Provocative/Provoking Legitimation

Eve Tuck

Abstract

In this vignette, I respond to Bronwyn Davies' discussion on recuperating legitimation, and explore the question, "what does it mean to recuperate terms that have been colonized by doublespeak?" Concepts of validity, generalizability, and evidence are excavated. I outline a methodology of repatriation aligned with Davies' call for post-critical, post-realist research frames.

Legitimation is an integral concept/worry in all research, whether acknowledged or not. Tenuous, ethereal, even fleeting, it is what keeps the academy awake at night. Bronwyn Davies has helped to give some heft and insight to those late-night ruminations by articulating many of the moving parts of legitimation. Her discussion provides both time-lapse-like narration of the emergence of critical and post-critical inquiry, and slow-motion-like 'footage' of effects of the prominence of neoliberal, empiricist 'prudence' on knowledge production – the cheetah chasing the antelope.

To launch her discussion, Davies applies two common yet contrasting definitions of legitimate. The first, the one employed most often in research discourse, is concerned with *conforming to established standards*. The second definition, concerned with filial relationship, connotes legitimacy as geneological, generational. Though Davies moves on from this point, utilizing this second definition singularly toward characterizing the post-ness of post-critical and post-realist research, I am left trailing behind, caught up by the full implications of the generational on frames of research. To me, the implications are both liberating and scary.

In this, and in several other ways I found Davies' discussion of legitimation to be thought provoking. I'll outline these

ways in this response by reflecting on how legitimation has played out in my work as an Indigenous emerging scholar and participatory action researcher. The timing of the entrance of Davies' chapter in my reading is uncanny; I have been wanting to write about evidence, (supposed) evidence-based policy, and the real and imagined roles of research for some time now, and have just begun to sketch out some ideas. Davies' work brings me right to the center of my still-swirling thoughts, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to write back to her a bit (in front of a wider audience.)

Davies' chapter has inspired me to reflect on the conceptualizations of legitimation I employ in my own participatory action research, and my work as an Indigenous theorist. In research projects, in-school, out-of-school, and pushed-out youth are trained in inquiry methods and read theory, policy, journalism, and poetry in order to work shoulder-to-shoulder as my co-researchers. The aims of *catalytic validity* (Reason and Rowan 1981; Lather 1991, p. 68) have been a beacon in my participatory research with urban and Indigenous youth on schooling injustices.

> Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it... The argument for catalytic validity lies not only within recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research process, but also in the desire to consciously channel this impact so that the respondents gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation.
> (Lather 1991, p. 68)

E. Tuck (✉)
Educational Studies, State University of New York, New Paltz, NY, USA
e-mail: tucke@newpaltz.edu

Catalytic validity plays out as *meaningfulness* to communities involved in the research, and in addition, in my work, meaningfulness to my youth co-researchers. Emphasis on catalytic validity and meaningfulness when engaging in research with communities that have been betrayed by former research experiences, or have been over-researched but under-seen (Tuck 2009) is particularly crucial; Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes of Indigenous communities, "(R)esearch was talked about in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument" (Smith 1999, p. 3). Thus, catalytic validity is an approach that attempts to invert the landscapes of meaning-making so that the foci of meaning are located in the experiences and knowledges of the community.

This concept can be intersected by Michelle Fine's concepts of *theoretical generalizability* and *provocative generalizability* (Fine 2008, pp. 227–230). Fine's contributions confront (prior fantasies of) the supremacy of large, randomized, blind trials in knowledge production, and assert a series of turns toward thinking about what can be lifted up and listened across in deeply place-based, locally meaningful inquiries that, when mapped as counter-topographies (Katz 2001) reveal structural, systematic dispossession, exploitation, and domination (Fine 2008). Theoretical generalizability contends with the ways in which theory meaningfully travels from rich context to rich context, even against all odds of easy transfer. It requires what Fine, Sarah Zeller-Berkman and I have identified as obligations and opportunities of jumping scale: integrity with home spaces, active respect for sovereignty, relationship, understanding competing responsibilities, and resisting homogenization (Fine et al. 2007).

Fine's provocative generalizability, drawing on Maxine Greene's calls to "fight the numbness of oppression,"

> refers to researchers' attempts to move their findings toward that which is not yet imagined, not yet in practice, not yet in sight. This form of generalizability offers readers an invitation to launch from our findings to what might be, rather than only understanding (or naturalizing) what is. Greene's desire for social and ethical imagination rises as a standard for social research: does the work move readers to act?
>
> (Fine 2008, p. 229)

The intersection of catalytic validity and theoretical and provocative generalizabilities marks the potential for inquiry that, like Davies' kinship definition of legitimate, is both generative and iterative, expansive and seeking, but with an ethic of meaningfulness for home.

Crafting a response to Davies' chapter has challenged me; though my own thinking has brought me to some of the same precipices of legitimation that Davies identifies, I have made different choices than her analysis suggests. This is interesting to me; although my work does not fit with the traditional definitions of empirical research (data-based rather than theory driven) or Foucault's definition of a theorist (someone who

"constructs a general system. . .and applies it to different fields in a uniform way") (Davies 2013, p. 448) I have come to identify myself as both an empirical and theoretical researcher. What is going on here? How can I stand to be so contradictory? Why do I describe my and my co-researchers' analyses as explanatory rather than interpretive? Why haven't I jettisoned the neoliberal empiricist lexicon of legitimation, and why have I instead decided to stretch the meanings within that lexicon to include my work and theorizing?

There are two major impulses at work here. First, is my ever-present awareness of the historical denial and exclusion of Indigenous people's knowledge and epistemologies in research discourse, especially as Indigenous peoples served as research *subjects*. This, in tandem with my awareness of the diminished value of urban youths' (with whom I work and conduct participatory research) perspectives, has led me to a self-consciousness not just about my scholarship, but my performance of myself as a scholar. I employ the neoliberalist empiricist lexicon of legitimation to mark myself as scholar. This seems somewhat superficial, and I waver in my conviction that this is the best route for people who are under-represented in the academy. It is counter-productive to the fields of research about which I care for me to continue to employ a lexicon that systematically de-recognizes those fields, yet it is also counter-productive for those fields to not have under-represented scholars whose research is taken seriously as members of the field. Literacy in the lexicon becomes a point of access, itself a legitimation.

Further, on the point of explanation/interpretation, the social explanations of Indigenous people, urban youth, and many other disenfranchised groups are regularly cast aside as mere interpretations. I welcome the humility of well-established researchers who acknowledge that Truth can only be partial, and that they can only offer interpretations of what they have observed. However, it is also important to remember that the right to claim an analysis as explanatory or interpretive is mitigated by social location.

The second impulse at work also points to the ways that the stakes of legitimation vary for different groups, and can be higher for under-represented scholars and communities. This is my impulse to reclaim language that has been used to strip power from oppressed communities. Davies talks about this in her call toward recuperating legitimation. Recuperating legitimation through the frames of post-critical, post-realist research "requires a capacity to engage creatively with the possibilities opened up by others," (Davies 2013, p. 444) and to "make harder those acts which are now too easy" so that "transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible" (Foucault 2000, p. 457, as quoted by Davies 2013, p. 445). Davies positions these practices in opposition to practices of recuperating empiricism, those operations that supposedly perform rationality, reason, and reliance on

evidence, while characterizing opponents as quibbling, disagreeable, worriers, as displayed in an article by a US National Research Council committee member and two colleagues (Feuer et al. 2002, as discussed by Davies 2013).

Practices of recuperating legitimation through/by post-critical and post-realist research are distinguished by their embracing of trajectories of knowing, of multiplicity, of the intersectional, of movement, of "life as movement." Further, "legitimacy comes not from obedience to prescribed rules, but from a relationship of respect and love, in which those who go before provide a horizon of possibilities that do not foreclose thought, but open it up" (Davies 2013, p. 448). The shift in weight from paranoia to intimate curiosity, from chastising to generous criticality, yields a stance in which ideas can flourish, and rhizomatically expand.

Recuperation is a valuable strategy in a neoliberal climate so entrenched in Orwellian doublespeak, that which boldly, thinly conceals true meaning by distorting usage of language. Paralleling Orwell, Bourdieu (1998) said this of neoliberalism:

> This initially desocialized and dehistoricized 'theory' has, now more than ever, the means of *making itself true*, empirically falsifiable... In the name of the scientific programme of knowledge, converted into a political programme of action, an immense *political operation* is being pursued (denied, because it is apparently purely negative), aimed at creating the conditions for realizing and operating of the 'theory'; *a programme of methodical destruction of collectives...* (p. 95)

What does it mean to recuperate terms that have been colonized by doublespeak? For example in U.S. education policy, the doublespeak of "evidence based reform," "scientifically based research," and "data driven decision making" is supremely prevalent in the contemporary conversation on schools; doublespeak because while signaling tried and tested, successful approaches, policies like No Child Left Behind demarcate programs like phonics-only reading instruments, goals such as 100 % proficiency by 2014, and consequences like the 5 year insufficient AYP sequence that have no empirical backing (Rebell and Wolff 2008; Noddings 2007).

A sobering thought: Does educational research, or social research now or ever truly impact educational or social policy? If we don't know the answer, why do we conduct our research as though it surely does? Evidence is a tricky notion these days, and recuperating it, like recuperating legitimation, is an act no less than decolonizing our epistemologies so that we can maintain that proof is not only in our statistical print-outs, but also and importantly, "proof is under our fingernails, in our melting footprints, on our park benches, in our clusters, in our flights, on our backs, our chapped lips, in our stories and the grandmothers who told them" (Fine et al. 2007, p. 19).

In my own work, I engage practices of reclaiming not as recuperation, but as repatriation, and have come to call my approach a methodology of repatriation. A methodology of repatriation borrows and builds upon elements from Participatory Action Research (Fine and Torre 2004, 2006; Torre and Fine 2003, 2006; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; McTaggart 1997) and from Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies (Smith 1999, 2005; Grande 2004; Alfred 2005). There are some important differences between participatory action research (PAR) and decolonizing methodologies, I have used the gaps between them to prod the ethical commitments and conditions of participatory decolonizing approaches. I call this a methodology of repatriation because it imbibes a particular politic of reclaiming, reframing, repurposing, and reparation.

The word repatriate comes from the Latin word *repatriare*, which means restoring homeland, or going home again. It conjures a sense of turning tides, or turned pages. It commands an acknowledgement that would not otherwise come. I was raised with a thick thirst for repatriation. Broken promises and betrayal have defined the relationship between Unaangan people and the United States Government. In just one example, after Dutch Harbor was bombed in 1942 during World War II, every person of Aleut ancestry was removed from the entire Aleutian chain and the Pribilofs and interned for 4 years in abandoned warehouses and canneries on the South East coast of Alaska.

I grew up knowing that I had a dance that had been lost in the 4 years of internment. I had a language that only few elders could speak. I had a costume that was no longer sewn. When I was a child, my relatives were involved in a large effort to garner an apology from the U.S. Government to the Aleut people for negligence and disrespect during internment and after. The U.S. Government decided to tack the Aleut internment to an already under-works act, The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, that made restitution to Japanese-Americans that were also interned during World War II.

This was our formal apology but to me, it didn't feel like anything. Now I know that I was expecting for the apology to bring back our songs, our dances. I was confusing the apology for the repatriation. It has been our generation that has spent the time with our elders, talked with other tribes, done the research, and, at times, filled in the gaps with our best guesses to bring back our songs, our dances, our regalia, our drums. Now, elders are again making grass baskets, hunting visors, seal bone dolls. We are repatriating our stories, our traditions, our futures.

Components of a methodology of repatriation include balance, sovereignty, desire, rhizomatic complexity and multiplicity, and theorizing back (Tuck 2008a). Here, I'll discuss the praxis of theorizing back, an approach I have

adapted from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's concept of researching back (Smith 1999; Tuck 2008b):

> Theorizing back requires us to reprove and reclaim theories that have been used against us, theories that we have mis/believed about ourselves, that have fed our own self abnegation, theories that have made us rely upon, cater to, offer gratitude to, and even congratulate the colonizer, and theories that, as one CREDD[1] researcher has said, "paint us as lazy, crazy, and stupid." Researching back and theorizing back are refusals to speak against ourselves, shifting the scrutiny off of our own bodies and rightly placing it upon the institutions that naturalize racism, misogyny, gross disparities of wealth, homophobia, and neglect.
> (Tuck 2008b, p. 120)

Theorizing back is a repatriation of theories and discourses used against us, and at the same time, is a pedagogy of the ethics of dealing with traditional and emergent sacred material and stories (Tuck 2008a; Tuck et al. 2008).

Many have pointed to the barbed-wire nature or neoliberal double-speak; our challenge as researchers is to develop strategies to dis/engage/cut through/reason over the rabble of the doublespeak –this is why, as Davies illustrates, discourse frameworks are so crucial, "the real world and relations of power no longer floated free of their production in discourse" (Davies 2013, p. 444). In the wise and comprehensive lists that Davies presents in the later passages of the essay, she demonstrates that the inverse must also be true, that discourse be responsible to communities, (tribes,) homes, and places. Recalling Fine (2008) standard for provocation, "does the work move readers to act?" Davies' lists are a compelling gift.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983) supply one final yet ever-connected approach to thinking about discourse, legitimation, lives, and places. They insist we ask the questions, "Given a certain effect, what machine is capable of producing it? And, given a certain machine, what can it be used for?" (p. 3). In this essay, Davies has enacted this questioning by interrogating the prominence of neoliberal empiricism, and the legitimating-machine that has produced it. Further, grappling with the legitimating-machine, she has provoked what it can be use/d/ful for. Whether we in turn repatriate or release legitimation, Davies' exploration excites our un(der)examined relationships to legitimating discourses and processes.

Note on Contributor

Eve Tuck is an assistant professor of educational foundations at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She has conducted participatory action research with urban youth on mayoral control of their schools, neoliberal education policy, and the value of the GED credential (General Educational Development). She is the author of 'Suspending damage: A letter to communities' (2009) in the *Harvard Educational Review* and co-author of *Theory and Educational Research: Toward critical social explanation* (2008) New York: Routledge.

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[1] The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire, my co-researchers on the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project, a project that investigated the relationships between New York State exit-exams and other education policies, the General Educational Development (GED) credential, and school push-out.

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