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Postcolonial Reflections on Research in an Inuit Community

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Abstract: This paper considers the role of non-indigenous researchers within indigenous contexts. I propose the notions of ‘hybridity’ and a ‘third space’ as useful conceptual lenses to understand the intersection of marginalized and dominant knowledge.

Introduction

I am a researcher who is *Qallunaak*, or non-*Inuk* with interests focused on issues relating to Inuit and a remote Arctic locale. My interest in the Arctic and into research with Inuit began in 2001 when I moved to Cape Dorset, Nunavut with my family. I soon began my graduate degree in southern Canada but moved back to Cape Dorset to conduct the research for my thesis which explored Inuit women’s perceptions of adult education programs. In 2004 having finished my graduate degree, I worked in Ottawa at *Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami* as a researcher on a study that documented Inuit perspectives of climate and environmental change. I am now pursuing doctoral studies and plan to return to Cape Dorset with the goal to explore Inuit women’s perceptions of the links between learning and life resiliencies.

Questions with regards to my role arise in discussion with Inuit, in academic settings, and in self-reflection. This paper explores the background of some of these questions and outlines my work at attempting to answer or at least reconcile these into a methodology and conceptual lens to use for my forthcoming doctoral fieldwork and dissertation.

The Canadian Arctic

In the Arctic, the point of contact with southern Canada or the ‘West’ is typically traced to the 1950s when the Canadian state began its intervention in the Arctic, guided principally by motivations of national security during the Cold War era and sovereignty over the Arctic (Brody, 1975). Inuit were controlled during this era by three parties. “The churches, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Government of Canada itself – were determined to exercise an hegemony over the minds and lands of the Eskimo” (Brody, 1975, p. 15). Throughout this colonial period, there are clear examples where the discourse of southern Canada conceptualized Inuit as ‘Other’. This conceptualization often relied on the stereotypical fixed image of the ‘noble savage.’ As Moore-Gilbert explains stereotypes are proof that the colonizer struggles in a conflictual psychic relationship with contradictions inherent in the subaltern culture (1997). Clear examples of a colonial discourse based on Inuit as ‘Other,’ include that which oversaw the issuance of Eskimo-numbers (or E-numbers), the RCMP slaughter of the sled-dogs, the High Arctic relocation and the coercive movement of Inuit into communities under the main motivation of maintaining Canadian sovereignty (Hicks and White, 2000).

Inuit continue to struggle with direct and indirect implications from contact with the world outside the Arctic. Bhabha (1994) calls this “the on-going colonial present” (cited in Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 114). Indirect implications for Inuit of the fast paced change that accompanied the move into the settlements have resulted in a period where many are still reeling with the changes. Colonization in indigenous communities has been compared to trauma. Tookoome discusses the Inuit context from a personal perspective: “What people usually forget

is that we only had contact for the last fifty years...When you're in an accident and all of a sudden you are just like spinning out of control. You have no time to think and to understand what's really happening ... We don't realize the significant impact that contact had on us" (cited in Stevenson, 2006, p. 174). Current symptoms of the postcolonial trauma are exhibited in the crisis levels of suicide, violence and substance abuse in Arctic communities, which Kulchyski attributes to "the trauma of colonization" and so aptly describes as "the trauma of compulsive repetitions of its original violence" (2006, p. 167).

Inuit Resistance

Postcolonial perspectives of the Arctic must draw from Inuit resistance to hegemony as it exists. Postcolonial perspectives "emerge from the colonial testimonies ... and the discourses of 'minorities'" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 245) and "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history...that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (1994, p. 246). Inuit resistance to colonization is often not overt, outspoken resistance. Mitchell sees that there are three forms of Inuit resistance, (1) nonconfrontational...efforts to conserve language and folkways; (2) confrontational, which includes public protest, a seldom used mode of resistance...and (3) politically organized resistance" (1996, p. 413).

The most common form of resistance in Inuit communities is the preservation of Inuit language and culture. Many contemporary anthropologists in the Canadian Arctic see this as primary. "Inuit are concerned—almost hypersensitive—about the survival of 'their culture'" (Graburn, 2006, p. 139). Furthermore, Kulchyski promotes the notion of the Inuit community itself and gestures of community as vehicles of resistance (2006, p. 167).

The Non-indigenous Researcher in Indigenous Contexts

Research itself conducted from the perspective of the West has in many ways acted to objectify the 'Other' and has been a part of colonial practices. "In its clear links to Western knowledge research has generated a particular relationship to indigenous peoples which continues to be problematic" (Smith, 1999, p. 39). A number of indigenous and non-indigenous researchers have taken steps to critique and address the inequitable power balances within research relationships through decolonizing processes (e.g. Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffrey, 2004; Selby, 2004; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2005).

Echoes of the long-standing colonial inequities that have defined relations between minority and majority cultures on a wide scale influence current relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people. "[T]he relationship between, for example, community workers and community members, teachers and learners, or researchers and informants, is one that is related to the historically and culturally derived identities of each" (Wilson, 2005, p. 2). Researchers who work in the Arctic have also recognized this long-standing influence. "Many of these differences are based on our cultural backgrounds, but others are rooted in the fact that we are members of the dominant society that has perpetuated racism and inequality in its treatment of Inuit" (Archibald and Crnkovich, 1995, p. 115).

A colonial shadow over relationships among indigenous and non-indigenous has given rise to feelings of guilt in some non-indigenous researchers looking to pursue emancipatory work with marginalized groups. Selby terms this the "guilt of centuries of systematic oppression of indigenous cultures" (2004, p. 144). Paradis discusses this as the "'I am the impossible oppressor' theory of alliance, in which white middle-class women understand ourselves through a lens of guilt and inadequacy, and our political projects are undertaken as a form of apology or penance" (cited in Batacharya et al, 2006, p. 278). This has led to feelings of paralysis in their

work for some. For Wilson, guilt from being a part of the colonizer structure, “led to a kind of professional and personal impotence or ‘fatalistic passivity’ which was accompanied by the need to critique my every action and understanding” (Wilson, 2005, p. 2). Selby speaks of how such sentiments have led to the “premature abandonment of projects” (2004, p. 143).

These researchers discussed the need to move beyond these feelings of guilt through authenticity of engagement. Wilson spoke of the notion of responsibility not to give up on account of uncritically reflecting on the feelings of guilt. “[O]ther writers and my Aboriginal mentors also suggested that there were equal risks in doing nothing or in simply uncritically affirming difference and entering the space of ‘benvolent inertia’” (Wilson, 2005, p. 2). Selby also discusses how hiding from the discomforts that are integral to collaborations between non-indigenous and indigenous people means we “do our work less well” (2004, p. 143).

‘Hybridity’ and ‘Third Space’

A number of theorists point to Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and a third space as guidance for non-indigenous researchers working in an emancipatory manner with marginalized groups. It is in this third space where one can draw upon the hybridity of one’s identity to relate in new ways. “We are entangled in a multiplicity of stories and carry multiple voices. This inevitably, leads to awareness of hybridity...Acknowledging hybridity opens up what has been called a “Third Space” (Kremer, 2003, p. 9-10).

As Bhabha explains, his concept of hybridity linked to the notion of the third space point to places where new meanings can be created, where histories can be displaced, and new authorities can govern. “[H]ybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). Furthermore, Bhabha sees that “cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).

Multiplicity of identity allows for connections between dominant cultures and minority cultures on other identity planes. Narayan sees this as “shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (1993, p. 671). The conceptualization of hybridity and multiplicity of identity, allows for authentic connections that can form based on one’s gender. Relating in this manner does not negate the differences that our cultures afford us, but it means that true connections that occur can be recognized. “Over time we have gained an intimate knowledge of the issues facing Inuit women, identifying as women, with many of them, yet always being aware of our differences” (Archibald and Crnkovich, 1995, p. 115).

Dialogue, otherwise called intersubjectivity or the Habermasian “ideal-speech situation,” (1970) are similarly pointed to by some researchers as potential methodologies for such work. First we must affirm that truly democratic dialogue or pure intersubjectivity is impossible (Wilson, 2005, p.7; Selby, 2004, p. 145). The multiplicity of identity within hybridity inherently possesses mismatched powers and agencies between individuals, especially when these are impacted by the overarching influence of colonization that is the case for interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Selby speaks to this when she cautions that intersubjectivities are always distorted through the Lacanian notion of misrecognition (2004, p. 146). She cautions that, as our identities are constructed in discourse, and intersubjectivity is the

interaction between identities, intersubjectivity is inevitably compromised through the gap that exists between the self in interaction (through discourse) and the 'real' self. As Selby writes, "working with indigenous communities is always occurring within a context of contested divides, multiple intentions, and fragments of emotional needs" (2004, p. 146).

Once the limitations of dialogue are recognized, we can go on to begin to investigate its methodological implications. Dialogue, when approached as working against oppression or in the promotion of emancipatory agency is a method of interaction that can be based on the principle of hybridity. Wilson (2005) has derived a conceptual framework for this work, enacted through transformative dialogue, which she calls an "ethics of meaning-making." Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffrey, discuss a similar concept: "The ethical space between cultures offers itself as the theatre for cross-cultural dialogue...that ethically engages different knowledge systems" (2004, p. 42).

Important to our understanding of the methodological implications of dialogue are its reliance on the notions of partiality of knowledge, openness and reinvention. Speaking of the ethics of meaning-making, Wilson states, "meaning-making is enabled and affirmed from multiple positions and locations, all of them partial, and these meanings are understood as continually open for critique and reinvention" (2005, p. 6). Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffrey, discuss how collaborative subjectivities can act as mirrors for the Western researcher to understand their partial knowledges regarding indigenous peoples and to assess their own ethics in interaction (2004, p. 42). Selby relates how through "creating something new, integration... [we are] losing something at the same time, thus you can never again see yourself as of only one coherent community or identity" (2004, p. 148). This further hints at one of the key aspects Wilson defines as inherent in dialogue, the movement between positions of self and other, thereby "encountering of the actuality of...differences in an intersubjective way" (Wilson, 2005, p.7).

Implications for Future Research

I have used this paper to consider postcolonial approaches to research in indigenous contexts and I can now begin to explore more precisely how hybridity and a third space apply to my research in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. The third space is at the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56) which speaks to my preference to bring together indigenous and Western perspectives on resiliency within my research. The methodology in this way fits into the third space termed by other researchers as an 'ethics of meaning-making' or the 'ethical space.' As Bhabha states, the third space "displaces the narrative of the Western nation" (1994, p. 54) and within it "hybridity ... [exists] as a contesting, antagonistic agency...which is a space in-between the rules of engagement" (1994, p. 277). Within my research, this aspect of the third space allows for antagonism against the hegemonic discourse, and outside 'normal' authorities, where marginal voices are typically excluded. Within the third space, "all cultural statements and systems are constructed, therefore all hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 54). Western claims to superiority are invalid because they are based on constructions of culture which have been staticized and essentialized. In my research, this allows for the recognition that an essentialized view of Inuit culture exists as a construct and it opens a space for recognition of a non-essentialized view of Inuit culture which as Searles notes, means recognizing Inuit sub-groups potentially excluded within the already marginalized Inuit context (2006, p. 101). Further, the third space allows us to "elude the politics of polarity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). Applicability of this aspect of the third space to the Arctic context allows for the rejection of traditional/modern binaries and clears a path for investigations

into how beliefs in this binary may affect identity constructions and resiliencies. Bhabha explains that within the third space “polarities come to be replaced with truths that are only partial, limited and unstable” (1994, p. 278). Recognition that knowledge is always evolving and never fixed acknowledges the partiality of my perspective and my positionality and this opens a space for critical reflection on my engagement in this research.

Conclusion

Approaching research in the Arctic context necessitates an understanding of Inuit resistance to the dominant discourse. Within the Arctic and other indigenous contexts, the long-standing dominance of Western discourse has meant that the role of the non-indigenous researcher within indigenous contexts is a questionable one. In this paper, I have reviewed the potentials of postcolonial theory for drawing out a space for this role when the intent of the non-indigenous researcher is based on ethical authenticity. Drawing here principally on Bhabha’s work, I examine some methodological implications of his postcolonial concepts of a third space and hybridity. I finally end the discussion by examining briefly how I can potentially apply these concepts to my own proposed doctoral research.

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