

Whose Knowledge is Constructed? Authentic Research and Reporting

Bias

The biographical journeys of researchers and journalists greatly influence their values, beliefs, their research questions and the knowledge they construct. The knowledge they construct mirrors their life experiences and their values. It is not necessarily experiences as much as it is interpretations of those experiences which are mediated by gender, class, age, political affiliation, religion, race and region. Objectivity must be the aim so that your work has legitimacy for diverse groups. Objectivity, however, is an unattainable and idealized goal. Strive for objectivity, but acknowledge how the subjective and objective components of knowledge are interconnected and interactive. When doing work interviewing and researching participants you must strive to empower those communities, support liberation and not reinforce inequality. Do not underestimate the power of race in cross-cultural interactions in this highly stratified society.

Banks (1998) has proposed a typology of insider/outsider status to help us be more aware of our socialization within ethnic and cultural communities:

- indigenous-insider
- indigenous-outsider
- external-insider
- external-outsider

The *indigenous-insider* endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs and knowledge of his or her community, He or she is also perceived by leaders of the community to be a legitimate member of the community who has the perspective and the knowledge that will promote well-being of the community, enhance its power, and enable it to maintain cultural integrity and survive. This person can speak with authority about this community.

The *indigenous-outsider* was socialized within the cultural community but has experienced high levels of desocialization and cultural assimilation into an outside or oppositional community. This individual is not only regarded as an outsider by indigenous members, but is viewed with contempt because he or she is considered to have betrayed the indigenous community and “sold out” to the outside community. This person is often chosen by leaders of the mainstream community as their spokesperson for public and visible issues related to his or her ethnic group and is often highly praised and rewarded by the mainstream community. He or she is viewed as legitimate by the mainstream but not by the indigenous community.

The *external-insider* was socialized within another culture and acquired its beliefs and values. However, because of unique and personal experiences within an outside culture, he or she rejects many of the values and beliefs of the mainstream community

in which he or she was socialized. This person may also become publicly opposed to many of the cultural assumptions and beliefs of his or her cultural community. This person internalizes and acts on the beliefs and knowledge claims of his or her “adopted” community. The *external-insider* as well, is often negatively perceived and sanctioned by his or her first community.

The *external-outsider* was socialized within a community different from the one in which he or she is doing research and reporting. He or she has only a partial understanding of and little appreciation for the values, perspectives and knowledge of the community he or she is studying. Because of a lack of understanding of and empathy for the culture being studied, the *external-outsider* often misunderstands and misinterprets the behaviors within the community and distorts information acquired when comparing them with the outside behaviors and values of the outside or majority community. The *external-outsider* believes that he or she is best-suited to be legitimate in reporting the studied community as he is she is more objective than people who live inside the community. This person is often criticized by members of the studied community while being praised by members of the outside community.

In order to be the most trust-worthy source of information, a researcher/journalist needs to critically examine the values and assumptions that underlie their personal knowledge from school curriculum and the values that support the institutionalized structures and practices of mainstream American society. Objectivity should remain an important goal—an ideal—though it will always remain elusive.

Celebratory Reporting

Journalists and researchers need to learn the tool of “defamiliarization” (Kaomea, 2003). This refers to perceptions over time becoming “automatized” and stale. When reporting on a Pow Wow, Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo or any other cultural event, think: We know about it, but do we really see it? Without a closer look, we cannot say anything significant about it. Looking beyond the familiar forces us into a more dramatic awareness of the event in order to give voice to the previously marginalized. What are the silenced perspectives or the lesser known aspects of this cultural event? This more comprehensive analysis should progress beyond surface experiences. Persistent excavation can illuminate the obscure and elevate the unknown.

Kaomea (2003), a Native Hawaiian researcher, explains this analytical tool while studying a new state-mandated curriculum in Hawaii. The schools are to integrate the cultural history of pre-colonial Hawaii in all public educational facilities.

As the parents, grandparents and administrators cheer and congratulate teachers after experiencing the culminating Hawaiian cultural event known as the Lei Day pageant, the *Kupuna*, are largely ignored. The *Kupuna* are the Native Hawaiian elders who run from classroom to classroom, from school to school to teach about and prepare the students for the May 1st celebration. They arrange the costumes, the music, the dances and all other preparations for this event. Though it has roots as a

Native Hawaiian celebration, it was really begun by a White poet from Kansas. Don Blanding was so taken by the romantic exoticism of the hula dance, that he moved to Hawaii and convinced the public in 1912 to share his vision of the this romantic holiday. This became the focus of the curriculum rather than other authentic, historical information, and this celebration is now firmly embedded in the curriculum.

As well, Kaomea (2003) interviewed many of the Kupuna and realized that these women are generally Native Hawaiian elders who are lured into these positions as their tourism careers are ending. They are low paid, work long hours, and resent the accolades going to the White teachers who are on the sidelines throughout the whole preparation of this event. The author also discovered through the interviews that the Kupuna resent the erasure of the colonial afflictions of Hawaii's past. Lei Day takes over the entire curriculum for the year erasing the suffering and oppression of Native Hawaiians as their lands, cultures and languages were stolen by tourism and the collapse of the Native Kingdom. Though they are respected in title, the Kupuna do not feel respected for their personhood. They are part teacher, part nanny or grandmother, part tourist industry worker, part Hawaiian studies expert and part Lei Day manager. Can you ever know the culture without the history? These are histories that are kidnapped thus reducing the culture to be known for its crafts, dances and costumes. It is a celebratory, surface knowledge. This hegemonic relationship can be seen in any event where the majority culture coerce consent of the "other" for many "celebrations" in schools. Whether it is a Thanksgiving dinner at school celebrating the Native American and Europeans eating together or Black History month celebrating the work of Martin Luther King, the erasure remains the same. Defamiliarization allows a writer to read these erasures and gives him or her opportunity to present the truth of colonized and conquered cultures.

References

- Banks, J. A. (1998). The lives and values of researchers: Implications for educating citizens in a multicultural society. *Educational Researcher*, 27(7), 4-17.
- Kaomea, J. (2003). Reading erasures and making the familiar strange: Defamiliarizing methods for research in formerly colonized and historically oppressed communities. *Educational Researcher*, 2(2), 14-25.