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## Chapter 9

# Countering Epistemological Exclusion Through Critical- Ethical Research to Support Social Justice: Methodological Comparisons Between Australia and the United Kingdom

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The dominance of neoliberalism in the west such as Australia and the UK and its insistence on impact measurement can lead researchers into an unquestioning adoption of scientific methods of measurement and data collection. We argue that if methods are not appropriate for the participants or context they are likely to reproduce existing societal inequities and positions of marginalisation and powerlessness. The theoretical position for fit-for-purpose research and evaluation tools, and specifically for social science methods is put forward theoretically and substantiated with cases drawn from diverse communities in Australia and the UK. Further, we will use autoethnography to share our experiences to argue that any research or evaluation endeavour should have as many benefits for the participants as for the researchers and wider stakeholders, a measure we argue should be the acid test for research ethics. The implications of these findings for researchers, evaluators, practitioners and policy makers are drawn out.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

We are two seemingly culturally disparate researchers from opposite ends of the globe who are collaborating over our shared interest in doing research differently. Both of us have worked in community and education sectors and in practitioner-oriented roles. When we first met near Kaz's hometown of Keswick in Cumbria, our differences were keenly met as opportunities to learn from each other. Wicked problems (Grint, 2008) were quickly identified in our shared discomfort of dominant research paradigms that are persistently being applied in a variety of situations, which we identified as raising major ethical concerns for the communities with whom the research is being undertaken. We shared our different yet similar experiences of undertaking research in diverse (what would commonly be termed 'underprivileged') communities, realising that whilst the contexts varied, our social justice values meant that similar tensions were arising in our practices as researchers. In this chapter, we will use autoethnography to weave our experiences as researchers into the analysis of traditional research methodologies and the pervasiveness of their use in education and community-based research. We will also argue that in the age of the Anthropocene, including, valuing and validating Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing is crucial in solving wicked problems and avoiding the re-production of knowledge that is known not to contribute to social justice or change (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Autoethnography is a systematic description and analysis of personal experience that allows understanding of wider cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). We are using it here to bring our personal experiences of countering epistemological exclusion to the fore so as to inform other researchers. This method itself is often subject to epistemological exclusion, however, as Wall (2006:56) says: "the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says what I know matters". Our individual subjective experiences can be understood as individual political acts against the mighty 'traditional research' movement that may lead to wider change (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). We hope that our 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973, p. X) of our experiences and practices (Alazewski, 2006) will enable other researchers to consider how they research in a socially just way and avoid being or creating further epistemological exclusion. In using our experiences, we will offer some viable alternatives to traditional research that we will argue are more fit for purpose, ethically conscious and equally as rigorous as ways of understanding complex human issues. We will begin by introducing ourselves and contextualising this paper.

## Kaz Stuart

*I am a White British woman from a working class background who ‘made good.’ I was bullied at school and written off as an educational failure at an early age. Hours of hard work meant I scraped enough grades to make a primary school teacher. My early experiences of oppression and stigmatisation meant I was keen to ensure that social justice was embedded in my teaching. Since then I have worked in education, social care, health, youth work, research and higher education settings. I have worked hard to live my values in each of these roles despite disparate challenges.*

*Conducting anti-oppressive research has been one of the keenest challenges I have faced. The power dynamic invoked by research are complex – there is often a funder or a sponsor, someone with an interest in the results, the wishes and desires of the researcher themselves, and these often butt against the needs of the research participants who didn’t ask for the research to be done. However, much they may sign up, the research is still done to them to some extent. This came home to me powerfully when researching the experiences of ‘gang involved’ young people in Sheffield where the needs of young people and statutory agencies competed. My colleague and I felt a great responsibility to be able to collect data in a way that would respectfully support the young people that we worked with rather than taking information from them. We were further mindful of the need to protect them from reprisals from peers or intervention by statutory services. We felt a great obligation to create findings that would support the Ending Gang and Youth Violence initiative, and yet the stories the young people told us did not conform to the expectations of the funder.*

*This research situation highlighted the power dynamics that are always at play and prompted me to further examine and question appropriate methods, tools, processes and ethics to engage in meaningful research with marginalised and disadvantaged young people. Further, I questioned how I could disseminate in ways that do not add yet more weight to the prejudicial discourses around young people in the UK.*

## Marnee Shay

*I am an Aboriginal woman whose traditional connections are to Daly River in Northern Territory, but I have lived and worked in South East Queensland most of my life. My professional background was originally as a youth worker before re-training as a school teacher. I have been a teacher in multiple education settings, including flexi schools, TAFE and universities. I am very passionate about my*

*community and my culture. Who I am is bound with my work as a researcher. When entering communities where I am researching, it is part of my cultural protocol to say who I am and what my connections are. My family connections and relationship to country (or land) are the ways in which I relate to those who I am researching with. Therefore, my conduct as a researcher is interconnected to my family and my community. The responsibility I have as an Aboriginal researcher meant that very early in my research journey I had an acute awareness of the implications of my research design and ethical issues that would arise for me. In the not-too-distant past, Indigenous peoples were excluded from even accessing university education, or indeed, any education.*

*My generation is the first to benefit from our Elders and Warriors who marched the streets and resisted the systematic social and racial exclusion that our people has been subjected to since the British colonised Australia in 1778. In the past few decades, Indigenous scholars have emerged with a range of theories and methodologies that assist Aboriginal researchers like me who want to do research to make a difference in my community but find that Western methodologies are often conflicting with Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. When undertaking my PhD, I noticed that some Indigenous methodologies are still developing, such as yarning. Although yarning allowed for the distinct ways in which Indigenous people share information, the existing scholarship was relying on positivist methods to collect data. This took me on a path of considering how creative and non-traditional methodologies might assist in finding new answers to old problems in relation to Indigenous Australians. Our people are often problematised and I have often wondered if this helps to keep researchers in work. Why continue to seek answers in the same ways that have not produced any social progress for our communities? Furthermore, given the ongoing disadvantage our people face, shouldn't we look to research that includes the perspectives of all in our communities?*

## **Context of Neoliberal Measurement**

The dominance of neoliberalism in Western countries such as Australia and the UK and its impact on the education and community sectors provide an insistent demand for evidence of success, enshrined in seven national 'What Works' centres. The 'What Works' agenda has a positivist ontology and epistemology that privileges a medical model of working – evidence-based practice. If there is no evidence of success within these ontological assumptions, the intervention is not commissioned. The assumptions within this paradigm include the ontological belief that there is a single 'truth' that can be identified, for example, whether a youth programme works or not, and that this can be revealed by experiments and random control trials in an

experimental epistemology. These assumptions are well suited to a wide range of research questions and contexts, but not all issues and contexts. In our experience it is, however, being applied without discrimination as if it is the only method of research. For us this represents a form of epistemological exclusion. Similarly, in Australia, a positivist paradigm prevails as exemplified by the ‘Close the Gap’ policy which aims to; “enable and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live healthy and prosperous lives” (Australian Government, 2018). The evidence of the policy benefits is collected within a Western positivistic tradition rather than a localised culturally sensitive way. Methodological disempowerment is present within an empowering policy.

In the UK, the drive for evidence-based practice commenced with the Labour Government’s modernising agenda that pledged evidence-based policy making (Cabinet Office, 1999). The establishment of five ‘What Works’ centres followed the year after (Davies, Nutley & Smith, 2000). Government agencies, quangos, and researchers joined the zeitgeist. The result was a UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice (ESRC, 2007), government-authored evaluation handbook (H.M. Treasury, 2010), and hierarchical standards of evidence (Nesta, 2014) all privileging quantitative data, validated tests, and random control trials.

There is nothing wrong with these methods per se, but when applied indiscriminately issues arise. The evidence-based practice or medical science model supposes that there are identifiable controllable factors (e.g. heart beats) that are measurable (e.g. by pulse rate) and the impact of interventions (e.g. pacemaker or drugs) to the control factor can be measured with comparison to a control group who do not receive the intervention (Petr, 2009).

Evidenced-based research works well in a medical setting but does not necessarily apply to social situations. For example, young people have many characteristics, and many factors are influencing them (parenting, peer pressure, media, thoughts, feelings, beliefs) and access or lack of access to cultural, social and economic that cannot be controlled or isolated. The impact of any intervention may differ depending on multiple variables of time, place and relationship, and controls cannot be established as groups of young people are not identical. There is neither linear, controllable nor predictable work with young people. As Strelitz (2013:22) states, social work outcomes are multiple and contested. The mismatch of these post-positivistic assumptions to social science is well documented (Nutley, Davies & Walker, 2002:2; Little, 2010:23) and yet the discourse of medical science prevails in social science settings.

The implications of this mismatch are multiple. Firstly, young people and communities may experience data collection being ‘done to’ them. If the demands of validated quantitative tools prevail then the data collection tool takes precedence over the participant’s needs. There are many examples of the kind of data that is

collected in ways that are meaningful for researchers and that jar for the participants. In the UK, for instance, the National Citizenship Service is aimed at all young people regardless of demographic. Presumably, this includes young people with low literacy, special educational needs, and English as a second language, and yet the evaluation form is a written document that requires literacy skills to be completed. A subliminal message may be received that ‘national citizens can read’ by default if you cannot read you are not a citizen. Not to mention the discomfort those young people may feel in the moment, their literacy abilities laid bare by a blunt evaluation tool.

Secondly, when the needs of the researcher are privileged over those of the participants, there is a risk of cultural unsafety. Cultural safety is a term developed by Maori Nursing academic, Irahepti Rasdem, who argues that critique of cultural dominance, power and racism are necessary to improve health care setting (Cox & Taua, 2012). Moreover, Cox and Simpson (2015) outline the “...potential of cultural safety to concentrate researchers attention on power imbalance, cultural dominance and structural inequality...” (p2), which assists in challenging ideas about “who holds the power to define what counts as knowledge” (p.7). The ‘interview’ protocol of direct questioning and recording of answers is a Western premise that may not be culturally safe in many cultures. The use of direct questions alone, compounded by potentially sensitive topics, exaggerated by the use of a tape recorder may mean no or low participation rates, poor data, or data were taken at the expense of the discomfort of participants (Speer & Hutchby, 2003 & Al-Yeteem, 2012). An example of such issues is outlined by (Oliver, 2010) who identified the presence of a recording device as being disruptive to the research process. When researching with groups who have historically been objectified, surveilled and dehumanized, such as Indigenous people and other groups such as gang involved young people, this method should be reconsidered by researchers.

Thirdly, the evidence-based practice movement is entirely geared towards showing that an intervention has worked. The data collected is therefore for the benefit of the providers of that intervention, with no gain for the participants engaged at that time. There may be long-term returns to future participants, but none to those questioned at that point in time. The focus on provider benefit constitutes an exploitation of the participants who are potentially giving their time for no reward, whereas the researcher is often in a paid role, and the research is likely to contribute to their reputation and career progression. The notion of benefit is an ethical concern and is a fundamental issue that exemplifies the power researchers exert over participants. If researchers think critically about the issue of beneficence, it will also ensure that data is not taken from people and used for means out of their awareness.

The ‘Close the Gap’ policy in Australia is an excellent example of how data is often used in ways that benefit an interventionist evidence agenda. Close the Gap was initially a response to the critical disparity of educational and health outcomes

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Holland, 2016). The Australian Government adopted the approach in policy and now reports on data such as school attendance, literacy, and numeracy outcomes and mortality rates, reporting only on statistical data collected by the Government through Government agencies (Australian Government, 2016). There is no accompanying data from Indigenous perspectives about their experiences or lived realities of why such statistics exist when the Australian Government reports on this data. For example, national year 12 completion rates are reported yearly. However, there is no reporting of whether schools are complying with mandates to embed Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum or if schools are employing Indigenous staff, which are known to increase engagement of Indigenous students (Price, 2012).

There is a cultural expectation that ‘evidence’ of inequity and how to address inequities is needed to inform social change on important issues. However, as technology and globalization move at alarmingly fast rates, research should challenge both the need for cultural change and the perception of what constitutes ‘real’ knowledge. As Rigney (2001) aptly states: “Science as a social institution produces, consumes and markets a knowledge economy. Science is a cultural phenomenon that is simply big business for nation states. Therefore, it is not surprising that science is widely accepted as authoritative in constructing ‘truthful’ realities in modern Western societies.” (p. 2). Together the three factors outlined above, doing evidence-based research to young people, in culturally unsafe means, with no returns for the participants is oppressive research reproduces the injustices that the participants may already be experiencing, and further may reproduce dominant discourses of the truth, omitting alternative constructions and ontologies. It is therefore intrinsically unethical.

## **Indigenous Knowledges in the Anthropocene**

Ways of being, knowing and doing is not a culturally benign discussion. Western knowledges continue to dominate the epistemic realm of knowledge production, emphasising White, patriarchal, imperialism, while Indigenous knowledges continue to be positioned as a paradigm on the peripheral (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2015). Indigenous Australian knowledge systems are amongst the oldest in the world, that has had at least 50, 000 years of refining (Australian Government, 2017). Although colonisation brutally disrupted many aspects of Indigenous knowledge systems, much knowledge is still in existence and practised today. And as many other cultures (including Western), knowledges and ways of being, knowing and doing have progressed as technology and globalisation have changed the ways in which many knowledges and now shared and developed. As a people that lived sustainably in harsh environments for tens of thousands of years, there is much to learn from



Indigenous knowledge systems and indeed in how the knowing occurs. Modern adaptations of Indigenous knowledges in research methodologies such as yarning (Bessarab & N'Gandu, 2008) must not be dismissed or seen as less rigorous than other social science methods. Furthermore, inclusion of Indigenous people in all aspect of the research process ensures “[T]he continuation of Indigenous scholars’ engagement with the intellectual traditions of their cultures draws upon the emergence of a broader global intellectual movement through which the ‘colonised’ and the ‘marginal’ speak back to the ‘centre’” (Rigney, 2006, p. 7).

## **A Critical-Ethical Research**

We propose a critical-ethical research that offers epistemological inclusivity. The first premise is that research is fit for purpose. To establish this, the researcher has to truly and deeply understand the people or community that they seek to engage with. Developing the understanding does not mean online or textbook research; it means getting to know people, building relationship, becoming culturally competent. Prioritisation of relationships and understanding the community and context is a precursor to and the bedrock of any critical-ethical research process. Research, to us, is a relational activity, it occurs at the interface of people, a person/participant, and researcher. Establishing authentic relationships, rather than arriving, taking data and leaving, is therefore important.

Some critical conversations can take place within this relationship. The first will be about the research project, what the aims are, why it is thought to be important, and the participants will contribute their views to this dialogue. Ideally, they would even create the research questions. Secondly, the way in which the research will be conducted will be discussed, and culturally safe methods agreed on that have meaning and relevance for the participants and researchers alike. Thirdly, the outcomes of the research will be discussed, and these will benefit the people who are involved as well as the researcher and any imbalances openly acknowledged and reviewed. This process ensures that critical discussions around power, outcomes, and ownership occur, and a shared understanding of ethical practices are established. Research then operates from a place of reciprocity and authentic collaboration based on relationships. Furthermore, researching in this critical-ethical manner reinforces the strengths of communities as experts on their own experiences, and as owners of the solutions to the problems that they experience.

This is not new thinking as these principles are at the heart of participative action research (PAR). The basic assumption of PAR is that research should be used to reduce the harmful effects of oppression by involving participants in the construction of knowledge, a critical examination of the world around them, and action to address social problems (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Winter & Munn-Giddings 2001:

261; Reason 2003; McIntosh 2010). We believe that this should be the case in all research, not just PAR. These notions are also enshrined in many codes of ethical research practice, but not fully or critically thought through and applied. As te Riele and Brooks (2016) point out, they are all too often rushed through in order to get to the findings. We suggest, however, that these critical ethical principles transcend one particular method to become the basis for all research. Researching the lived experiences of people in a way that honours who they are and that enables them to participate freely can be a challenge for researchers but we should not shy away from that challenge. Moreover, as universities increasingly push outcomes agendas underpinned by neoliberalism, we as researchers need to consider the juxtaposition we all too often find ourselves in; wanting to do critical and ethical research, which often takes more time while also meeting our key performance indicators through x number of publications and x number of research grants.

## **Our Case Studies**

Two methodological case studies are presented, one from Kaz's work in the UK with young people who were involved in inner city gangs and youth violence and one from Marnee's work in Australia on exploring Indigenous educative roles in flexi schools. Flexi schools are schools that are alternatives to mainstream education. They grew up from low key and underfunded provision in parks and shopping malls

*Figure 1. Creative capture of narrative data (source unknown)*



but now comprise fully accredited schools that are either independent, annexed to high schools or run by community groups or churches. Both research projects needed to demonstrate respect for the participants, develop trust, and enable critical discussion of the significant issues experienced by the participants. The commonality in the case studies is their central focus on relationships and stories of participants experiences. There are strong methodological similarities; Kaz's example, uses a narrative framework and Marnee's employs a yarning framework. Yarning is a distinct form of story and knowledge sharing to Aboriginal Australians but also shares similarities to how stories are valued epistemologically in First Nations cultures globally (Bessarab and N'gandu, 2010). Interestingly, after distinguishing epistemic differences and cultural characteristics that help define both ways of knowing, we were able to find common ground in terms of values and principles for conducting story, narrative of yarning research, despite our cultural differences.

### **Critical Realisations: Kaz**

*Two critical incidents arose simultaneously for me. The first was within my PhD study where my lead supervisor asked me to remove my collages and poems from my thesis. He did not feel that they were academic enough despite my attempts to situate them as reflexive artefacts. I was given dire warnings that 'the panel' would not like them and that they would jeopardise my doctorate. This experience made me realise how self-reinforcing the status quo is. Traditional methods beget traditional researchers and tutors who beget more traditional research. 'Different' is not accepted or tolerated.*

*At this time I was head of research at a youth work Charity called The Brathay Trust in the UK. I had been systematically collecting before and after measures of the outcomes of the five thousand young people who attended. The young people had a choice as to whether to complete the evaluation forms, but how realistically they felt able to invoke that choice I do not know. The use of a before and after, or pre-test and post-test is a classic quasi-experimental approach to 'prove' that something has changed and are promoted widely as high quality evaluation for youth work in the UK. The results were astounding – 90% of the young people had got worse as a result of coming on a Brathay programme. Of course, this was not the case. The young people did not know what they did not know and so could not self-assess at the start, further, no one wants to reveal how 'bad' they are at something when they have just begun a week long residential course, and so they may have also over-exaggerated for peer and tutor acceptance. A traditional researcher may look upon this experience and say that we should have used validated tools to remove the subjectivity of the participants. However, for me, it showed that using the wrong*

*tool in the wrong setting produces the wrong results! If we had talked with the young people we would easily have gained a sense of what changes had occurred for them and why. This would have been time consuming, but better than the time wasting incurred for all collecting meaningless pre and post test data.*

### **Critical Realisations: Marnee**

*I completed a Master's thesis prior to undertaking my PhD. I was very fortunate to receive a scholarship for my Masters study and therefore the timeframes to complete my project were extremely tight and I had no choice but to use the Western method of surveys, which enabled me to know where the gaps were for me and to critically reflect on this for my larger PhD study that I commenced shortly after completing my Masters. I knew I wanted to work with my people (Indigenous Australians) and narrowed down the topic to looking at the educative roles our people were undertaking in an education context called 'flexi school's in Australia. Flexi schools provide educationally disenfranchised young people an opportunity to re-engage in learning and there are high numbers of Indigenous people engaging with this schooling context.*

*I knew instinctively that I would incorporate yarning into the methodology of my study. Yarning is a culturally distinct way of sharing knowledge and conversation in our communities. Yarning can go from formal conversation to informal discussion about family, history, politics and other issues quickly. Incorporating yarning into a research context when there is very little scholarship on yarning as a research methodology was very challenging. As I searched for literature, I realised how limited the discussion was in yarning scholarship about how yarning data was then collected. The method for how yarning was recorded was a critical ethical issue for me – if I am using my identity as an Aboriginal woman to use yarning as a culturally safe method, how am I addressing ethical concerns such as power and control if I was simply going to put an audio recorded on the table and record a whole yarn? I was forced to push the boundaries of existing literature and use an alternative method of 'storyboards' to capture the voices and experiences of Indigenous participants. Participants had far more control and involvement over what was being recorded even though I did not capture all of their stories. I captured the stories that they wanted captured. Therefore, I was putting participants needs and choices above my own.*

Our discussions, theorising and reflections on experiences have led us to propose a critical-ethical research method. That is to say, research that is designed with criticality pertaining to power dynamics and associated ethical concerns as primary concerns. Narratives, stories or yarning, have a number of methodological advantages

that meet the demands of the critical-ethical research proposed. Narratives are the outward expression of personal experience (Patterson, 2009; Koch, 1998; Clandenin & Connelly, 1994), and are the very tools by which humans make sense of experience on a daily basis (Maguire, 1998; Simpson, 2008). Engagement in narrative making and telling is a form of learning and development (Campbell, 1968; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). They have specific uses for children's development (Bettelheim, 1976; Vogler, 2007) and emotional development (Thomas & Killick, 2007), and are used as developmental tools in adventure education (Gray & Birrell, 2000) and organisational development (Denning, 2005; Broussine, 2008). The narratives we listen to, create and tell enable us to resolve issues within the safety of fiction and metaphor (Gabriel, 2000; Bettelheim, 1976; Vogler, 2007; Semino, 2008; Lackoff & Johnson, 1980) and to define ourselves in ways that hold meaning for us (McAdams, 1993; Denning, 2007). The very process of making, telling and interpreting narratives is thought to involve many stages of reflection that lead to learning and development (Moon, 1999; Berne, 1976; McIntosh, 2009) and high-quality data (Gauntlett, 2007). Such is their power, that narratives have therapeutic uses (Morgan, 2011; White, 2007; Maguire, 1998). Narrative research is also a well-established and documented field whether through collecting the narratives of others (Clandenin & Connelly, 1994), or personal narratives in autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Wall, 2006).

Understanding 'What Works' for a young person or indeed any participant, for us, involves understanding a person's narratives of who they are, what circumstances they live in, what their preferences and dislikes are, what they have found works for them and does not work for them in the past, present, and what they think will work for them in the future. These narratives allow for multifaceted data and complex outcomes. They are respectful and valuing, and the process of constructing and narrating the experiences is developmental and beneficial for the person who potentially also learns about themselves. A third and more significant benefit is also accrued as Atweh and Bland argue (2007:189) such collaborations can lead to; "a more socially just and egalitarian society through the realization of the human potential for reason".

Whilst issues of sensitivity need to be deployed within every phase of research (for example, design, recruitment, consent, analysis), we have here focused on the selection of critical-ethical research tools. The creative and narrative approaches, or 'yarning' enabled this to happen. We both had concerns, however, as to how to collect the data. Sitting face to face with a participant and recording their stories did not feel appropriate, respectful or culturally sensitive in the gang environments and Indigenous education context that we worked in respectively.

## **Creative Data Capture**

Creative data collection tools were therefore the mechanism by which we captured the narratives and experiences of participants. This included: journey maps, storyboards, poetry, canvas art, Lego models, photography, filming, body maps and projection techniques. Creative tools are explicit attempts to: “explore new ways of capturing people’s expressive reflections on their own lived experiences, and to meaningfully contribute to social understanding” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 70), and as such are participative co-constructions of meaning with the researcher. The creative approach was vital to gain understanding of the individuals’ experiences. All these data collection tools share a socially constructed and interpretivist approach to multiple ‘realities’ and a clear purpose to elicit depth of meaning and understanding across perspectives rather than aggregated characterisations from non-existent average individuals (Patterson et al. (1998), cited in Allison, 2000).

For an increasingly culturally diverse and diasporic world, creative research methods are necessary. Literat (2013) highlights the suitability of creative media for linguistically diverse communities because they do not rely on English language proficiency. More orientated towards antireductionist ontology (Mason, 2011), creative tools extend our capabilities to cater for emerging knowledges that can arise unexpectedly through providing time and space for participants to engage in more creative ways of thinking and reflecting on their experiences. Although Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006) remind us that the concept of empowerment in research is somewhat over-ambitious, using creative tools and methods gives more authority to participants to decide what is and what is not recorded about them. While for some, creative data collection tools may be daunting, many researchers across disciplines have found they increase engagement, especially for disadvantaged populations (Kramer-Roy, 2015).

A criticism of creative tools is that they are non-naturalistic and so bias the research (McIntosh & Sobiechowska, 2009; Pink, 2009). They are not ‘naturally occurring’ data sets, but this does not logically mean that they create biased research. Social scientists have questioned the need to depart from naturally occurring data (Potter, 2002; Reeves et al., 2009), but as Silverman (2006: 117) points out, even interview data are flawed as they also only offer in-direct representations of experiences rather than experience itself. The creative data collection tools created the time, space and conditions for practitioners to engage in reflection and critical analysis. This, we argue, increases the likelihood of robust research as more thought is given to the endeavour. Gauntlett (2007) argues that visual methods are as defensible as scientific practice in that they allow researchers to: “offer propositions, drawn from data, which can be considered by others” (2007: 54). Surely this is what all good

quality research does? Secondly, all research events are non-naturalistic (Speer, 2002). The presence of an observer and asking of questions creates an unnatural situation that may influence the behaviour or answers of the participants. Rather than pretending any 'naturalism', creative approaches clearly and overtly claim to be non-naturalistic. Such transparency brings the question of bias into the research overtly rather than pretending it has been avoided.

## **Story Telling, Writing, Boarding, Diary Writing and Poetry**

Narratives are perhaps most conventionally collected in a written format. Story is widely recognised now as an emancipatory and participant driven way of knowing (Shabbar, 2015). In many indigenous cultures, story is fundamental to ways of knowing and indeed ways of understanding (Archibald, 2008). A person may tell a story that is recorded, or may write their story down freehand, in a writing frame or storyboard (Cross and Warwick-Booth, 2015), as an essay (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016), diary or poem. These may be done in the moment or over time away from the researcher. It is perhaps easier for revisions to be made to written work to a piece of art work. Words can be erased and struck through as the author creates something that represents them and what they want to share. The process may also be as valuable to the researcher to understand themselves within the research process as it is for the participants to understand theirs. Research diaries are well established as good practice to illuminate reflexivity in research, and Fitzpatrick (2012) extends this process with poetry as a literary research device.

## **Drawing**

We have both used drawn arts as data collection tools. Young people have drawn pictures of themselves, or the topic in questions. They have painted words and images that are important to them on calico and canvases. They have created journey maps illustrating the journey that they have recently travelled in their lives or made personal collages of stickers and images from magazines. Young people have made 'body maps' drawing around themselves and filling the outline with words, objects and symbols that represent them. All of these are meaning making activities, and the choice of tool and materials is important. Literat (2013) proposes that a crucial aspect for researchers is the story that accompanies drawing and visual data. Recording this data can be done through text or other methods with participants, and it is important to use the two equally rather than privileging the text over the artefact.

Drawing based research is not merely about providing paper and pens (Knight et al., 2015). The work of Elden (2012) demonstrates how a well-developed drawing

task, in her case draw your day and concentric circles of closeness, enable the researcher and child to democratically co-create meanings. Elden found that these meanings would have been invisible in a traditional discussion, and that they allowed the multi-voicedness of the child to emerge. Literat (2013) also used drawing to shift power from the researcher to the participant. Artwork is so well established in research that it is a method in itself - arts-based education research (ABED) (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Knight et al., 2015).

## **Lego and 3D Constructions**

Much that is said of drawing can be applied to modelling in that personal narratives are encoded into a creative media. Lego, modelling clay, sand trays, masks and other 3-D media also offer a physical experience which may have a significance in the conveyance of meaning. Scale and size can be emphasised when working in three dimensions. Plastic may be a familiar media for some cultures, whilst clay is more familiar for others. For some the experience of working in a physical media can be more involving, and for others may be more familiar and accessible. The opposite is also true for all media, and some people may find them off-putting and daunting. This reinforces our earlier point around knowing the people you are researching with, and selecting a tool that is fit for purpose. Every choice matters. Gauntlett (2007) used Lego to great effect to explore the identity of leaders and eloquently establishes a powerful rationale for that media.

## **Photography and Film-Making**

In an increasingly digital world, and for people who do not like to create pictures or write text, photographic or film-based data collection may be useful. Young people may use cameras, smart phones and I Pads to capture images – still or video - of places or objects that are significant to them. These methods may be particularly suited to the ICT ‘savvy’ or those with disabilities (Kramer-Roy, 2016) as an accessible documentary tool. A methodology called ‘photovoice’ is emphasised in the literature as a participatory method for social change that engages children and young people through use of images to further discuss their lived experiences (Moletsane et al., 2007). Giving photographic or film equipment to young people is one of the clearest indicators that the usual hierarchical power of researcher over participants has dramatically shifted, as the young person chooses what to frame, capture and show (Allen, 2008). It will be interesting in future years to see how virtual reality and augmented reality contribute to this form of research.



## Analysis, Validity and Robustness of Creative Tools

It is perhaps in the analytical stage that researchers feel most daunted by creative tools. Our familiarity with statistical analysis persuades us that this is a simple process and our unfamiliarity with coding creative tools convinces us that this is problematic. Literat (2013) acknowledges the practical limitations of finding suitable analysis tools and researchers over or misinterpreting data. We believe that analysis of creative artefacts is as robust as analysis of descriptive statistics and involves just as many analytical choices. As Thomson (2008, p. 11) states; “all languages are equally tricksters”. Friese (2012), Boyatzis (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2006: 16) all establish logical, transparent and robust analysis of such data artefacts, and awareness of the choices made and the fitness for purpose is the central question here. As stated previously, knowledge of the participants, their culture and context are vitally important.

Social science often does not aim for a single truth, but for a multiplicity of truths and views (McNiff et al., 1996, p. 9). It adopts a position where the truth is: “incomplete rather than fully apprehended” (McIntosh, 2010, p. 35). The possible exaggeration, embellishment and omissions in participants’ narratives are not weaknesses but part of the individuals’ interpretive endeavour (Denning, 2005, p. 181). As social research rejects the notion of ‘the truth’, then notions of ‘validity’ are also called into question, as nothing is held as ‘true and valid.’ Validity has many meanings, as shown by Cohen, Manion and Morrison’s (2007) identification of 18 types of validity. Its presence in post-positivist work is questionable, and is secured in a form that is congruent with the ethos of research endeavour – participant validation of the final artefacts.

The robustness of such data is secured through ‘crystallisation’. Crystallisation refers to multiple methods and voices creating different perspectives like different sides of a crystal (Richardson, 1994: 523). The different ‘sides’ of the crystal together created a coherent whole, whilst viewing the research through any side of the crystal revealed a different ‘truth’. As Richardson says, crystals: “reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on the angle of our repose” (1994, p. 523). Mason (2011) has used a similar metaphor – facets – to create a rich variety of questions and data to develop knowledge. Other theorists posit the collection of data artefacts as a bricolage or patchwork quilt (Yardley, 2008, p. 1), also with different dimensions, folds, and views where the researcher is; “a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories: one who assembles a theoretical montage through which meaning is constructed and conveyed according to a narrative ethic....that stimulates an inclusive and dynamic dialogue between the researcher and her audience”.

*For Kaz this meant putting the needs of young people ahead of those of adult stakeholders, privileging art as a process before capture on a data recorder, the need for relationship over bureaucracy and the need for clarity to be established before speed of conclusion of research. The result of this was in depth and counter hegemonic findings about ‘young people in gangs’ and a painful outcome as the research I was funded to complete was shelved, however, better this than the exploitation, labelling and continued oppression of young people.*

*For Marnee, similarly, the need to put participant’s rights and comfort ahead of the need to do the research was paramount. In an increasingly pressured university environment, the personal characteristics required to be flexible, responsive and reflexive is not always congruent with the requirements of researchers. Going against the dominant methodological norms (even within social sciences) ensures deeper thinking about ethics, what is best for participants and questioning repeated ways of acquiring knowledge. It is the same ways of ‘knowing’ that have often created the social issue of which we are trying to address as researchers.*

## **CONCLUSION**

There are many challenges researchers face in the existing neoliberal climate impacting on the academy. For researchers motivated by principles of social justice, we argue that it is now not enough to research issues of social inequities; we must resist research paradigms which reinforce social power hierarchies, imbalance and injustices that have created a form of epistemological exclusion. In their place, we should adopt critical-ethical research methods applied with cultural robustness. We must embrace Indigenous knowledges and centre Indigenous ways of being, knowing and particularly in conceptualising any research undertaken about Indigenous people. Using autoethnography, we shared short narratives of how we have resisted such paradigms through our scholarship and identified many alternatives to traditional methodologies that will not necessarily provide new answers to old problems.

What we have presented here are not fixed solutions to a static problem. As the nature of the world in the Anthropocene and of research constantly changes, the tools available and appropriate for the research purpose should also evolve. What must drive the research focus is a reflexive consideration of participant, culture, context, power, purpose and ultimately the methodological fit that can be achieved to ensure our research endeavours are socially just.

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