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## Tensions in ethnographic research: Combining critical ethnography and (ambivalent) decolonising methods

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### Abstract

*In this paper, we reflect on the tensions inhering in a multi-layered ethnographic project, with two researchers, across four school sites. This project is somewhat ambitious, as we are attempting to combine critical ethnography with participatory and decolonising methods (and theories) across four sites. In so doing, we aim to explore the health-related experiences of diverse young people, at the intersection of gender sexuality, place and class, as well as ethnicity and culture. We focus here on three specific methodological tensions. We employ Michelle Fine's notion of 'working the hyphen' and Homi Bhabha's ideas on ambivalence to explore the tensions of challenging colonial discourses-reinforcing colonial discourses; collaborating-co-constructing; and being critical-being a listener in research.*

I walk from the car park to the classroom as a slow drizzle of rain descends. I'm early and the room is locked and dim. Students stand around, some offer me tight smiles and a 'hi'. Schools in the rain can be energy-sucking. I huddle and stare at my phone until the teacher arrives. Things brighten up with her cheery 'hello!' and we walk into the room ready for Year 12.<sup>i</sup> health education. Sitting down in what is rapidly becoming my usual spot, I open the 'Year 12' file on my computer and glance at the notes from the previous lessons. My eye slides to the 'reminder to self' on the document header where I have written, "move around the groups of students each lesson". I feel a twinge of guilt but I don't move. Familiarity and routine keep me glued to my chair. The group of students I am sitting with are friendly and warm; they share their secrets with me. When I'm sitting here, I feel a little closer to belonging. For just a moment, I am no longer that annoying, weird, useless 'researcher', the one who keeps hanging around the school even though she doesn't teach here. The six students in this group seem interested in my project. If not, they don't seem to mind me sitting with them, and I'm pretty sure they have stopped editing their comments for my benefit. I think maybe they appreciate my questions or the fact that I do actually listen to their answers. I also really enjoy observing the dynamic in this group. The school is a diverse and multi-ethnic public high school in the central city and, at this table alone, there are students who identify as Indian, Māori, and Pākehā (New Zealand

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<sup>i</sup> Year 12 is the penultimate year of high school in New Zealand. Students are typically 16–17 years old.



European). Shaun<sup>ii</sup> makes me smile. He says he is ‘European’ but the others say he’s Māori. He is almost always late for class and he never seems to know what is going on. He doesn’t come to school on Mondays at all. Erika (Indian) and Aaron (Pākehā) always sit together. They are unapologetically in a relationship. Despite the hysterical hype displayed by other students about upcoming school ball (formal), Erika and Aaron’s stated refusal to attend this event fascinates me. Janeta (Māori) and Charlie (Pākehā) spend many lessons talking about the ball, sometimes in tones that could be called ‘hysterical’. They are both also studious and complete their work quickly, before getting back to their ‘chat’. Charlie is on a constant diet of one kind or another. Right now it’s sugar free. Jane (Pākehā) sits opposite me and is quiet and sweet. She is clearly an accepted part of this group but also somewhat on the outer. I’m wondering what’s going on for her. As the class begins and Ms Felix welcomes everyone, feelings of inadequacy wash over me from chest to feet. Am I too old to really connect with these young people? Am I asking them the right questions? What do they really care about? Is this research of interest to them or are they just humouring me? How can I get to the deeper stories about their experiences? What responsibility do I have to challenge their views, and to affirm their identities, or is my role here to listen and not get involved?

This short vignette is from Katie’s experiences in one school. It is from our wider ethnographic project across four school sites (we are engaging two schools each), in which we explore the health-related experiences of diverse young people, at the intersection of gender sexuality, place and class, as well as ethnicity and culture. The wider project aims to contest narrow notions of health and wellbeing, and show how young people live, conceptualise and learn about health in diverse ways across and between socio-economic and cultural contexts. The vignette above introduces the ‘scene’ of this research project, highlighting the minutiae of classroom-based ethnographic work. It demonstrates, or at least hints at, the tensions we experience in our bodies as researchers in schools, and the complex interactions we have with the young people involved in this project. It is consciously a somewhat incomplete introduction to this chapter. Incomplete in the sense that it does not attempt a clear and easy illustration of the tensions we explore further down. It was tempting to search for, or construct, a beginning narrative that neatly introduced the multiple tensions we discuss in this chapter, but this would not have made for an authentic representation of the actual fieldwork. The above vignette, instead, focuses on a micro moment in a school classroom; it zooms in on the doubts the lead author experienced as an ethnographer, and the related tensions that stem from her bodily discomfort, and from wondering if the project will actually ‘work’. Methodologically, we are attempting to combine critical ethnography with aspects of participatory and decolonising methods (and theories) in this project. We are uncertain about these choices, about whether we are achieving what we hope to. We are particularly uncomfortable about claims to explore decolonisation, framed as we are by colonial discourses of schooling, ethnicity and health. The combination of our (uncertain) methodological commitments produce particular tensions, which we explore here. These can be thought of as methodological dilemmas (Gallagher 2008) but we prefer to see them as *tensions* that are both productive and irresolvable. Productive in the sense that they chafe at the edges of our experiences, decisions and approaches, causing us to be more reflexive about how we engage with young people, with the politics of our research, and with complex relations of power. Consistent with our methodological and theoretical commitments (which we explain further below), we do not seek to resolve these tensions, but rather hope to hold them *in tension*, as productive axes for reflexivity and representation. We thus employ Michelle Fine’s (1994) notion of ‘working the hyphen’ to think about how the tensions of working with multiple methodological and theoretical commitments, with two researchers across four sites, might produce a sophisticated and thoughtful research engagement. We

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<sup>ii</sup> All names are pseudonyms

also draw on Bhabha's (1994) notion of ambivalence, which we employ as a way to approach the analysis of colonial power as multiple, shifting and irresolvable (we explain this further below). This allows us to explore the spaces between re- and decolonising in full awareness of the impossibility of claiming to decolonise. We imagine, instead, our purpose in this article then is to reflect on three key methodological tensions. These arise in this particular project in ways that they would not in another, so the focus of the wider study—on young people and health—is significant and threaded throughout the discussion. However, we focus the bulk of our analysis on the three methodological tensions: challenging colonial discourses versus reinforcing colonial discourses in research settings; collaborating versus co-constructing methods; being critical versus being a listener. In each of these we maintain a strong intension to do, what Paris (2014) refers to as, moving beyond a critique of power and “toward the praxical (taking action to dismantle unequal power relations)” (176). We are simultaneously aware of the dangers of such an approach in terms of risking reinscribing the very power relations we seek to dismantle. We begin by explaining the background to the project and the theoretical ideas we employ, before exploring the three tensions in turn and reflecting on their productive power.

### Background to the project: A critical ethnography of young people and health

The ‘healthiness’ of young people and communities is reported in news and entertainment media internationally in increasingly urgent tones. Ayo (2012) argues that “health consciousness has become deeply engrained within our social fabric” (100), so much so that health-related initiatives targeting young people are seemingly ubiquitous. Statistically, young people from low socioeconomic communities in New Zealand (like elsewhere) are reportedly more likely to have health problems (Rush and Bristow 2012; Jackson, Han, and Committee 2007; Tiatia 2009) and to underachieve at school. They are consequently targeted in health campaigns (Ministry of Health 2012a, 2012d, 2014) especially if they identify as Māori (indigenous) or as Pacific Island<sup>iii</sup> (Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2011; Ministry of Health 2012c, 2012b; Oakley Brown et al. 2006). In this sense, policy initiatives here, as elsewhere (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2011; US Health and Human Services 2001), tend to elide social class and ethnicity, and assume a homogenous conception of low socioeconomic communities with respect to health. Health interventions then tend to be located narrowly according to ethnicity and to reinforce cultural stereotypes and deficit perspectives, while ignoring both the complex and differentiated nature of communities and social class. Curiously, youth from low socioeconomic communities in New Zealand choose to take health education as a senior high school subject in disproportionate numbers (Education Counts 2012); they also tend to perceive themselves as ‘healthy’ across a range of indicators (Clark et al., 2013). It is not clear how such school-based learning enables young people to engage with a diversity of views about health, or how this articulates with the knowledge they gain from family, peers, social media and health websites. Indeed, there is little international evidence exploring youth perspectives on how the dedicated study of health at school impacts their lives. This study asks how health is experienced, conceptualised, lived and learned by youth in different ways across and between socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

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<sup>iii</sup> Pacific Island communities in New Zealand are diverse and include both recent migrants and those who have been in New Zealand for generations. The term ‘Pasifika’ is often used as a pan-ethnic term for people who identify as one or more of: Samaon, Tongan, Niuean, Cook Islands Māori, Fijian, Tokelauan and other ethnicities. We are aware of critiques that this term is not the preferred name of people from these communities and so choose instead to use the terms the students in the study use: Pacific Island or the name of the specific ethnicity/s (such as Tongan).

Critical ethnography is the overarching methodology for this study. We resonate with Madison's (2012) definition of critical ethnography as a process of going "beneath surface appearances" and unsettling both "neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (5). Thomas (1993) insists that critical ethnography does not stand in opposition to conventional ethnography but is, rather, explicit about its political purpose. For us, a critical approach is connected to our theoretical commitments to humanising research, and to attending to relations of power in education at the intersection of gender sexuality, culture, ethnicity, social class and place. It also connects well with our commitments—in line with the wider field of ethnography—form meaningful connections with people, and to develop reciprocity, trust and reflexivity (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Critical ethnography also allows (requires) us to spend enough time in the field to connect meaningfully and gain deep understandings. Lather (2007) suggests that critical ethnography and post-structural theories can work together to produce a kind of (post) critical ethnography. She argues that researchers employing such an approach will embrace "the performance of practices of not-knowing" (7) by being slow to make claims and adopting ambiguity and uncertainty.

Within the wider critical ethnographic methodology (see also Fitzpatrick and May forthcoming), we have a range of methods. Space limits here preclude us from explaining these in full, but the methods include observing and participating in health education classes and having research discussions with students (Fitzpatrick 2013); attending and participating in student-led groups (such as queer support groups and feminist groups); conducting individual and group interviews; and arts-based methods such as photovoice (Pink 2013) and poetic representation (Faulkner 2009). In each of the four schools in this project we have (or will) spend 3–5 days per week for between 20 and 30 weeks. The timing differs slightly in each school depending on school priorities, logistical factors and our own sense about the level of connection we can achieve over time. At the time of writing this article, fieldwork is complete in three schools and planning is underway for the final school in 2018. In this sense, we are very much writing from the middle of the project, without any clear sense of what the empirical materials will elucidate once we engage a committed analysis.

## Working the hyphen

Michelle Fine (1994) suggests that researchers might 'work the hyphen' between self and other in order to 'interrupt *Othering*' in qualitative research. She notes that many, "researchers have spoken 'of' and 'for' Others while occluding ourselves and our own investments, burying the contradictions that percolate at the self-other hyphen" (70). Although Fine made this statement over 20 years ago, it is a challenge that continues to be relevant in contemporary research (see Paris & Winn 2014). In this century, we can see new forms of *Othering* emerge while old notions of class, race, gender and sexuality tenaciously persist, in both recognisable and altered states. We borrow Fine's notion here to help us think about and explore the messy, complex and irresolvable tensions inhering in this research project. The in-between space of the hyphen allows us to explore the *either-or*, the *both-and*, the *but-also* of the various research decisions we make. Working the hyphen helps us to "probe how we are in relation to the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations" (Fine 1994, 72). Working the hyphen is complicated, messy and sometimes uncomfortable as we discuss with our participants "what is, and is not, 'happening between,' within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told ... and whose story is being shadowed" (Fine 1994, 72). This requires an open and honest approach in our relationships with one another, and we need to ask difficult questions about how we inadvertently *Other*. Jones and Jenkins (2008) explored such complexities by examining what they call the indigene-colonizer hyphen in their writing relationship (one of them is indigenous and one a white—Pākehā—New Zealander). They found that collaboration is not only about relationships but also about researchers' respective relationships to

difference and to one another. Thus, hyphens are never innocent, and neither are the researchers who are working them (Bhattacharya 2015). In the following sections, we explore the three particular tensions we mentioned earlier. In each of these, we are implicated in embodied, emotional and embedded ways; none so much as the first, which is the tension between challenging colonial discourses and reinforcing colonial discourses in research. As with Jones and Jenkins (2008), exploration of this tension begins with us.

### Challenging colonial discourse versus reinforcing colonial discourse: Embracing ambivalence

Like many other nation states, New Zealand is still grappling with the ongoing effects of its colonial history(s). While discourses have morphed over time, social inequalities continue to reflect colonial power relations. Bhabha (1994) argues that colonial histories articulate as shifting and mimetic relations of power; these are difficult to challenge because they are expressed, not in definitive identities, but in the spaces between identity positions. Some scholars suggest employing decolonising practices as a response to such ongoing and persistent inequities. Smith (1999) explains decolonising as “a long term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (98). It necessarily involves the language of critique and struggle (Thiong’o 2005), as well as the reclaiming of indigenous voices (Swadener and Mutua 2008). Thiong’o (2005) argues that decolonising requires people to imagine a world where indigenous bodies, health and humanity are not dependent on the bodies, health and humanity of others (Thiong’o 2005). It is debatable whether contemporary schools—which are haunted by their colonial past (see below)—can ever be decolonised sites. Bhabha (1994) reminds us, however, that power relations exist in micro interactions and the in-between spaces of subjectivities. He suggests that these in-between spaces provide chances to contest—to split—colonial power. In this project, we do not claim to decolonise but we are inspired by Bhabha’s work to reflect on how, even in micro ways, we can be aware of, and contest, colonial power through our research methodology. Central to this is our intention to challenge discourses about young people’s health. Such discourses, for example, position Māori and Pacific peoples in New Zealand as stereotypically unhealthy. Our project, therefore, begins with a scepticism about western medical approaches to the body, health and illness (Hokowhitu 2013). At the same time, we are also aware that decolonisation exists only because of colonisation; they are connected by Bhabha’s *and* (see below), by Fine’s hyphen. To attempt decolonisation is to also be defined by colonisation, and to risk reinforcing the latter. Bhabha (1994) employs the notion of ambivalence to argue that contemporary power relations do not merely mirror or echo historical ones, but rather shift over time into new mimetic and complex forms. These forms create fluid, contradictory and shifting identities. Rather than ignoring contradictions, Bhabha highlights the effects of these in the spaces between subjectivities. Bhabha states that “... the Unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, *but the disturbing distance in-between* that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness” (64, emphasis added).

Bhabha (1994) insists that colonial histories ‘haunt’ contemporary practices so that echoes of the past reverberate through institutions. This, of course, includes schools as state-sponsored institutions that carry the weight of their colonial histories via knowledge, practice and structures. Bhabha (1994) insists that there is no possibility of liberation from these discourses (or for the people subject to them) in the sense of power binaries (he references Hegel’s Master-Slave as an example but we might offer teacher-student or researcher-participant). For Bhabha (1994), rather, “both colonizer and colonized are in a process of misrecognition where each point of identification is always a partial and double repetition of the *otherness* of the self—democrat and despot, individual *and* servant, native *and* child” (139, emphasis in original).

In this sense, he suggests that because “discourse is so disseminated” (138) the dichotomy does not lead to a transformation of the less powerful to the more powerful, or even a handing over of power. He insists that “it is around the ‘and’—that conjunction of infinite repetition that the ambivalence of civil authority circulates as a ‘colonial’ signifier that is *less than one and double*” (Bhabha 1994, 139, emphasis in original).

We begin working this *and* in the micro setting of our own relationship.

Jean identifies as a Tongan New Zealander; she is a PhD student and ‘emerging scholar’. The latter of these labels too often equates with a lack of status in the academy. Jean is also an experienced teacher and has lived experience of being a non-white (non-Pākehā) New Zealander. In this relationship, Jean is the expert in indigenous knowledges and approaches to research, and in Pacific cultural protocols. Jean hates the word expert; Katie has convinced her to keep it as an illustration of the hyphen or the *and*. Jean is expert *and* student; indigenous *and* studying in the western academy. Katie is an associate professor with a permanent academic role; she is Pākehā and is Jean’s PhD supervisor. She is also an experienced teacher and ethnographer (Fitzpatrick 2011, 2013). Katie has worked with young people her whole career, and has conducted critical ethnographic work with diverse youth. She is supervisor *and* non-expert. She is both a scholar *and* a novice of contemporary youth culture.

Our first task in this project is to ensure we are, as much as possible, exposing and challenging the workings of power between us. Swadener and Mutua (2008) argue that decolonising research involves “resisting the lures and mires of postcolonial reason that position certain players within post-coloniality as more ‘valid’ postcolonial researchers/scholars” (31). Our process here begins with naming and questioning how we are positioned by academic hierarchies, and how this affects our confidence, ability to speak and relations of power. Jones and Jenkins (2008) note that such relationships are never ‘simple or settled’ rather, “all collaborative arrangements differ depending on the personalities, the partnership, the relative power, and academic desires of the participants” (4). In our relationship, we first try to be aware of, and name, the hierarchies we are each invested in and interested in disrupting. For Katie, this includes subverting her own ‘expert’ status by inviting Jean to challenge her views and assumptions, inviting Jean to talk first in meetings, and naming Jean as an expert in particular areas of the research. On the other hand, she invokes her academic experience to actively and supportively mentor Jean in her academic career. For Jean, subverting power is about resisting the academic hierarchies that suggest PhD students are less knowledgeable or have less status. This includes institutional racism inherent in the academy. Jean is one of the few Tongan scholars in our faculty; we both have to challenge traditions of whiteness that silence non-western voices, that position non-white women as Other. This includes speaking up when we see and hear exclusionary institutional and interpersonal practices, and actively supporting colleagues with less (perceived) status. This is not always easy and, as we work with Bhabha’s ideas, we are reminded that there is ambivalence in our positioning within universities, as colonial institutions. Jean is especially conscious of how she is trying to subvert colonial discourses that position those in her community in deficit terms, but every time she positions herself as a PhD student, she also understands that she is reinforcing colonial discourses that view ‘academics’ as having more legitimate knowledge. Therefore we do not pretend that such relations of power can necessarily be overcome. We are instead trying to subvert them in small but visible ways. We have regular and honest conversations about the process, about how we can better support each other, and we consciously open up spaces to challenge each other’s thinking. This requires humility and self-awareness. In writing this article, we talked at length about the term ‘Pasifika’ (see footnote 2), and Jean insisted we use the terms Pacific, Pacific Island/er and Tongan. This is her right, to resist names that may reinforce colonial discourses, to resist names that do not speak truth to the people they speak of.

In the fieldwork itself, we attempt to keep the intentions and politics of decolonising in mind as we go about researching, thinking and writing. We are, of course, as Bhabha (1994) reminds us, all subjects



to, and subjects of, colonial discourse and so also implicated in its workings. Our intentions then, to privilege youth voices, to challenge western discourses of health and wellbeing, are also haunted by the shadows of colonialism; these intentions carry with them a history of the subjugation of youth voices and non-white cultures, and women (McClintock 1995). Exploring the ‘disturbing’ spaces in-between is a point of beginning. Many of the youth in the research project are from non-white cultural backgrounds; centring their voices is a conscious act to de-centralise western perspectives. Not that we suggest that western perspectives will be absent in their views and actions, but rather there might be other things also evident, a dissonance between western and non-western cultures, languages, practices. In order to notice this, we have to at once suppress and make visible our assumptions about these young people, the limits of everyday conversation, and listen with as much openness and awareness as possible (Souto-Manning 2014; Madison 2012). This is also a contradictory practice as we commit to critical praxis (Paris 2014), to contesting prejudice, while also valuing deep and open listening (we give an example of this in the final section). In this, we are framed by the in-between spaces that reinscribe colonial power, the space between the researcher and participant; the indigenous and settler; the colonised and colonial other.

There is no one set list of methods that challenge the dominance of western discourses, but indigenous scholars Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith 2013, 1999) and Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1997) offer some minimal requirements, such as the relinquishing of power within one’s chosen fields. Of course, it is not possible to completely give up power. Power relationships are always in flux (Gubrium and Kori-Ljungberg 2005) and our status in schools as ‘people from the university’ gives us certain credibility. It is also a barrier to connecting if universities are seen as elite and ‘ivory tower’ institutions. Instead of trying to relinquish power we, instead, seek to ‘mute’ our power in conscious ways at different research moments (personal communication with Hayley McGlashan 2017). Cram, Chilisa and Mertens (2013) argue that “the ‘bad name’ that research has within Indigenous communities is not about the notion of investigation itself; rather it is about how the investigation has been practiced, by whom, and for what purpose that has created ill-feeling” (11). Muting power requires attention to humility, an attitude that acknowledges that researcher power is both arbitrary and meaningful. A willingness to learn *alongside and from* participants is a point of beginning (Fine 1994; Freire 1996). Muting power might, for example, begin in the body. Bain and Nash (2006) argue that ‘the researching body’ is a visible and contested site of knowledge production. They discuss the purposeful and contentious process of preparing, positioning and interacting with bodies throughout their ethnographic research into feminism, embodiment and sexuality at a queer bathhouse. The perceived representation of their bodies was a constant tension. On reflection of the bathhouse guidelines, Bain and Nash (2006) stated that

these suggestions reinforced for us our desire to ‘blend in’ with other participants. Yet we also recognized that we could be positioned as sexual subjects in the eyes of others, and we wanted to communicate that neither one of us was available to participate in any sexual activities. (101)

On one hand, we want to fit in and be accepted at the schools we are researching in, but we do not want to compromise our authenticity by (for example) ‘dressing up’ for school or consciously hiding aspects of our identities. Schools are famously conservative sites and researchers (as well as teachers) are vulnerable to how they are perceived. McDowell (1995) argues that bodily presentation and deportment affects both how others perceive us, and how they interact with us (see also, Bain and Nash 2006). During fieldwork, we each made a conscious decision to dress in our own ‘normal’ way; we both display our tattoos and wear casual clothing (jeans, t-shirts, denim or leather jackets). We both noticed a tendency (at least partly unconscious) for each of us to employ colloquial phrases and youth-speak (words and phrases in fashion with young people). This is perhaps an attempt to connect, to be understood; we were trying to be relaxed, informal and approachable. It was somewhat strange being a researcher in a school, especially when we were both teachers. It felt a bit ‘useless’; in schools



in New Zealand, researchers don't necessarily have status. In many ways, we both felt more vulnerable during the school-based fieldwork than we did at the university. I (Katie) was aware that most people in the school setting had no idea who I was or why I was there. The students found me a kind of novelty, an adult who asked them (sometimes strange) questions. I did not get the feeling that they expected me to have any particular expertise in the subject they were studying. Embodying the 'non-expert' (either on purpose or as a result of being a stranger in the space) may be one way to mute power. This, however, also raises tensions and questions at the hyphen of challenging-reinforcing colonial discourses. While our embodied approach to the research process might convey discomfort and a lack of power and status in schools, this is, of course, partial, incomplete and constructed. We continue to (also) embody the power of the academy and we are the writers of the research project, the authors who wield the power of representation.

Existing in the hyphen between challenging and reinforcing colonial discourses, we are also aware that we do not control all the outcomes of the project nor how we are perceived in the schools. What if, for example, our attempts to mute power were read as disingenuous? What about the moments when expert knowledge is useful to teachers and students in schools? Swadener and Mutua (2008) remind us that some of the key tenets of de-colonial research focus on intent, attitudes towards participants and respect for indigenous ways of knowing. Cherryl Smith (2013) suggests that this also requires challenging one's own identity/s. Ultimately, (post) critical theory requires us to accept that we can not know all the affects of our presence, or even be fully conscious of our own embodiment. We settle on a hope to maintain a gentle awareness; enough to ensure we do not inadvertently 'Other' even as we attempt to relinquish power (Fine, 1994) in the spaces between our uncertain identities.

### Collaborating versus co-constructing

A further tension in this research project lies between collaborating with our participants and attempting to co-construct parts of the research. This is a fairly large, funded research project, focused on health and education across four school sites. The overall intentions, as explained earlier, are to expose and challenge dominant conceptualisations of how health is defined, and exemplify how young people across and between socio-economic and cultural contexts live health in diverse ways. We have set the broad agenda and the focus of the research. Although this is informed by our work with young people, it is not expressly designed by our participants. On the other hand, we want to centralise youth concerns and voices, and so need to open the methodology up to input from youth, to ensure there is connection, reciprocity and collaboration. We want the research methods to make sense to the students, and to be both inviting and meaningful to them. Holding this tension in mind, we explored how we might integrate aspects of participatory research into this project (Camarrota and Fine 2008; Rodriguez and Brown 2009). Participatory action research begins with research problems identified by community members; it engages participants as co-researchers at each stage of the research project. Clearly this differs methodologically and epistemologically from our project, but we wonder if we might learn from this approach, whether we can use it as a stimulus to open up our research design to gain more input from youth. This created questions for us in several directions (all of which remain unresolved at the point of writing this paper). We were bound by the constraints of having a funded project and prior university ethical approval. The former meant that the aims of the project were set by us (mostly by Katie, who won the funding and then brought Jean into the project), and rested on our learning from the literature, prior experiences, the research of colleagues, and international health concerns. The resulting issues, however, are not necessarily those of the youth in the research. An example here is the positioning of health education as a school subject internationally.

Health education tends to be a low status subject in schools and is seldom offered as a dedicated separate subject in senior school for national qualifications (Fitzpatrick and Tinning 2014). Understanding how young people engage with this subject then is of interest internationally. For the

young people in this study, however, having the opportunity to study health is taken-for-granted, as it has existed in the schooling system in New Zealand since 2002. This small example shows how the very intentions of the research project are framed by wider international and field-based concerns that are beyond the possible knowledge of participants. However, our ethical responsibility in this study remains the provision of space for youth voices while keeping in mind the larger intentions of the project and how it relates to the field. Souto-Manning (2014) notes that all researchers engaging in critical methodologies must ask the question ‘critical for whom? She argues that it is “important to look closely and listen carefully in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants in their own terms” (201). If we take Bhabha’s (1994) contention that power exists in the spaces in-between, then bridging the gap methodologically by providing options for participants to communicate in ways that are meaningful to them goes some way towards challenging relations of power.

One strategy we employ to grapple with this tension is seeking approval for, and including, a wide range of methodological options. As stated earlier, we are participating in health education classes—in the hope that youth choosing this subject have some interest in the content. While critical ethnography provides the broad methodological approach, we have included a range of individual methods. These include research conversations, group and individual interviews, photo-voice and a range of arts-based methods (poetry, drawings). We also include the option to email us thoughts and responses to questions and to submit formal class assignments to the research. Students have the option to engage in all (or none) of these methods.

We hope that the provision of this range of methods will allow us to work the hyphen between the larger field of research and practice in health education, and the lived experiences of these particular young people. Methodologically this means we hold in tension the levels of collaboration with youth, with our directive input into the project. Within these various methods, we also acknowledge a further tension: our tendency to contest knowledge with our responsibility to listen with openness.

### Being critical versus being a listener

Madison (2012) insists that critical ethnographers should resist domestication, by which she means a researcher might “use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible—to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defence of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (6). She also argues that “politics alone are incomplete without self-reflection” (7), and so critical ethnographers might also examine the layers of their intentions, try to understand how their ontologies frame what is seen, heard, felt. This self-awareness can, of course, stand in opposition to, and in tension with, any motivation to challenge injustice.

Critical ethnography requires us to focus on issues of injustice and prejudice, but what if these occur during the research, such as in conversations with students or teachers? What should we do if we are witness to, or even part of, conversations where racist, sexist or homophobic comments are made? In such moments, what responsibility do we have to act, to contest? A further tension lies in understanding how our own subjectivities influence how we receive and experience such moments in the field. How do I know that the injustices I am seeing and feeling are not simply a product of my own interpretation of events? What is my responsibility to seek a full understanding of the scene I am witnessing before acting? How do my actions then affect the research? We offer an example here as a case-in-point of how a researcher’s interpretations can be wrong, and how a critical view can actually prevent one from really listening and seeking deep understanding. In this, there is a risk of jumping to incorrect conclusions, contesting ideas based within our own cultural and gendered frameworks. This can prevent us from listening and also close down conversations with participants because we are misunderstanding what is actually going on. This can happen when we see teachers say things to

students that we perceive as unfair, or when students talk about each other or about teachers. We need to make ethical decisions, not only about how to represent these in our research writing, but also how to act in the moment.

The following example is also from the first site of research. It is a conversation between Katie and a health education student. In this, Katie struggles to put aside her own deep commitments to the study of the subject, in order to listen to the alternative views of the student, Mike.

Katie: Tell me why you decided to take health education.

Mike: Well, because I did well in health last year. No one told me it was a feminist class. I was kind of taken by surprise.

Katie: What do you mean by a feminist class?

Mike: It sort of talks a lot about social justice and the objectification [of women] and such [sighs in frustration] and it has actually been quite fun because I am one of those people that sort of thrives on arguing. [Pause].

So, being in a class where, how do I explain this, sort of being in a class where most of what is taught I tend to disagree with, it is actually very refreshing. Like I've been in debates and arguments before with people in certain things, but I've never really argued with someone who I disagree with on a fundamental level on anything. So, it's been fun.

He takes a bite of biscuit and then continues.

Mike: Yeah, I'd say I kind of disagree that feminism is still a necessary thing in the west. It's sort of devolved into a sort of loose group of people with first world problems from what I've seen. Like modern feminism in the west is the biggest collection of first world problems I've seen in a very, very long time.

Katie: Do you think women have equal rights to men in the west?

Mike: Legally, yes; and in some cases socially, they have more rights than men. For instance, they have the right to genital integrity—that's not a social one that's a legal one I might point out—where, like, a parent can't ask a doctor to cut up their new born daughter's clitoris, but if a couple want they can have their son circumcised. That is a right that women have in the west that men don't, and as for social rights, well ...

In this conversation, you can almost hear Katie biting her tongue and trying not to leap in, in defence of feminism, in defence of health education, and against, what she perceives, are Mike's unjust attitudes. But if she had contested what he said half way through this discussion (and it was tempting), she would have missed Mike's quite sophisticated and thoughtful later comments, his comparisons between different cultural expectations and his own ideas. The wider context here is also important. Mike usually sat alone at the back of the room during lessons and seemed to have few friends. It was clear from his comments during the year, and those of his teacher, that his health was often not good (he looked pale and thin), and he was always hungry. He often did not engage with class activities but was keenly involved in discussions. Mike had a strong interest in playing online war games, and talking about the medieval cultures represented therein. He explained to Katie many times that he was writing a fantasy book and he brought along draft character descriptions that were evocative and well-written. Mike also chose to take health education, a subject clearly orientated to learning about communication and relationships, sexuality, and so forth and he voluntarily agreed to talk with Katie, at length, about his thoughts. The in-between spaces between identity positions is interesting in this

discussion between Katie—the feminist, academic researcher—and Mike—the somewhat reluctant health student, and anti-feminist. Mike is at once resistant to the ‘liberal’ ideas of health education *and* deeply engaged with thinking about the issues introduced in class. Katie is, at once, resistant to Mike’s anti-feminist sentiments and openly listening to him as a research participant. There is even a sense of dissonance in colonial and gender power relations as the white (middle class) academic woman, grapples with the views of the white (working class) teenage boy. Mike rather came to the conversation as an equal; he wanted a contestation of ideas. Katie’s internal critical dialogue almost got in the way of understanding his ideas, of allowing him equal status in the researcher-participant intersection. The real power relations and injustice were not, indeed, expressed in his views but were more apparent in Mike’s experiences of school, his ailing health and his hunger. Katie also talked with him about this and she always brought food to meetings with students. We cannot pretend that we have the right, the resources, or the power to impact such issues for young people like Mike. But we do maintain the affect that research conversations can have when they allow young people to express their views openly. Small human acts of connection and acknowledgement, like those between Katie and Mike, aim for a depth of critical humanistic engagement, rather than a preoccupation with critical rhetoric.

## Conclusion

In this critical ethnographic project, we are attempting to combine our overarching methodology with decolonising and participatory research methods. In doing so, we are aware of the tensions and contradictions that inhere in this combination as we engage across four research sites. Instead of trying to resolve these issues, we employ Michelle Fine’s (1994) notion of ‘working the hyphen’ and Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of ambivalence to explore how we can hold these methodological problems in productive tension throughout the research process. We understand that, as university researchers and teachers, we are immersed in an institution and a range of practices that are re-productive of colonial power. We explore the hyphen between challenging colonial discourses and reinforcing colonial discourses, first, in our own relationship, and then in how we engage in the fieldwork. We have also discussed here the tensions we experience when working with young people in schools, and seeking participation. While the structures of schooling in some ways work against participatory methods, we do hope to actively engage young people by offering methodological choice. We are also aware that marrying the wider political concerns of the field with the specific concerns of young people can strengthen both the reach of the research, and the questions we explore. Finally, we maintain that listening openly and without contestation in research conversations can sometimes require us to resist our own assumptions and probe the participants’ views more deeply. This can be challenging when participants express ideas that we perceive are at odds with our commitments to social justice and critical scholarship. Working the hyphen then requires us to be open, critical and reflexive about our ideas and practices. It also requires us to examine our assumptions as we navigate relationships with one another and with our participants.

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