal which ultimately did fail, failing to be even shortlisted through the Royal Society of New Zealand selection process. The government has since announced additional funding and a new process which is welcomed by myself and many other Māori researchers who would struggle to have community-focused Māori-centric projects funded by other sources.

to have a Whānau representative available for personal support during interviews, and to allow Tangata Whaiora to seek support from outside of the organisation. My response to HEC was to emphasise these regular communications and meetings, and the oversight of the Whānau representative and Board. Approval was given by HEC on December 17th 2012 (HEC 2012-45).

I had always framed this research as a Kaūpapa Māori project but there is a constant risk this approach becomes cliché. Kaupapa Māori research now has a considerable body of evidence and ever-expanding communities of practice. It is both a means to progress research with Māori and a fundamental *expression* of Māori culture within research. Kaupapa Māori perhaps be better understood as an array of research 'principles' for engaging with Māori. Here Linda Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies* (Smith, 1999, p. 120) provides some clear and simple (but not simplistic) rules which I have always found very helpful:

Aroha ki te tāngata: a respect for people.
Kanohi kitea: 'the face seen' (i.e. you present yourself to people face to face).
Titiro, whakarongo, kōrero: look, listen, (then) speak.
Manaaki ki te tāngata: share and host people, be generous.
Kia tūpato: be cautious.
Kaua e takahia te mana o te tāngata: do not trample over the mana of people.
Kaua e māhaki": don't flaunt your knowledge.

Such principles are not limited to research with Māori and could be seen as fundamental to any ethical research that relies on human participants (see, e.g., Whyte, 1991). Grounding research in Māori lives, from the use of Māori terminology to the situational awareness of social and cultural engagement that occurs specific to Māori collectives presupposes the legitimacy of *mātauranga Māori* and the value of Māori culture. A manifestation of this in my work was the provision of kai, a practice I began at the outset of the interviews which involved me calling in to a local café or supermarket and buying some items of food. At first I bought cakes or donuts, classic Kiwi tucker that would always get a smile. After several interviews I became aware of how many participants

were diabetic. In discussion with a board and a staff member, I switched to a large punnet of mussels; still a delicacy with Māori communities but one I was more comfortable providing.

One challenge from HEC was the size of the *koha* or gift for participants which I had originally decided was to be $100 and gifted as a grocery voucher. A key institutional principle of the provision of gifts to research participants is that the gift not be an amount or of a value that would 'entice' participation. Through the processes of the ethics application process I decided to reduce the amount to $50. In the final phase of interviews (January-February 2014) the project was discussed in a Whānau meeting and the koha of $50 was obviously mentioned (several attendees had already been interviewed by this stage). When I arrived for an unscheduled visit immediately following this meeting I was besieged by volunteers wanted to be interviewed. Some specifically mentioned the 'fifty dollars'. The majority of participants were beneficiaries with weekly incomes of approximately $270-$300 of which perhaps $60 would be discretionary income. Given this level of poverty, what koha amount would not entice people to be interviewed?!

I was comfortable with this turn of events from a Kaupapa Māori perspective for two reasons. Firstly, the koha was reciprocity for the fundamental knowledge which became research data and amounted to a small fraction of the total cost of the research (I spent more on research texts than koha over the course of the project). Secondly, as noted, most participants live in poverty. To be able to contribute to their living costs, albeit for just a week, is not something I choose to have any ethical angst over.

Discussion

Researching a disaster provides challenges and opportunities beyond what a researcher would normally face. The challenges remain to be robust and rigorous in the academic context while

remaining ethical and honest. I will discuss three wider issues relevant to my experiences in researching this disaster through the lens of Māori experiences.

The first is the challenge of integrating Indigenous Knowledge into the eclectic disaster literature that is generally dominated by geological and engineering disciplines. For Māori, what institutions and practices enable the rapid and accurate assessment of the location, movement, and needs of our people, individuals, whānau, marae and communities? How do contemporary manifestations of Māori community translate into tangible support networks in locations of known and future environmental hazards; through periods of environmental stress including long-term climate change; and through the dislocation and disruption evident in post-disaster landscapes including built environments? It should be clear from these questions that the integration of IK into modern DRR will be a contested political arena, and the experience of Indigenous Peoples everywhere attests to the brutal nature of these contests and the politico-economic risks (among others) that Indigenous individuals and groups must face to be heard (Lambert, Athayde, Yin, Baudoin, & Okorie, 2014).

At a lower level of debate, though arguably fundamental with respect to actual research, is the necessity of demanding rigorous research. One issue that I try and promote amongst my students is to move away, or at least bolster, our reliance on narratives (commonly gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups). My reasoning is that while Indigenous Peoples have the best stories in the world - such ancient wisdom, such holistic understanding, such tragic modern history - we tell and retell these stories *ad nauseam* but to what purpose?! Many here in Aotearoa would argue that the situation for Māori is worse than ever with growing poverty despite the Treaty Settlements process and regular reference to a 'Māori economy'. Influencing policy will require ongoing programmes with robust results and academic credibility.

As an example of diversifying methods, I use Qualitative Comparative Analysis, a set-theoretic case-study approach that gives robust results with small sample sizes (Ragin, 2009), a common challenge for Indigenous and other community researchers. QCA was used to analyse survey data including

pre- and post-disaster self-recorded well-being with results showing individual Māori resilience can be seen as a various configurations of pre-disaster economic security and family networks. While it is controversial for some of my Māori peers, I argue economic well-being trumps 'culture' as a factor in disaster resilience (Lambert, Forthcoming 2014).

Research is a 'given' in any culture, being part of any collective strategy that is still reliant on tactical abilities as held by individuals and communities. As a colonised people, Māori sit within and alongside Western philosophy: an appreciation, of Pākehā history and philosophy is vital to framing a successful strategy. By accepting and using *mātauranga* and *Kaupapa Māori*, Pākehā-centric state organs exhibit an essential modern skill: the ability and pragmatism to assimilate 'all forms or aspects of social activity without exception', to understand and apply, not only of one particular methodology but *any methodology or variation* (Feyerbend, 1975, p. 10). I argue that Māori must likewise be able to pass from one approach to another 'in the quickest and most unexpected manner' (*ibid*.).

Fieldwork with any group is always a dynamic process, and relations with Indigenous communities are often 'on a knife-edge'. Good research is supported from above and below, is networked both here and overseas, and will be disseminated to all those who need to know. At all levels this requires understanding, vision, commitment, courage, cooperation, and perseverance. These criteria are also evident in the second discussion topic, the participation of Indigenous groups in disaster and emergency management where their culture might, in some way, influence their engagement. We know Māori cultural practices were evident in the hectic, stressful but also exhilarating disaster response period. But what lessons have been learnt to forge a more efficient response to future? Working with Te Awa o te Ora and their mental health community is to walk in a world where stigma from mental illness outdoes ethnicity as a factor in the marginalisation of this community. Often the isolation is from their own whānau who are interpreted by the Whaiora as part of the problem or

perhaps the main problem in their health and safety (drugs, alcohol and violence were the common factors mentioned in interviews).

Conclusions

IK certainly 'adds value' to disaster research. Research in Aotearoa NZ aimed at disaster risk reduction will draw on iwi capital (economic, environmental, human, and cultural) and contribute through ongoing education, training and mentoring programmes. Arguably *all* research in this country will be reliant on the increasing sophistication of Māori relationships with public and private, local and global contacts. In this sense, it might be said research in disaster and emergency management is taking a necessary Indigenous turn and Aotearoa New Zealand can lead the way.

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