

# The ethics of anonymity for research in colonised settings



## RESEARCH

‘The ethics of allowing participants to be named in critical research with indigenous peoples in colonised settings: Examples from health research with Māori’

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## Background

The default practice in social science research is to enforce anonymity for participants. This is based on a perception that being named within research write-ups could lead to harm for participants. However, many participants in social science research do not share this concern and would like to be recognised for their contribution to the research. This idea is particularly relevant for research with indigenous communities because of the problematic history of indigenous representation in westernised institutions.

In Aotearoa, *Kaupapa Māori Research* is one of the leading frameworks for doing research with Māori communities. *Kaupapa Māori Research* is most simply defined as research done for, by and with Māori, and is often credited as the way to decolonise research practices.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, contributed to a book chapter on the issues of enforced anonymity and the opportunity of being named in research for Māori participants in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

## Main research findings

In two studies, researchers applied *Kaupapa Māori Research* principles to the study of *hauora* (health and wellbeing) in *tamariki* Māori (Māori children), and the experiences and aspirations of Māori men with a history of criminal offending, respectively.

One aspect of *Kaupapa Māori Research* is an emphasis on *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination) for Māori participants. Therefore, as part of the consent process for the study with *tamariki*, the researcher explained to the children that they would have the option of being named in the research if they chose. All eight *tamariki* decided that they would like to be named in the final research write-up and expressed happiness and pride in being able to share their stories.

However, issues around anonymity in the study of Māori men with a history of criminal offending led to the decision to not offer participants the option to be named. This decision was made largely because of the harm it may cause to people in the wider community that may have previously been harmed by participants. Additionally, the effect that naming participants could have on their future employment and the risk of identifying participants with gang affiliation were also contributing factors to this decision.

The authors provide a model for distinguishing five levels of anonymity to help guide future research. The five levels of anonymity are: True anonymity (participants never give their name); Full anonymity (researchers know participants names but they are concealed in research outputs); Soft naming (participants are named within the research output with limited detail); Full naming (each participants full name is provided and they could be identified by all readers); Co-authorship (participants are recognised as co-researchers in research outputs).

## Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Taken together, these findings raise important issues about anonymity when undertaking research with Māori communities. The issue of naming participants in research with Māori should be understood in the context of historical injustices that Māori communities have endured.

Naming participants allows researchers to be accountable to their communities and promote the *tino rangatiratanga* of participants. It also affords the possibility of participants becoming co-authors of the research, furthering the potential benefits of research. Therefore, participant naming can be one way of conducting *Kaupapa Māori Research* and decolonising research practices.

Local ethics committees can contribute by supporting and normalizing participant naming within the ethical application processes. However, it is important to recognise when forced anonymity is the best approach, not only for the individual participants, but for the community as a whole.