



Special Section

Sociology in a crisis: Covid-19 and the colonial politics of knowledge production in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Rather than being exceptional for Māori and Pacific Peoples, Covid-19 is the latest iteration of virulent disease that arrived with European colonisation. The various pandemics are connected; they exacerbate and intensify existing conditions of colonial inequality and injustice. The political and economic marginalisation of Māori and Pasifika within Aotearoa New Zealand ensures that Covid-19 will have disproportionate impacts upon them. Covid-19's impacts will be felt in the academy as everywhere else. The immediate issue will be the culling of less popular 'uneconomic' courses, and of precarious instructors (where Māori and Pacific teachers are over-represented). Colonisation never ended. Ongoing domination is secured through the reproduction of social life, including via social institutions like the university. While sociology likes to think of itself as the critical edge, it often fails to be so in relation to its own assumptions. In order for sociology to be part of the solution, instead of simply perpetuating the problem of racism as it is wont to do, its practitioners must recognise our place in the world, must speak to our ways of knowing and being, and must validate the aspirations of Māori and Pacific communities, Māori and Pacific students and Māori and Pacific staff.

Keywords

colonisation, Covid-19, higher education, Māori, Pacific Peoples, sociology

Introduction/context

Rather than being exceptional for Māori and Pacific Peoples, Covid-19 can be joined by a single thread to both the virulent diseases that arrived with Europeans as well as the subsequent influenza pandemic of 1918 and more recently the measles epidemic in

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Samoa in 2019. What connects these pandemics is that they exacerbate and intensify existing conditions of colonial inequality and injustice. Moments of crisis, whether financial, viral or both, register their effects across every domain of the social. What were seemingly more fractured experiences of inequality – in whatever area we choose to look – become discernible as parts of a more totalising structure: colonial domination and accumulation that operates through racial inequality. Fairweather progressive gains, however limited, are in times of crisis revealed to be precarious and superficial – a buffer to protect the hard kernel of Pākehā (European) privilege. While we are aware that the university is not the sharpest edge of ongoing colonial domination it remains a key institution for the production and reproduction of settler ideology and therefore crucial for the maintenance of the hierarchical subordination of Māori and Pacific Peoples. It is also the institution we as academics have a particular familiarity with, and because of the holistic nature of settler-colonial domination an analysis of its response to the Covid-19 crisis makes possible insight into the more general system.

Tagata o Moana: Mana whenua and Mana Moana

We quote at length Pro-Vice-Chancellor Māori Cynthia Kiro and Pro-Vice-Chancellor Pacific Damon Salesa of the University of Auckland to explore our connected histories and contemporary realities as Māori (*mana whenua*, people with customary authority over Aotearoa) and Pacific Peoples (*mana moana*, people with customary authority over the Pacific Ocean):

Māori and Pacific peoples share in common the importance of the moana (the sea), which connects us, joins our histories and interwoven stories of migration and development, and provides a cohesive platform for theorising our future development. We have traversed the largest ocean in the world, finding islands across the vastness of space and time, and developed many practices and languages in common but also with variations on our shared histories and experiences. Like all families, we do not always have to get along, but we care and have a stake in what happens to our members. (Salesa and Kiro, 2020: 3)

It is with our shared indigeneity to Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) in mind that we have written this article calling our field to account. We recognise that we are not sociologists who happen to be Māori or Pacific but are a Māori sociologist and a Pacific sociologist and we wish to see both our academic and wider community come together to ensure that our disciplinary field serves our communities. Like family we have chosen to come together in the face of an emergency and reflect on what we can do within our own spaces to ensure the health and well-being of our peoples. As part of this, an examination of our own field of work and research in relation to Covid-19 becomes a necessary endeavour.

Contrary to a deeply embedded public assumption, there is no point at which colonisation can be said to have ended in the Moana (Pacific). Within Aotearoa (New Zealand) we see a majoritarian settler democracy provides the crucial infrastructure by which the continuation of colonisation is both managed and repackaged as consent. Through this structure of domination Māori are held within a position of economic subordination and

political marginalisation. The symptoms of this are well known: high incarceration rates downstream from racist policing and judiciary, low-paid shitwork and unemployment, health inequalities, abduction of our tamariki (children) by the state, inadequate housing, and unequal treatment and outcomes in the education system (Children's Commissioner, 2020; Department of Corrections, 2020; JustSpeak, 2020; Ministry of Health, 2019; Stats NZ / Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). New Zealand has and continues to play a role in the colonisation of the Pacific, from initial governance roles to ongoing economic and political systems that ensure the Pacific remains in less powerful positions globally. This wider global framing of Pacific Peoples as 'less than' has ramifications within Aotearoa for Pasifika. Like Māori (but with a different history of causation and contemporary reality) Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa experience the same symptoms listed above.

The public health response in New Zealand has been strong although still lacking in sensitivity to the specificities of Māori and Pasifika Peoples in terms both cultural and socio-economic. It is worth noting that Māori and Pasifika communities face a vastly higher infection fatality rate from Covid-19. This is because, in the words of a report by Te Pūhana Matatini, 'the compounded effects of underlying health conditions, socio-economic disadvantage, and structural racism result in imbricated risk of contracting COVID-19, becoming unwell, and death' (James et al., 2020). Te Rōpū Whakakaupapa Urutā, the Māori National Pandemic response group, have criticised the government's Māori Covid-19 Plan for its use of feel-good aspirational statements without substantial detail as to how inequality within the health system will be addressed (Johnsen, 2020). However, economic history suggests a profound cause for pessimism as the economic impacts of the pandemic unfold. By being held in place at the bottom of our economic hierarchy Māori and Pasifika will be made to feel the brunt of economic downturn first, and with the greatest intensity. This was the case with the abrupt end to the post-war boom in the 1970s as well as the more recent global financial crisis (Hitchcock, 2020; Poata-Smith, 2002). The collapse of the post-war boom in the 1970s led to mass unemployment for Māori and racially motivated deportation for Pacific Island Peoples of which the 'dawn raids' are emblematic.¹ Resulting from the global financial crisis Pākehā unemployment rate rose from 2.4% to 5% between 2008 and 2012 the Māori unemployment rate went from 7.4% to 14.6%. For Pacific Island Peoples the unemployment rate was slightly below that for Māori in 2008 peaking above 15% in 2012 (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). With the global economy heading into recession what reasons are there to believe this time around will be any different?

In spectacular form, we are currently witnessing the logical outcome of a settler colony wherein the structural subordination of people based on a racial hierarchy has been actively nurtured instead of dismantled. It is no surprise that insurrection in the US – sparked by the state-sanctioned murder of black people and people of colour – has come in the midst of a global pandemic. Decades of neoliberal restructuring that has brought an extractive inequality to a fever pitch has rendered the US incapable of mobilising against Covid-19. Extreme economic and political inequality organised across racial lines has ensured that those people dying in greater numbers from the virus are also those being killed in greater numbers by the police. What becomes pertinent for sociology, as a field, is that two of the four police officers charged with aiding and

abetting the murder of George Floyd had completed sociology degrees from the University of Minnesota. Making a point that would seem to apply equally to sociology departments in Aotearoa New Zealand, Doug Hartmann, chairman of the sociology department at the University of Minnesota, has said: ‘We so want to believe we are not racist, we don’t even see the way that race still matters’ (Leonhardt, 2020). For our context here we would add that without Māori and Pasifika faculty, aspirational non-racism in sociology will remain just that: a performance that actually secures the discipline’s aversion to confronting racism. Work needs to be done now if we are to be part of a sociology that does not stand by, idle and complicit, in the face of institutional racism and the violence it inflicts and perpetuates.

As a field, we pride ourselves in not only recognising inequity but also actively working to address society’s inequities. Many of us and our students participated in the Black Lives Matter solidarity marches across the country, went to Ihumātao when the call was made (Kaho, 2019; O’Malley, 2019) and have been vocal about the #armsdownNZ movement (<https://armsdown.nz/>). In our own space, it is time to reflect on both the historical and contemporary embedded inequities within the field of Sociology. However, if our field remains a space in which the very people we claim to advocate for cannot access us then we risk contributing to the societal inequities we claim to speak against.

Considering inequities in our field

At the 2019 Sociology Association of Aotearoa New Zealand conference, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith called on us as a field to consider the kind of sociology we are creating. Here we outline what was already obvious to those of us at Waipapa (University of Auckland marae) – sociology in Aotearoa is still predominantly Pākehā despite our commitment to equity. In this space, we explore what we teach, who teaches it and who is in our classrooms; providing us with an insight into our continued inexcusable exclusion of Māori and Pacific Peoples and knowledges within our field.

What are we teaching?

A quick scan of our disciplinary websites shows that we have very few Māori or Pacific sociology courses, despite the wealth of knowledge that Māori and Pacific sociologists have contributed to our discipline (e.g. Ranginui Walker, Tracey McIntosh, Linda Smith, Joanna Kidman, Vili Nosa, Tamasailau Suaali, Steven Ratuva). Professor Ranginui Walker, for instance, taught some of the first sociology courses at the University of Auckland before there was a sociology department. An awareness of how Māori and Pacific sociologists have contributed to our discipline is of increasing importance. Using websites to determine what courses were available was an intentional choice as this is how our students and community engage with our field. We may know of courses that meet the criteria of being Māori or Pacific focused because of who is teaching them but this is not immediately clear to our students or community.

Table 1 gives us a snapshot of the state of our field in terms of what we are teaching. However, it is necessary to move beyond university websites and to offer some critical insight to what is happening beyond this table. We are able to provide this for the

Table 1. Courses with Māori and Pacific content in Sociology at New Zealand universities.

University	Total UG and PG courses with sociology coding that mention Māori or Pacific in their description	Total courses offered by Māori or Pacific studies that count towards sociology
University of Auckland (Sociology)	4	0
AUT (Social Sciences)	2	0
University of Waikato (Sociology)	2	6
Massey University	1	0
Victoria University	2	0
University of Canterbury	2	5
Lincoln	NA	NA
University of Otago	1	0

Note: UG – undergraduate; PG – postgraduate.

University of Auckland. To give some initial context, Auckland is regularly dubbed the ‘capital city’ of Polynesia given that Māori and Pacific Islanders live here in greater numbers than anywhere else in the world. Further, Māori and Pasifika students enrol in higher numbers in Sociology than in any other department in the Faculty of Arts. Of the four courses that are taught at the University of Auckland that indicate some Māori or Pacific content:

- one is a broad introduction course that does not centre Māori or Pacific ontologies throughout the course
- one clearly centres Māori ontologies but is taught by a post-doctoral fellow so is unlikely to be taught once their contract runs out
- one centres settler perspectives, and
- one is taught by a permanent Pacific academic but is currently framed through a white developmental lens.

While our colleagues are pushing to keep these courses on the books, attempting to introduce Māori and Pacific content or supporting in restructuring the course content completely, there is still a significant amount of work to do to achieve the type of discipline imagined by Māori and Pacific academics, students and community. Some of this work is not possible within our disciplinary field and will involve pushing our institutions to change (Ahenakew and Naepi, 2015; Kidman and Chu, 2017, 2019; McAllister et al., 2019b; Naepi et al., 2017).

Consideration of what we are teaching is important as it indicates what we find valuable or essential within the field of sociology. Wider critiques of knowledge production in universities note that they benefit from, and continue the reproduction of, colonial ideologies through reproducing a monocultural knowledge system anchored in Western ontologies and epistemologies (Hau’Ofa, 1994, 2008; Kidman and Chu, 2019; Māhina, 2008; Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Naepi, 2019a; Naepi et al., 2017, 2020; Suaalii-Sauni, 2008; Tamdgidi, 2012). What is clear from the course outlines available online is that we are

continuing the tradition of reproducing a monocultural knowledge system grounded in Western ways of knowing and being. Covid-19 means that as a field we are facing pressure to discontinue courses that are an extra cost to the university, such as those taught by professional teaching fellows in favour of courses that can be taught by permanent staff. As a field, we must be careful to not lose what little Māori and Pacific course content there is and also the few Māori and Pacific colleagues we have.

Who is teaching in our field?

There is also a notable lack of Māori and Pacific academics employed on a permanent and full-time basis within our field in universities. We are aware of only two full-time members of academic staff who are Māori, and three who are Pacific, across the entire School of Social Sciences at the University of Auckland. In sociology we are aware of only 1 Māori (equivalent with Australia) and 1 Pacific person employed in full-time permanent lecturing positions. Anecdotally, we know that of the few Māori and Pacific academics that were in sociology departments a number left because they were unable to progress their careers in those departments. While this may reflect a national trend (McAllister et al., 2019; Naepi, 2019b; Naepi et al., 2020), as a field that is committed to addressing inequity we would expect to see sociology leading the way in ensuring the stability and representation of Māori and Pacific faculty.

The absence of Māori and Pasifika academics in permanent positions in sociology departments stems primarily from a broader institutional problem. But there are good reasons to suspect that this exclusion is intensified by the disciplinary formation of sociology itself. Sociology has proven to be particularly reluctant to undertake the theoretical reconstruction necessitated by the critiques of Western modes of knowing and knowledge production and their relationship with colonialism (Savransky, 2017). This might come as a surprise given sociology's own claims as to its radicalism and commitment to social justice. Yet, in a discussion of the failure of the social sciences to confront racism throughout the 19th century up until at least the post-war period, Immanuel Wallerstein remarks: 'Well then, at least the sociologists, who have had the reputation of being the hearth of political radicalism in the university system, at least they did better. Far from it! They were the worst of all' (Wallerstein, 2000). Gurminder Bhambra, following Habermas, has argued that the emergence of the idea of 'the social', and so the possibility of sociology, resulted from the modern demarcations of the spheres of the economic and the political worked out in the combined political and industrial revolutions of the 19th century (Bhambra, 2007; see also Habermas, 1984). 'The social' was what was leftover, an irrational residue beyond the concerns of the supposedly rational spheres of the market and administration/strategic action. As Bhambra argues, because of the distinctly modern context of its emergence, and because its foundational questions came to be directed at a self-understanding of modernity, how it had begun and how it might be completed, sociology's core concepts and categories became 'ineluctably tied to the categories of modernity' (Bhambra, 2007: 872).

Modernity was understood to be a doubly radical break, both from Europe's own past and from the rest of Earth's now pre-modern cultures. As such, colonised peoples were outside of the modern social only to be subsequently available to a project

of modernisation. Because of the particular way in which sociology conceived of itself in relation to modernity, ‘the dynamics of empire were not incorporated into the basic categories, models of explanation, and narratives of social development of the classical sociologists’ (Seidman, 1994). Whereas sociology has also proven to be recalcitrant to transformative incorporation of feminist and queer perspectives it has, in Bhabra’s narrative, been able to acknowledge the challenges posed by those critiques without allowing them to threaten the universality of its core concepts. Gender, sexuality and indeed race, are included as so many particularities of the non-rational social, neutralising their ability to challenge the theoretical ordering of the system as a whole. Postcolonial and Indigenous critique provide a more stubborn problem for sociology because of their connection to historic and ongoing decolonisation movements, outside of the modern social. Postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives on modernity assert an irreducible difference from the narratives of European provenance, a difference difficult to tame because of the more-than-modern ground of its assertion.

Covid-19 will further entrench and aggravate the problems already articulated in Bhabra’s critique by thinning out the already slight numbers of Māori and Pacific in sociology. Covid-19 means that many of our temporary teaching and research staff will not have their contracts renewed. We are aware that the majority of Māori and Pacific academics are employed in temporary contracts (McAllister et al., 2019; Naepi, 2019b). Covid-19 human resource cuts are essentially eliminating our Māori and Pacific workforce overnight (Naepi and McAllister, 2020). It is the responsibility of permanent academics within the universities to ensure that this does not happen. We must build robust challenges to these discontinuations and build compelling cases for hiring more Māori and Pacific academics within our field in spite of Covid-19. Waves of neoliberal restructuring in the university have heightened precariousness and competitiveness amongst academics (Kidman and Chu, 2017; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Roper, 2018). In moments of crisis it is understandable that people go into survival mode. Yet, via continual fragmentation of our collectiveness, we end up at each stage in a worse position to defend that which we feel is valuable in the university. As a field, we need to resist this first instinct, and instead make moves that serve the wider discipline ensuring that we are able to face our student body – who are increasingly well informed on, and sensitive to, de/colonial politics – with integrity.

Who is in our classrooms?

Table 2 indicates that as a field sociology has been able to maintain robust enrolments of Māori and Pacific students. Māori have seen a small percentage overall enrolment increase in undergraduate, other graduate and PhD enrolments and significant growth in Master’s students. Pacific have nearly doubled their headcount numbers for undergraduates, which unfortunately only resulted in a small percentage increase overall as enrolment numbers have increased across the discipline. Pacific PhD numbers doubled both in headcount and percentage but other graduate and Master’s numbers have seen little change. Each stage of enrolment is important and must be accounted for and engaged

Table 2. Headcount of student enrolment in the sociology field in New Zealand 2009–18.

Year	Program	Non-M&PI		Māori		Pasifika		Total
		Headcount	% of total	Headcount	% of total	Headcount	% of total	
2009	Bachelor's	2,110	73%	390	13%	390	13%	2,890
	Other graduate	85	77%	10	9%	15	14%	110
	Master's degrees	60	75%	10	13%	10	13%	80
	Doctoral	70	88%	5	6%	5	6%	80
	Total	2,325	74%	415	13%	420	13%	3,160
2018	Bachelor's	2,510	66%	580	15%	720	19%	3,810
	Other graduate	60	75%	10	13%	10	13%	80
	Master's degrees	65	59%	30	27%	15	14%	110
	Doctoral	60	80%	5	7%	10	13%	75
	Total	2,695	66%	625	15%	755	19%	4,075

with as we need more Māori and Pacific students to move through what is essentially a pakaru (broken) pipeline (Naepi et al., 2020), a pipeline that is under more pressure with the ramifications of Covid-19.

Covid-19 will impact Māori and Pacific enrolments. Recently social media has highlighted that many Māori and Pacific students are not returning to college, instead, they are electing to find full-time work where they can in order to contribute to their wider family's financial stability. We will have fewer Māori and Pacific undergraduate students both enrolling for the first time and returning for study. Māori and Pacific graduate students have expressed concerns that they will not have an income during their graduate degrees, and that it is looking like there will be few to no jobs when they complete their doctorates. We must come together as a field and consider how we can both retain and recruit Māori and Pacific students while considering their lived reality.

Opportunities post-Covid-19

If we wish to be the type of academic field that confronts the inequalities we reproduce and ensure that this global pandemic does not further entrench these inequalities then we are compelled to ask and address the following questions:

- 1) What actions can we and do we take daily to advocate for Māori and Pacific Peoples and communities in our field?
- 2) How are we actively amplifying Māori and Pacific voices in our field?
- 3) How are we using our own power and privilege to secure permanent full-time positions for Māori and Pacific academics?
- 4) How are we ensuring that our online presence indicates a commitment to Māori and Pacific Peoples and communities?

Conclusion

For sociology to remain a vital voice in the years to come it must be transformed by its encounter with other ways of thinking, learning and knowing. If the sociological imagination is to be opened by a perspective on itself other than its own, then the

primary relationship it must develop, in Aotearoa, is with the long memory and thinking of this place that Māori give voice to. This is not an abstract or theoretical exercise but instead must involve the practical activity of building and maintaining sustained and substantial relationships with Māori and Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Rather than being mediated via a state-led policy of abstract multiculturalism, wherein the relationship between Māori and Pacific Peoples is mediated via the settler state, the relationship between *mana whenua* and *mana moana* we have outlined remains crucial to the decentring of sociology. A decentring that would enable recentring on the Pacific, the place of collective inhabitation so that our thinking and research might become a unique expression of this place rather than a tired sociological form of Eurovision karaoke. It seems unlikely that this will be possible while Māori and Pasifika are all but entirely absent from the faculty of sociology departments around the country. It seems straightforwardly colonial that Māori and Pasifika students should continue to study sociology while Māori and Pasifika perspectives remain excluded.

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Note

1. Begun in 1973 and continued for the remainder of the decade, the ‘dawn raids’ involved raiding of homes and workplaces by special police squads in the early hours of the morning with the aim of finding and then deporting people whose working permits had expired. The raids were deeply racialised, specifically targeting Pacific Island Peoples despite there being much larger groups of workers from Europe who had ‘overstayed’ their visas.

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