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To cite this article: Sarah T. Rewi, Georgia McLellan & Milly Heke (2022) An indigenous research narrative: rangatahi in the research space, Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand, 52:sup1, 46-56, DOI: [10.1080/03036758.2022.2090389](https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2022.2090389)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2022.2090389>



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Published online: 26 Jun 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



An indigenous research narrative: rangatahi in the research space

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ABSTRACT

Colonial institutions are notorious for using scientific research to claim ownership over Indigenous peoples and justify acts of colonisation (Smith, 2021). In response, Māori academics continue to advocate for culturally ethical practice; supported by a seemingly inexhaustible list of anecdotal evidence pertaining to the colonial violence experienced by Māori communities subjected to western research. Whilst recognising the historical and contemporary role of scientific research is vital to the safety and well-being of Māori communities, this generates a narrative that dissuades researchers from engaging with them. We question 'who is the audience' for this narrative and 'does this generalised message unintentionally inhibit our rangatahi in these spaces?' Messages of aroha and whānaungatanga are sorely missing from this research narrative leading to insinuations that can alienate rangatahi in the research space from working with their communities, whānau, hapū and iwi. Here we look to share our experiences as three rangatahi working alongside our people to diversify the narrative of researching with Māori communities. Through our narratives we hope to encourage other rangatahi to engage with their own people and foster the next generation of Indigenous scientists to actualise the aspiration of their communities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 January 2022

Accepted 10 June 2022

HANDLING EDITOR

Darren Powell

KEYWORDS

Colonisation; Māori communities; Māori engagement; rangatahi (Māori youth); scientific research

Introduction

The Western academy often frames Māori student success from a deficit perspective that treats us as an 'issue' that requires correcting. Despite this, Māori initiatives within the academy are typically under-resourced and rarely prioritised (Smith and Ema 2021). Being an institution within New Zealand's mainstream education system, academia is inherently monocultural and racist. It marginalises, devalues, and negatively stereotypes Māori knowledge and perspectives (Mikaere 2013; Naepi et al. 2020). Issues of recruitment, retention, and promotion of Māori within academia directly contribute to the consistent under-representation and exclusion of Māori from universities throughout New Zealand (McAllister et al. 2019; Naepi et al.

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2020). Moreover, Western research methods often fail to acknowledge Māori community contributions to research, and the impact it can have on these communities (Tia-kiwai 2015). For us, as rangatahi seated within the lecture theatres of the Western academy, these messages are commonplace; and rightly so. For decades, pioneering Māori academics have drawn attention to New Zealand academia and its role in the colonisation of Māori knowledge. Scientific research is embedded within European imperialism and colonialism leading to ‘research’ becoming one of the dirtiest words for Indigenous peoples (Smith 2021).

Māori spaces within sciences are flooded with a multitude of horror stories of unethical practice where both research and researchers have contributed to acts of colonisation and injustice; all driven by an academy that was designed to structurally invalidate Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and value systems (Smith 2012). As a result, the science community has a long history of disregarding Māori knowledge and ways of knowing (known as mātauranga Māori) as mythical and therefore implausible (Hikuroa 2017). In this way, research has privileged western ways of knowing over Māori knowledge, communities, language, and culture. Driven by these experiences of colonisation, assimilation, and urbanisation, research within the Māori space (or Kaupapa Māori research) aims to overcome these negative statistics and achieve greater outcomes for Māori through research and theory (Royal 2017). Yet the development of this Indigenous academic work within institutions can isolate such knowledges from their indigenous communities (Smith 2015). Consequently, Māori researchers face the challenge of convincing their people of the value of research whilst advocating against antagonistic colonial discourses for the acceptance of Māori knowledge and involvement in the space (Cram 2001; Smith 2017).

This reality creates a solemn, cautionary narrative that dominates the research space and acts as a barrier to rangatahi wanting to engage in the Māori research space. Emphasised is the exploitation and harmful impacts caused by non-Māori researchers in Māori communities (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al. 2007). This narrative calls attention to how colonisation has effectively suppressed and de-legitimatised the institutions and communities that protected and empower Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing (Smith 2015). In response, Kaupapa Māori theory and research looks to resist and counter this discourse by providing a methodological space where Māori can simply be Māori. This centres te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga Māori (cultural protocols) as critical elements that push an academic initiative that is counter-hegemonic and anti-colonial in practice (Pihama et al. 2002).

For many researchers, this narrative creates an awareness of the structural and cultural violence that Māori knowledge and communities experience within research institutions. It challenges their research practice to be culturally ethical and inclusive of Māori culture, practices, and aspirations. But ultimately, it cautions researchers to take care to conduct themselves in a way that does not debase cultural protocols and identities or perpetuate acts of colonial violence. This perpetuates the narrative that research, particularly scientific research, is viewed with suspicion and scepticism by Māori due to its role in the colonisation of Māori peoples and knowledge. Māori that engage in this space are also at risk of being complicit to this colonial agenda (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al. 2007). As rangatahi in the research space, we found our response to be significantly different. At first there is a sense of relief, with this

cautionary narrative validating our experiences that would otherwise remain invisible. Followed closely is a sense of empowerment that comes from being able to articulate our struggle and thus communicate this to others and challenge the status quo. But then we consider the one message that is resoundingly clear: research is dangerous. It is not difficult to imagine the uncertainty this can instil in aspiring young researchers. Cram (2001) asks the question that many rangatahi in the research space can relate to: Are we merely brown versions of the researchers that research 'down' about Indigenous people and privilege Western knowledges over our own? This insecurity can run deep manifesting itself in a sense of shame that can make us feel as dirty as the way many Māori view Western research. It can lead to fears of causing harm or offending our own people as well as concerns for our own safety; being caught between an institution that actively oppresses us and a community that may resent us for associating with colonial research institutions. It becomes a very intimidating space for rangatahi attempting research for the first time.

You can imagine our surprise when engaging with Māori communities, that our research experience completely contradicted the cautionary research narrative. Upon reflection, we saw the obstacles created by this cautionary narrative. It dominates the research space, and for us, it prevented discussions around how appropriate and genuine research engagement could be a tool of empowerment. Of course, it is important to learn from historical examples of research engagement but often that is all we are provided with, despite many success stories existing. We have come to recognise that we are often not the target audience of this cautionary narrative and believe it is time for a new chapter of encouragement and empowerment.

Materials and methods

Our chosen method of data collection was a reflective one consisting of five collaborative sessions. Each session typically lasted 2 hours was recorded and transcribed. Similar to the 'Thought Space Wānanga' Indigenous approach of Smith et al. (2019), these sessions allowed the collective production and analysis inclusive of whakawhanaungatanga (to build relationships) and the sharing of kai (food). Despite the difficulties of meeting in person during the COVID-19 lockdown in December 2021, these were a priority for our practice. As referred to by Smith (2021) 'kanohi kitea (the seen face)', this kaupapa Māori practice was vital to developing our relationships. Furthermore, the sharing of food is particularly important as it aids the continuous attempt to build and maintain relationships (Hoskins and Jones 2017). Our first two meetings had no designated agenda to facilitate discussions around our intentions for this paper. The remaining three sessions were designated to each researcher to discuss their own research journey as a space to recount our journeys and collectively explore the personal impacts of our experiences conducting research.

By recounting our own experiences as three rangatahi in the science research space, we hope to provide a new narrative, one of connection and empowerment driven by the aroha and whānaungatanga we experienced when researching with our own communities for the first time. In using this anecdotal evidence, we aim to diversify the research narrative and encourage other rangatahi in the research space to harness science and research as a tool of empowerment for themselves and their people.

Results

(Re)connecting by Georgia McLellan

There is a difference between knowing you have Māori whakapapa and knowing that you are Māori. I lived in the former headspace for most of my life, acknowledging my Māori whakapapa but not identifying as Māori. I have always been proud of my Māori heritage, learning about my tupuna kuia Huihana Hopa from Whakatōhea. She was meant to marry a Rangatira but instead ran away with my grandfather many generations ago. I was raised in a Pākehā world, curious about my whakapapa but feeling far too disconnected from it to identify as Māori. When I attended university and learned about different world views and the strength of whakapapa I started to identify as Māori. I then wanted to learn more about my heritage and the whenua I whakapapa back to. My cousin Dr Karen Brewer had previously reconnected with our iwi through her research journey, so I saw research as a way for me to reconnect as well.

When I first expressed an interest in doing research with my iwi, I learned about the common cautionary indigenous research narrative discussed above. These narratives provided fundamental knowledge, especially for someone who is white-passing and who grew up in Te Ao Pākehā. I learned about the negative impact research has had (and in some cases continues to have) on Māori and other indigenous communities and the extreme honour, privilege, and responsibility of doing Māori research.

When it came to my Honours year and my first real opportunity to reconnect with my whakapapa by doing research with my whānau, I found the common Māori research narrative overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. It overshadowed any positive accounts of doing Māori research, especially with your whānau. That, combined with my perceived disconnection to my whakapapa, meant that I felt I wasn't ready to carry out research with my iwi at that time. However, I was prepared to take the leap by the time I started my master's research. So, in 2019, with the common cautionary research narrative stuck firmly in my mind and with my partner in tow for much-needed support, I went to my marae for the first time to attend the Whakatōhea Māori Trust Board Annual General Meeting (AGM). At the time, attending the meeting was the only way I knew how to reconnect.

We went to Ōpōtiki the night before the hui, and that night I was so nervous I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the possibility of being turned away from the meeting by my whānau and what people would think when they found out I was doing research. I was expecting the worst. There was a big lightning storm offshore that night; this did not help my sleep or nerves. When I woke up in the morning, my nerves were overwhelming, and I felt sick. However, this feeling went away as soon as we arrived at the pōwhiri. My marae and the surrounding whenua were beautiful, and I instantly felt connected. I felt none of the animosity that I had expected going back to my whenua as a researcher.

I wondered why I hadn't visited sooner. My whānau welcomed us with open arms; they were naturally curious about who we were, but once I said I was Whakatōhea, no one questioned my whakapapa. Everyone was super supportive of me and my research. A few people at the hui recognised my partner even though she had never visited Ōpōtiki before; this made us feel even more welcome as hers was a familiar face.

When presenting my master's research findings to the Whakatōhea Kaumatua Committee in the Whakatōhea Māori Trust Board meeting room, where carvings on the wall

depicted my tipuna, I felt embraced by a sense of calm. This was the complete opposite of how I felt before I visited my marae for the first time. My ancestors were with me, and looking back, I had no reason to be so anxious about working with my whānau.

The common cautionary Māori research narrative provided and continues to provide me vital lessons in how to conduct culturally appropriate research. The fear and anxiety these messages instilled in me as a young Māori researcher looking to work with my whānau disappeared as soon as I reconnected. I am now working with my whānau through my PhD research on Māori kuku (green-lipped mussel) economies. With the space carved out by the many successful Māori researchers that have come before me I can write my own diverse research narrative that speaks to (re)connection to whānau and whenua.

A whakapapa narrative by Milly Heke

My mum grew up on our whenua and growing up she always made sure I knew where we were from. As I got older, I heard stories about how the land changed, how the golden sand dunes had been replaced with pine trees, and how the land was being lost to the ocean. Stories of man-sized kingis (a colloquial term for kingfish) swimming up the estuary; of logging ships docking in the harbour; of kids riding horses through the estuary and over the sand-dunes to school. Always about how the land and people change over time and what the future may look like. This is my experience of doing research on my whenua.

The university gave little to no acknowledgement or guidance around researching with Māori communities. Despite having a formalised structure of research, I only managed to navigate these structures with the support of other rangatahi in the space. My research became about whānaungatanga, reconnecting with my people and my whenua. Because of this my research journey started months before the semester had begun. I was attending hui, wananga, listening, observing and talking to whanau kanohi ki te kanohi about what I wanted to do. I spoke with aunties and uncles who, although we had never met, they constantly ‘had my back’ and supported my kaupapa. So, it became important to find the right supervisors that will create safe spaces in the institution; for both myself and my whānau. I needed supervisors that would listen to what I wanted to do, who would understand the context of who I am and what my research means to me.

In my experience, researching with Māori communities in science is often surrounded by narratives that are difficult, scary, and cautionary; or not even considered at all. This uncertainty and discouraging narrative caused me anxiety and fear around researching with Māori communities. I felt like I was preparing for a fight. There was little to no guidance in this area, especially within the Faculty of Science, forcing me to look to another Faculty to find an appropriate Māori supervisor. Smith (2015) highlights the increasing freedoms of Māori research, particularly in reference to Māori research units. Yet as a rangatahi attempting research outside these designated Māori spaces, we do not experience the same support. This was why I made the choice to request a supervisor from the Department of Māori studies to help me navigate Māori research in the science space.

Initially, I questioned why it was so important to me to have a Māori supervisor. But the Faculty of Science’s inability to acknowledge the dynamic nature of relationships

within the Māori world, made my supervisor's ability to safely guide me through these difficulties invaluable. I was challenged to legally prove my whakapapa and validate my right to do research on my own whenua. This could have negatively impacted my relationships with whānau and the whenua. However, I realised that my Māori supervisor was able to safely guide me through the dynamic relationships in the Māori world, something that the Faculty of Science was unable to do. Thanks to my supervisors and the support of my friends, I maintained the confidence to stand by my whakapapa. It reminded me of my responsibility to protect my whakapapa from the colonial institution and resist conforming to the offensive arbitrary processes that could have been detrimental to my research journey. When it came to collecting my data, the relationships that I had built with both my supervisors allowed me to conduct my research in a way that, to me, was culturally appropriate. Despite only collecting data for one day, my friends, technician, and supervisors all made the trip to support me. Beyond that, my friends stayed with me on my whenua for the whole week to meet my whānau who supported the kaupapa, learn about my research, and connect with my whenua. During this time, my whānau contributed historical newspaper articles about what happened on my whenua during the 1940s, photos, stories, and kai. These contributions were my whānau's way of supporting my kaupapa and me. Prior to my research I never had the opportunity to discuss these things. This dissipated my anxious feelings, replacing them with more and more aroha. It was a time of excitement for both me and my whānau for what my research may mean for our future. Although I have yet to finish my research, I intend to relay it back to my whānau. Again, my supervisors understood the importance of sharing my research with them and got funding to enable me to do so.

This research journey has allowed me to strengthen the relationships with my wider whānau, and actively connect with my whenua in a way that I have never done before. I have taken ownership in wanting to know more about who I am where I come from. From this experience I now know that there are many ways to conduct research with Māori communities and as a rangatahi in the research space. We must write our own narratives. No one can deny you, or your whakapapa, and knowing where we come from or who we are is not just a privilege, it is a right.

Connecting two worlds by Sarah Rewi

Entering an institution such as academia certainly amplifies the cautionary Māori research narrative. Science, in its attempts to create unbiased research, creates a space that demands researchers leave who they are at the door to conduct research successfully. This, coupled with the harmful history between science and Māori communities dissuaded engagement between the two worlds. As a result, I found myself dissociating my Māori identity from my academic one. As someone of both Māori and Pākehā descent, I drew upon this dual whakapapa to conform to each space as the situation demanded. The cautionary narrative is pervasive in the research space and as an impressionable rangatahi, I found it easier to take the path of least resistance and conform to be successful in the science institution. For a long time, I felt lost. I questioned: How do I do it? How do I practically bring together two knowledge systems? This paralysed my ability to academically engage with the Māori world and reinforced my perception of these two worlds conflicting with one another.

This conflict manifested itself in my research. At the beginning of my master's, I struggled to conceptualise Māori ways of doing, being and knowing within my scientific research. A certain amount of fear is instilled through the overtly negative and cautionary research narrative. So, I convinced myself that it wasn't possible, and nothing in the institution suggested otherwise. Moreover, conforming to a mainstream methodology of research brought a sense of security. Choosing to engage with a more novel research approach not only felt risky but as a young postgraduate student, seemed a very intimidating thing to do. It is easy to convince yourself in that environment that only experienced researchers can achieve such things. Especially when no-one around you is doing it, that's when the research space begins to feel lonely, and you doubt yourself.

It was at this stage that I confided with other rangatahi in the research space. Connecting with them and their individual journeys helped me identify that I hadn't positioned myself within my research and this disconnection was holding me back. By re-centering my identity as a rangatahi, I was able to connect with my research and overcome the idea that these two worlds that I exist in are separate. I recognise now that they cannot be separated because I exist within each space equally. With this foundation, I found the confidence to break out of my conformative mindset and approach my master's with more clarity. It surprised me how easily the two worlds came together, and that's where I began to truly appreciate the value of collaborative research. I now view my master's project as an opportunity to explore both Māori and Western-based knowledge systems and develop my skills in these areas.

However, conceptualising these ideas was the easy part, conducting research in accordance with them is the true challenge. This is where the role of the research supervisor is vital. It is the most empowering thing to have someone put their trust in you and both my supervisors did so. This created a space for me that was full of support and encouragement rather than one of obstacles and harmful narratives. They simultaneously guided me through my project with their knowledge of the institution and Te Ao Māori whilst stepping back to allow me to determine my own path. Without any doubt, I attribute my development as a researcher to them.

Still, at this point, I had yet to engage with Māori communities through my research and that cautionary research narrative remained a source of anxiety in the back of my mind. This drove my choice to incorporate my own whānau into my research because I instinctively knew that this was a safe space for me and full of aroha. My experience and connection with my whānau was the only contradiction I had to the narrative that Māori are suspicious and disapproving of research. My only regret in taking that first step is that I wished I had done so sooner. It opened my eyes to the many opportunities and aspirations that exist within Māori communities.

This is not to say that researching with whānau is not without its limitations. As mentioned by Tiakiwai (2015), those that hold the position of an 'inside researcher' or those that work within their own communities, face the expectations to navigate both institutional and cultural expectations. As rangatahi, we work at the interface of scientific and Indigenous research methodologies requiring adequate training in both to maintain our integrity as Māori researchers (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al. 2007). These limitations can create immense pressure on rangatahi in the research space to maintain a reputation of perceived technical ability and commitment to both Western and community agendas (Tiakiwai 2015).

I realised I didn't have to be afraid; I know how to interact with my own whānau. Research does not change this because whakapapa (connection to people and place) holds a far greater power. Mistakes in how I conduct the research is nothing in comparison to the empowerment that comes from having the next generation engaging in these spaces for the benefit of their people. Our whānau understand that as rangatahi our role is to learn, and they foster that. I found myself being guided by my elders and learning from the mistakes I made. This sense of empowerment comes from realising your success contributes to the success of your people. It also creates an avenue for the community to influence the research and its outcomes because as a rangatahi my elders have the right to hold me accountable to the community and their aspirations.

This experience made me realise that this research space is not scary at all. Although messages of caution are necessary, they should not be the sole narrative that defines my experience researching alongside my whānau. As the science space diversifies, rangatahi can become powerful forms of resistance and empowerment for their people. If you have whakapapa, no one has the right to question your validity in that space. However, this does not absolve us from appropriate research practice. I have found this journey to be one of love, connection, and empowerment. Any messages that dissuade Māori from doing research with their own people need to be challenged because it is up to them and their people how to research in accordance with their tikanga.

Discussion

Navigating scientific research is a complex journey unique to every Indigenous scholar. Yet the emerging presence of Māori in these spaces means that Māori culture, knowledge, and aspirations will be increasingly incorporated into scientific research. For some, research can provide opportunities for those who feel disconnected to reconnect and learn more about their whakapapa and communities. For others it can be harnessed to solve problems that their families have faced for generations. In our own way, we each discovered the empowerment that comes from connecting with our people through research. Despite the many differences in our personal research journeys with our communities, we were all welcomed with open arms. We were guided, encouraged, and fostered through the research journey.

Stepping into the research space alongside our communities dissipated the many fears that we held whilst researching within the institution. These fears are certainly brought about by the obligation we inherit to do what is right for our people, but this is also what drives us as researchers. It leads to research that engages with Māori communities and their aspirations whilst being conducted in a way that is empowering and culturally ethical. As a complete contradiction to what we were led to expect, we learnt that this cautionary research narrative does not define our research experiences. Still, it impacted our journeys and in a lot of ways manifested as barriers that we had to personally overcome.

Not only have we the right to conduct this research, but engagement with science also provides access to considerable political and financial support and holds the potential to generate a wealth of knowledge (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al. 2007). Still, we hold a responsibility to protect our people from the potentially harmful consequences of our research. Research on Māori is often insufficiently resourced and can contribute to institutional

inertia, a predominantly euro-centric approach, issues of equity, and reluctance to share power and decision-making with Māori (Taiepa et al. 1997). Te Ara Tika Guidelines for Māori research ethics generates a solution to protect Māori communities from these consequences. This framework addresses issues of decision making relevant to Māori by ethics committees in the research space using tikanga Māori to guide engagement with Māori ethical issues (Hudson et al. 2010). Ahuriri-Driscoll et al. (2007) also propose the forging of collaborative alliances between Māori and science. By working with our own communities, our whakapapa forms the foundation of a long-term collaborative relationship between research and community. This holds us as researchers accountable for the consequences of our research which acts as a safeguard against harmful research impacts.

Māori academics are significantly under-represented within universities throughout New Zealand (McAllister et al. 2019). Whilst our numbers continue to grow, our presence remains small, and we are often isolated. Consequently, not all of us have the privilege of a Māori supervisor or mentor. However, our experiences and knowledge have the potential to guide each other's journey through the Western academy (Naepi et al. 2020). Though our numbers are small, Smith and Ema (2021) encourage collaboration to mutually benefit Māori researchers and transform the research methodologies within the Western academy. Whilst each of our journeys are unique, the Māori experience within the research space has many commonalities. We identified the cautionary research narrative as one such commonality that impacted each of us in our research. Sharing our personal journeys is our contribution to the collective experience of Māori, particularly rangatahi Māori, in the research space. Our hope is for this counter-narrative to support other rangatahi that are still isolated in the academy.

The acknowledgement of differing research experiences can provoke discussions among Māori researchers which is particularly important to rangatahi in those spaces. Unlike our experiences in the community, our role as rangatahi is not always recognised within the institution, largely due to there being so few Māori to begin with. Discussions around more diverse research narratives with Māori communities can create a space that fosters the confidence of rangatahi to grow into researchers that empower their communities. Such is the relevance of this work. By adding our experiences to the literature, we have diversified the research narrative around engagement with Māori communities. Our experiences speak to this by demonstrating that these spaces can be full of aroha, whānaungatanga and empowerment. These anecdotes demonstrate that research can act as a powerful form of resistance, connection, and reconnection to our whakapapa, our whenua, and our whānau. By adding our personal narratives to the literature, we acknowledge the diversity of scholarship within the next generation of Māori researchers and challenge the prevailing cautionary narrative that currently dominates the research space.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our academic supervisors at the University of Auckland inclusive of Dr Mark Dickson, Dr Brendon Dunphy, and Dr Dan Hikuroa (Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato-Tainui, Ngāti Whānaunga, Te Arawa) for your unfaltering support. To the Heke family (especially Elsie Heke, Bryn Grant-Mackie, Tiaki Grant-Mackie, and Georgia Grant-Mackie); the Davis-Rewi

family; and the Ōpōtiki Whakatōhea family; your love, support, and guidance has been the foundation on which we have all grown into the researchers we are today. Your knowledge and spirit will continue to foster our connection to our culture and whakapapa for which we are eternally grateful. We would also like to acknowledge Te Kahuratai Painting and Clarissa Nathaniel for your involvement in our journey as rangatahi in the research space.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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