



Indigenous Peoples, Whiteness, and the Coloniality of Co-design

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Abstract

The sustained inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples have been rigorously documented. Co-design has increasingly been posited as a way forward in the design of health interventions or services with Indigenous peoples and other groups that experience significant adverse health and social inequities. However, the relatively rapid rise in co-design rhetoric within health and disability settings has not necessarily been accompanied by an increased understanding of what co-design is. In addition, an ever-increasing enthusiasm for co-design as “the solution” has not equated with a growth in the evidence base around its

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effectiveness or appropriateness as an applied approach within Indigenous well-being contexts.

This chapter deconstructs concepts of co-design within the context of deep-seated racialized social divisions central to Whiteness and coloniality. The chapter also draws upon the authors' research identifying the emergence of co-design as a market/commodity and the parallel presence of harmful colonial, racist, paternalistic, deficit, othering, voyeuristic, and extractive discourses within the field of co-design. These discourses reveal an apparent disconnect between the rhetoric of co-design and its purported benefits and how co-design appears to be currently practiced. The extent to which current co-design practices naturalize colonial knowledge hierarchies and thus reify, rather than unsettle, Whiteness in health and disability settings is explored.

Keywords

Co-design · Indigenous peoples · Māori · Colonization · Coloniality · Whiteness · Health

Introduction

If we start with the presupposition, striking perhaps but not totally far-fetched, that the contemporary world can be considered a massive design failure, certainly the result of particular design decisions, is it a matter of designing our way out? (Escobar 2017: 33)

The field of co-design appears to be increasingly influential within the context of health and well-being services. Government agencies make recommendations to include it, policy-makers promote the use of it, philanthropy seeks to commission it, and organizations say they are doing it. Indeed, within the nation state currently known as New Zealand (NZ), government has bestowed co-design with an influential position in the future of Indigenous Māori health and well-being, with minimal evidence to support this positioning (King 2021). Current government strategies and reports include recommendations for agencies to “co-design solutions with Māori where possible” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019: 21). Even where not included in policy recommendations, co-design is often still alluded to as exemplary practice. What is notable is that these strategies and reports generally fail to define or even describe what is meant by the term “co-design” itself or to provide a rationale for why it forms the basis for the recommendations regarding its use (King 2021).

Despite institutional support and assertions about supposed benefits, co-design (and its relation, “design thinking”) has received critique, ranging from the observation of Vink et al. (2016) that “[t]o date there has been limited to no discussion in co-design literature of negative impacts of the process on well-being. . . conversations about how to reduce and mitigate negative impacts of the co-design process are absent” (396) to the dry assertion by Monteiro (2019) that if one asks “ten designers for a definition of design. . . you’ll get ten different answers

and five will be self-serving” (203). Indeed, Monteiro (2019) goes so far as to state “[o]ur shifty definition of design has been quite helpful, mainly to us. It allows us to slither and slide toward the things we enjoy doing, while avoiding accountability” (203).

As Indigenous Māori scholars with a commitment to eliminating inequities within NZ and realizing optimal health and well-being for Māori as part of broader aspirations for sovereign futures, the authors have observed – at first with curiosity, over time progressing to unease – an ever-increasing enthusiasm for co-design as “the solution” for improving the health and well-being of communities (and within those communities, social groups including Indigenous peoples). Such increasing enthusiasm has not been accompanied by a growth in the evidence base around co-design and health and well-being, particularly for Indigenous peoples (King 2021).

This chapter seeks to deconstruct concepts of co-design within the contexts of Whiteness and coloniality and suggests that rather than being a new “solution” for addressing racialized health inequities, current co-design approaches are a reinscription of colonial knowledge hierarchies and Whiteness. Drawing on the authors’ research identifying the emergence of co-design as a market/commodity and the parallel presence of harmful colonial, racist, paternalistic, deficit, othering, voyeuristic, and extractive discourses within the field of co-design (King 2021), this chapter explores the ways that current co-design approaches in NZ reify Whiteness through the (re)production of “white innocence” (Wekker 2016) and White saviorism (Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021), through the construction of White expertise and experts, through the representation of “otherness,” and through possessive and extractive logics.

Whiteness, Coloniality, and Māori Health

Concepts of Whiteness have a long, although not always acknowledged, history of theorization and articulation, particularly within communities that experience marginalization and structural oppression (Hambel 2005; hooks 1992; Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021) and among Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2004). More recent critical attention to Whiteness in academic settings, and the articulation of critical Whiteness studies, has built upon this earlier theorizing, including the foundational works by W. E. B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and others (Fine et al. 1997; Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021).

Whiteness has been defined in various ways but is understood here as a construct or a “set of locations” (Frankenberg 1993: 6) historically, socially, and culturally bound and shifting as opposed to a natural, preexisting social classification (Fiske 2000; Frankenberg 1999; Gabriel 1998). According to Hambel (2005), it is “a multi-layered construct embedded in the fabric of westernised society and centred on the way that white institutions, cultures, and people are racialised and ethnicised by history and society” (75). Definitions of Whiteness often include reference to power and dominance (Fine et al. 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Tascón 2004). Whiteness has

material consequences, through the conferred privilege accrued by White people and White epistemologies and the accompanying systems of domination and oppression through which Whiteness is maintained (Moreton-Robinson 2004).

Hunter and van der Westhuizen (2021) note that the focus of theorizing has broadened within the critical Whiteness study field “to name, home in and dissect whiteness as a distinct power formation within the structures of race, racism, and white supremacy that rose with and sustained colonialism, and today forms an essential part of coloniality” (xx). Similarly, Tascón (2004), speaking in the Australian context, notes that:

Race and whiteness as complementary processes are part of the coloniality of power and cannot be separated from it. They constitute and reproduce colonial power, and in turn make of us colonial subjects differently placed to exercise power. The coloniality of power continues, although it has shifted to new forms, forms that at times appear non-raced, neutral to the complexity that is Race[ism] and Whiteness. And Race[ism] and Whiteness are complex subjects, they hide within the myriad of different ways people receive privilege. (242)

For Māori, Whiteness is always conceptualized and experienced within the context of colonialism and ongoing coloniality. That is, Whiteness is produced and sustained by what bell hooks names the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 1992) or what Grosfoguel (2011) refers to as the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world system.” Whiteness was actively cultivated as part of the colonial project and continues to be (re) produced in the institutions and systems, including knowledge and health and disability systems, that have become dominant in NZ. Colonization, for Māori, as for Indigenous peoples elsewhere, is characterized by the violent and explicit dismissal and destruction of already existing ways of knowing, being, and doing (Jackson 2020). Racialized hierarchies, central to colonialism, were introduced, with power, resources, and access to rights delineated along this “line of the human” (Grosfoguel 2016: 10).

In addition to the myriad material ways that Whiteness is embedded in the organization and functioning of social, political, cultural, and economic systems in NZ, Whiteness is also created and sustained through “a set of discursive techniques” (Gabriel 1998: 13). Among these discursive techniques are those of exnomination, naturalization, and universalization (Fiske 1996: 43; Gabriel 2000). Exnomination, as a process of not naming or refusing to name, allows social groups to remain unnamed or unmarked, to just exist. In NZ, exnomination can be seen through tendencies to avoid marking the dominant group ethnically, as is often the case in reporting ethnic health inequities. While social groups constructed as “Other” are frequently labeled through reference to perceived group characteristics or differences, the White settler majority group is much less likely to be either externally or internally labeled in such a way (Cormack 2008; Gabriel 2000). Closely related to exnomination is naturalization, described by Gabriel (1998) as the process whereby “whiteness establishes itself as the norm by defining ‘others’ and not itself” (13). It is through naturalization that White ways of knowing, being, and doing become institutionalized and taken for granted, while Others and Other ways are constructed

as abnormal and different, if not deviant. Naturalization is linked to processes of indivisibility that allow for Other groups to be divided and categorized, while Whiteness remains “indivisible” (Chambers 1997):

[T]he differences between white and nonwhite depends in crucial ways on there also being differences among the multiple categories that constitute the paradigm of the nonwhite, since it is only by differentiation from a pluralized paradigm that the singularity of whiteness as nonparadigmatic, its undivided touchstone character, can be produced ... In short, to pluralize the other is to produce one's own singularity. (190)

While Other groups are pluralized in this manner, Chambers (1997) notes they are also “homogenized,” in contrast to White groups. In this manner, the indivisibility of White groups is further realized through the individualization of their members:

[W]hereas nonwhites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group belongingness, that is as black or Latino or Asian (and then as individuals), whites are perceived first as individual people (and only secondarily, if at all, as whites). (192)

Fiske (1994) has also identified universalization as a tool of Whiteness, “where whiteness alone can make sense of a problem and its understanding becomes the understanding” (Fiske 1994: 43 cited in Gabriel 1998: 13). This is enacted in the health and disability system in NZ, for example, through the universalization of White settler paradigms and concepts and the marginalization of Māori worldviews and knowledges. White settler colonial ways of knowing are not marked as partial or situated but as universally applicable truths. Moreton-Robinson (2004) states:

They [academics] have produced knowledge about Indigenous people but their way of knowing is never thought of by white people as being racialised despite whiteness being exercised epistemologically. Whiteness establishes the limits of what can be known about the other through itself, disappearing beyond or behind the limits of this knowledge it creates in the other's name. (75)

These discursive tools of Whiteness support invisibility, a centrally important aspect of Whiteness (Chambers 1997; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993). Moreton-Robinson (2004) highlights that “. . .whiteness is constitutive of the epistemology of the West; it is an *invisible* regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life” (75, emphasis added).

However, the idea of invisibility has also been critiqued in relation to the ways in which Whiteness is invisible for some but, for those peoples who are made always visible in racialized hierarchies, Whiteness is not invisible (Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021). Invisibility can link therefore to ideas around White ignorance (Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021) and the way in which invisibility is sustained as part of an active cultivation of ignorance – it is in the best interests of those who benefit from the system to not see it or to claim ignorance of it, as this supports further claims to innocence.

Theorists have also talked about White innocence as a formation of Whiteness (Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021) and its relationship to White ignorance.

Wekker (2016), in talking about innocence in the Dutch context, says: “The claim of innocence, however, is a double-edged sword: it contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know, capturing what philosopher Charles W. Mills (1997, 2007) has described as the epistemology of innocence” (17). Theories of Whiteness, therefore, encourage a shift in the focus or the “gaze,” as Morrison (1992) describes, “from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90). While some have cautioned against the potential for Whiteness studies to (re)privilege Whiteness through this shift in focus, critical Whiteness studies seek to challenge White ignorance (Mills 1997) and encourage increased attention on the ways that Whiteness is cultivated (Fine et al. 1997), as part of the broader work of dismantling Whiteness.

For the purposes of this chapter, theorizing around Whiteness is important as it supports a shift in focus to dominant and dominating institutions through redirecting attention to those with privileged access to resource, voice, and power. While racism is increasingly named as a factor, much research and policy in this space in NZ still focus on the examination of those who are racialized as Other, with limited critical discussion of Whiteness and White supremacy, including in the field of co-design.

Design and Co-design

As noted, co-design is often not clearly or explicitly defined as a concept, and there are a multitude of meanings and ways that the term “design” is used. Costanza-Chock (2020) notes the term “design” is used in reference to:

a plan for an artifact, building, or system; a pattern (such as a floral print on a textile); the composition of a work of art; or the shape, appearance, or features of an object. It also refers to the practice, field, or subfields of design work. . . . At the same time, design frequently refers to expert knowledge and practices contained within a particular set of professionalized fields, including graphic design, fashion design, interaction design, industrial design, architecture, planning, and various other industries. (13)

Although design has been described as a universal activity that all humans participate in, it has been professionalized over time. Indeed, while everyone designs, only particular types of people have their design work attributed, recognized as credible and valid, or remunerated (Costanza-Chock 2020); in other words, design is an elite activity that can only be undertaken by “elites.”

Commentators describe a conceptual change in design theory and practice over time from that undertaken by experts only to design involving end users of artifacts and/or technology. However, rather than being passive recipients, individuals and communities have always designed or appropriated and re-designed artifacts and/or technology to meet their own aspirations (Costanza-Chock 2020). Such trends were the key drivers of changes in approaches toward the designing of products leading to the advent of “user-centered design,” “human-centered design,” and “design thinking” (Costanza-Chock 2020).

Over a decade ago another emerging design practice was observed. While the discipline of design had previously centered on creation of artifacts and/or technology, emphasis was now being placed on designing to meet the needs of people, communities, and society more broadly. A critique of “user-centered design” approaches as inadequate in the addressing of contemporary societal issues represented a key shift toward the concept of “co-design” (Britton 2017). This evolution also encompassed a shift from those concepts of “user as subject” to “user as partner,” considered fundamental to the “decentering” of design practitioners as the experts (Britton 2017). Thus, notions of “co-design” began to take shape within the fields of design and management.

There is no one established definition of the term “co-design” but rather a number of varying definitions within the literature tending toward overlapping use of related terms and/or use of synonyms (King 2021). For these reasons it can be challenging to identify what co-design actually is. Kimbell (2015) provides a broad definition of the term “co-design” referring to engagement of people with “relevant (often first-hand) experience of an issue in generating and exploring potential solutions to it” (80). Zamenopoulos and Alexiou (2018) provide an extended definition, describing a “practice where people collaborate or connect their knowledge, skills and resources in order to carry out a design task” (10). The term has also been broken down into the prefix “co” and the word “design” (Blomkamp 2018; Zamenopoulos and Alexiou 2018). The prefix “co” is considered by Blomkamp (2018) to be a short form of the terms “cooperative” or “collaborative” design. Zamenopoulos and Alexiou (2018) concur but extend the prefix “co” to that of “collective” and “connective” design.

Elements of the definitions highlighted tend to describe a scenario whereby participants (who are not design practitioners) collaborate to some extent with design practitioners within some sort of design process, though it is somewhat unclear who these participants are. Britton (2017) notes that if participants are the end users of products or services, then “co-design” appears to be an extension of the concept of “user-centered design,” whereby those end users of products or services are involved in a design process but mostly as a source of information. However, it potentially aligns with Steen’s (2012) definition of “human-centered design,” whereby people are considered a potential source for the generation of solutions. Blomkamp (2018) argues “it is only co-design if people who are affected by the issue are active participants in the design process” (5). Britton (2017) however, critiques whether those participants involved in co-design are “engaged as a source of data or as a genuine partner in the process” (35), highlighting power dynamics of such processes, instead favoring a description of “co-design” that reflects a spectrum of participation across a design process. At one end of the spectrum, “co-design” involves “a formalized and tightly constrained engagement of end-users in providing information to guide design tasks being performed by experts” (Britton 2017: 41). At the other end, “co-design” reflects “the development of intention and the establishment of relationships that form a foundation to meet future challenges” (Britton 2017: 42). Relational and temporal definitional components are thus present.

Akama and Prendiville (2013) prefer the term “co-designing” with the verb form acknowledging the process of design as continuous. They argue the limitations to

“co-design” when interpreted as a process that comprises a series of “fixed interactions or [a] systemized process of methods. . .[and/or a] generic method to develop empathetic connections and understandings of people and their contexts” (30). As per Britton’s (2017) description of “co-design,” both relational and temporal components are present.

Current definitions thus reflect a spectrum of participation (of people with lived experience of the issue at hand) across a design process. This spectrum ranges from participation within a particular design phase, to participation across an entire design process, to ongoing participation across future design iterations. Alongside this spectrum and arguably one of the most important elements to “co-design” lie the added dimensions of temporality and agency of participants involved. However, what is clearly missing is the explicit mention of either rights or equity or the recognition and acknowledgment of the contextual elements of colonization, coloniality, and Whiteness (King 2021).

The Whiteness of Co-design in New Zealand

As signaled, there has been a recent proliferation of co-design rhetoric and approaches in NZ, with co-design proposed as a solution to long-standing inequities in health and other social outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (King 2021). Co-design is positioned as something that is new – an innovative or novel approach to health and social issues and to service improvement. However, in many cases, particularly where co-design is commissioned or carried out by governmental agencies and non-Indigenous corporates or nongovernmental organizations, it embodies continuities with colonial, racial logics that underpin the health and social issues and the inequitable services in the first place (King 2021).

Co-design, White Innocence, and White Savior Logics

Co-design often makes claims to “goodness” in the (re)presentation of co-design projects and activities, including in relation to co-design with communities that experience marginalization and structural oppression. Co-design purports to be interested in solving problems or designing systems and services in collaborative ways. However, research by the authors involving document and critical discourse analyses of publicly available documents relating to co-design within NZ health and disability service contexts has highlighted the focus of much co-design remains limited in relation to what are considered as potential solutions, with a tendency for both the problems and solutions to be defined in narrow, neoliberal individualistic terms (King 2021).

In this sense, co-design can perpetuate both White innocence and White savior logics. In relation to White innocence, for example, co-design often maintains a “gaze” on individuals or communities, rather than identifying or addressing structural issues, let alone fundamental underlying systems of oppression (King 2021).

Within the context of co-design, Farr (2018) notes that “service improvements are made, yet at the same time wider structural issues within public services, generated through austerity measures and neoliberal marketisation may not be challenged” (627). Thus, co-design with communities runs the risk of the neoliberal privatization of “fixing” poor-quality services to communities, with governments saving further costs and continuing to retain all the resource. Dahl and Soss (2014) caution co-design runs the risk of “grafting deliberative processes onto a neoliberal framework” (502). Blomkamp (2018) likewise cautions the risks of “co-opting and ‘responsibilising’ citizens in the state’s quest for efficiency and governing at a distance” (10).

In this manner, co-design operates as a “settler move to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012) by allowing agencies and corporates to feel better about themselves and absolve themselves of guilt for creating and reproducing the conditions of inequity. As Wekker (2016) has noted, White innocence involves both “not-knowing, but also not wanting to know” (90), supported by this proclivity to avoid interrogating underpinning systems and structures, while (re)telling stories of “damage” (Tuck 2009). As Hunter and van der Westhuizen (2021) state, in the current neoliberal context, “[W]hiteness now comes to rely on the dualism of white saviour/traumatised victim, because what white subjects can ‘save,’ they can contain and control” (3). Commentators have criticized the direct link between corporate design and the notion of “doing good” as one fundamentally flawed due to its lack of self-reflection and critique. Schultz et al. (2018) argue:

[t]he ‘doing good’ movement in design (social design, design activism, humanitarian design, etc.)...has done very little in the way of transforming design education, thinking, and practice...designers often remain uncritical service providers, and design itself part of a competitive business strategy. (89)

Whiteness is thus maintained through both structuring the representation of the problem in ways that uphold claims to White innocence and then positioning Whiteness as part of the solution and White institutions and experts as saviors.

Co-design and Logics of Possession and Extraction

In alignment with the observations of others (Akama et al. 2019), the authors’ research has demonstrated the emergence of a capitalist market for co-design in NZ (King 2021). It is not entirely surprising that co-design functions as a market/commodity/saleable product when one considers the foundational underpinnings of co-design have capitalist roots, with industrial design as their antecedent. Escobar (2017) points out how “design’s historicity can be discussed with reference to the patriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system” (41). The close relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and Whiteness is one that is enduring – that of the central role of imperialist capitalist motivations and logics in colonial contexts. Colonialism has an enduring desire to extract and profit from Indigenous lands and Indigenous peoples (Smith 2021).

The authors' research also identified unethical co-design processes and practices in the confiscation and theft of Indigenous knowledge via colonial extractive processes and practices (King 2021). This was demonstrated through discursive strategies such as use of extractive language, objectification, and voyeurism by co-design commissioners, providers, and practitioners. Situated within a culture of the collection and confiscation of knowledge from Māori and other Indigenous peoples, unethical co-design is acknowledged as being aligned with capitalist, neoliberal, and anthropological practices in terms of the "culture of collecting" (Smith 2007). In a number of instances, co-design participants were objectified as a resource containing experiential knowledge to be "captured" or "mined" for the benefit of "the elites." Discursive mechanisms identified included extractive language, for example, "capture," "mining," and "rich source."

Smith (2021) highlights how Indigenous bodies and knowledge are continuously discovered, extracted, exploited, and commodified by the colonizers in the same way that Indigenous natural resources are. There was a prevailing pattern of the objectification of participants as resource or "thing" to be extracted from, a different manifestation of the same "extractive logics" of the colonizers observed by Kukutai and Cormack (2019). In some instances, objectification of the participants as a "thing" to be extracted from extended into voyeurism, with participants as the exotic "other" being gazed upon by "the elites." This aligns with the concept of "thingification" described by Césaire (1972) in reference to rampant objectification, extraction, exploitation, appropriation, and commodification, driven by coloniality and racism. Smith (2021) illustrates this further via their description around "trading the other," stating:

[t]he real critical question in this discussion relates to the commercial nature of knowledge 'transfer', regardless of what knowledge is collected or how that knowledge has been collected or is represented. In this sense, the people and their culture, the material and the spiritual, the exotic and the fantastic, became not just the stuff of dreams and imagination, or stereotypes and eroticism, but of the first truly global commercial enterprise: trading the Other. . . Trading the Other is a vast industry based on the positional superiority and advantages gained under imperialism. (163)

Whiteness and the White Expert in Co-design

A further way in which Whiteness is strengthened, rather than unsettled, is through the (re)production of White experts and White epistemologies in co-design processes. Approaches used by co-design commissioners, providers, and practitioners (and particularly, government agencies) in NZ have been found to be paternalistic toward Māori, a manifestation of colonial constructions of Indigenous peoples as "childlike" and of Indigenous knowledge systems as inferior (King 2021). Recurring patterns of discourse identified through critical discourse analysis involved the (nonevidenced) portrayal of co-design as a universally beneficial process resulting in the improvement of lives of participants involved (King 2021). Indeed, commentators have pointed out that such presumptions are not uncommon in the broader

field of design. Reitsma et al. (2019) caution how “use of design within the context of [I]ndigenous communities raises concerns. This has to do with the characteristics of design to ‘improve’ lives and its emphasis on innovation. Both these characteristics increase the probability that design will colonise” (1556). In much the same way governments and other state bodies consider Indigenous peoples to be tantamount to children requiring others to make decisions about what is good for them (Smith 2021), the presumption that co-design (led by “elites”) improves the lives of all involved can be perceived as a form of paternalism, a continuity of Whiteness rather than a departure.

Akama et al. (2019), in their observation of the “army of people trained or self-equipped with an arsenal of methods being invited into boardrooms, co-working hubs, and community halls, or participating in jams, hackathons, and living-labs” (60), note how the current proliferation of co-design in NZ (and elsewhere) “reflects the success of design thinking and co-design for entities that are contracting services from consultancies” (60). Throughout the documents examined by the authors, co-design itself was represented as an elite activity through discursive mechanisms such as jargon, distancing, and paternalism (King 2021). Such patterns of speech reflect a particular way that co-design is practiced in NZ that reproduces rather than disrupts colonialism and reproduces rather than disrupts power relations about who can or cannot be a knower. Research findings by the authors further demonstrated paternalistic and patronizing statements about participants involved in co-design were framed as “shared understanding” or “empathy,” while at the same time reinforcing racialized stereotypes via discursive mechanisms (King 2021), for instance, “acts of surprise at competence,” known for its use in discourses about Indigenous peoples (Smith 2021).

Despite the rhetoric of collaborative engagement, all of the publicly available documents examined in the research dataset were authored by the commissioners, providers, or practitioners of co-design, rather than by participants. None of the documents appeared to have an intended audience of children, young people, families, or communities, even though the co-design projects described in the documents had involved them as participants and/or subjects of study (King 2021). This resulted in participants being invisible in certain parts of the co-design process. Yet, participants were simultaneously hyper-visible, having been positioned or centered by “the elites” as a “thing.” This had the overall effect of creating a paradoxical hyper-visibility/invisibility of the participants. Walter (2018) highlights the “Indigenous data paradox,” a phenomenon whereby there is an abundance of data from official statistics and linked administrative datasets about Indigenous peoples but a “data desert” when it comes to access to meaningful information required to support Indigenous peoples’ aspirations for self-determination.

As observed in the literature about co-design in NZ and internationally (Akama et al. 2019; King 2021), a lack of engagement with ethics was apparent in the field of co-design, whereby some of the documents examined by the authors demonstrated use of coercive approaches toward engaging participants and unsafe practices. Examples included targeting by co-design practitioners of potential participants receiving care in health and disability settings, demonstrating lack of insight

regarding inherent power imbalances and methods for identifying potential participants that involved reviewing of personal health records or records of people having previously made complaints about the organization (King 2021). Akama et al. (2019) have cautioned the “consequences of misplaced enthusiasm for design thinking toolkits for beginners that emphasize a bias for action, without due process and consideration for duty of care, safety or ethics” (62).

Whiteness and Representations of the “Other”

Representations of Otherness or Blackness are intertwined with those of Whiteness, and the fundamental interdependence of the production of the Other and the self (Frankenberg 1999). Weis et al. (1997) discuss how this has been enacted in the colonial process through “the ways in which discourse about nonwestern ‘others’ are produced simultaneously with the production of discourse about the western White ‘self’” (213).

In co-design, the use of “personas” as a common practice tends toward reinforcing racialized stereotypes reliant on taken-for-granted assumptions and on the essentialization of Māori. Research by the authors highlighted an interesting contrast between the concept of uniqueness and the use of replicable co-design practices such as “personas,” which collapse down uniqueness. Racialized stereotypes were also reinforced by using infographics, a practice typically utilized in co-design, for example, storyboards depicting racist essentialist images of Indigenous peoples (King 2021). The importance of acknowledging uniqueness is even more critical within the context of co-design, in that one needs to understand those unique aspects required for the development of high-quality health and disability services that meet the aspirations of Indigenous peoples. Practices such as these bolster Whiteness through the processes of indivisibility and homogenization discussed earlier as key discursive techniques (Chambers 1997), in that they support the continuance of generalized, essentialized discourses about Māori through practices that foster rather than challenge stereotypes and leave the dominant group unmarked.

The recurring patterns of discourse identified in the critical discourse analysis undertaken by the authors illustrate how elite discourses contribute to maintenance of the “status quo” through continual “power abuse[s] of one group over others” (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 9). Recurring patterns included colonial racialized language when talking about potential and/or current participants in the co-design, and/or Māori as subjects of study (King 2021). Use of deficit language and framing when talking about Māori is not a new phenomenon, nor are taken-for-granted assumptions about Māori (Smith 2021).

Findings from the authors’ research also demonstrated an apparent disregard for deeply contextual and relational concepts in the way co-design currently appears to be practiced in NZ. Tlostanova (2017) observes the “coloniality of design” means the field cannot help but dismiss contextual and relational concepts or anything else that diverges from its own static and rigid perspective, stating:

coloniality of design is a control and disciplining of our perception and interpretation of the world, of other human and nonhuman beings and things according to certain legitimized principles. It is a set of specific ontological, epistemic and axiological notions imposed forcefully onto the whole world, including its peripheral and semi-peripheral spaces in which alternative versions of life, social structures, environmental models or aesthetic principles have been invariably dismissed. (53)

Thus, there appears to be a considerable disconnect between the rhetoric around potential benefits of co-design and how co-design is currently practiced by those in positions of privilege and with power within the field of co-design in NZ. Within this context, co-design cannot be considered anything other than a colonial tool of oppression.

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples exist within the wholeness of relationships and connections with history, with each other, with other species, and within various physical spaces and surrounding environments. Rather than being rigid and time-bound, relationships are interdependent and interconnected to broader concepts and constructs moving across multiple dimensions in space-time, aligning with Mikaere's (2017) conceptualization of whakapapa "as an intricate and constantly expanding web of relationships" (283).

There is an urgent need within co-design to subvert colonial knowledge systems and disrupt White epistemologies through resistant epistemologies. There is little benefit to Māori and other Indigenous peoples in the continual reproduction and reinforcement of the status quo that occur from elite discourses (under the auspices of "sharing our learnings with one other"). Scholars within the field of design have argued for "decolonizing design praxis, research, and pedagogy not only as a form of 'doing'...but also as form of 'undoing'" (Schultz et al. 2018: 98), calling for decolonization of design as:

an act of passivating, unravelling and no longer contributing to material-discursive configurations that privilege certain bodies while oppressing and dehumanizing others. Such efforts to undo can be understood as both a precondition for and consequence of unlearning...this unlearning can only arrive through 'de-linking' not only from the ideas and methods taught by the holders of material and epistemic power, but also from the humanitarian design endeavours that other the others further and replace a multiplicity of voices with tokenism and diversity. (Schultz et al. 2018: 98–99)

This unlearning will need to engage deeply and meaningfully with Whiteness in the history and current of design practices if it is to undo rather than redo Whiteness in co-design. This requires further critical attention on the ways in which current co-design practices actively strengthen Whiteness and White ways of knowing, being, and doing, including through the discursive strategies discussed in relation to the NZ context.

Escobar (2017) argues for a “reorientation of design from the functionalist, rationalistic, and industrial traditions from which it emerged, and within which it still functions at ease” (42). Such reorientation must be informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing and by the ways of knowing, being, and doing for other social groups whose “nondualist and relational understandings and forms of life” (42) occur through:

struggles for the defense of seeds, commons, mountains, forests, wetlands, lakes and rivers; in actions against white/mestizo and patriarchal rule; in urban experiments with art, digital technologies, neo-shamanic movements, urban gardens. Taken as a whole, these expressions of multiple collective wills manifest the unwavering conviction that another world is indeed possible. (Escobar 2017: 44)

Sheehan (2011) calls for “respectful design,” a concept informed by Indigenous ontologies “founded on how design positions itself in relation to natural systems and the social world. . . . Respectful Design is an aspiration for a deeper situational awareness that generates many divergent spaces where innovation can contribute positively to the well-being of the whole” (70). Akama et al. (2019), building on Sheehan’s (2011) concept of “respectful design,” draw attention to the urgent need for “respectful, reciprocal, and relational approaches as an ontology of co-designing” (59). This necessitates a reframing of co-design through an uncoupling of design from its colonial logics to be “re-situated and re-conceptualized. . . [and] centrally grounded in respectful, reciprocal relationships” (Akama et al. 2019: 77).

Hence, as a “form of ‘undoing’” (Schultz et al. 2018) within the field of co-design, the authors call for an immediate moratorium on the publication of colonial, racist, paternalistic, objectifying, othering, and marginalizing discourses that cause harm to Indigenous peoples and a refusal of the broader colonial, capitalist, neoliberal, and extractive logics that lead to them in the first place (Tuck 2009). As a means of refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014) highlight the concept of “desire,” whereby refusal is no longer “just a no” but a “generative stance” allowing for the unfolding of “other r-words – for resistance, reclaiming, recovery, reciprocity, repatriation, regeneration” (Tuck and Yang 2014: 244). Thus, refusing the Whiteness of co-design in the way that it operates as a colonial tool of oppression is not only a “no” but it is also a “yes,” leading to alternatives involving the dismantling of the structures and assemblages of Whiteness and making space for sovereign presents and futures where systems are collectively built by, for, and with Indigenous peoples, in ways that are deeply embedded in place and in relational ways of knowing, being, and doing.

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