

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS CALL FOR MORE COLLABORATION TO SOLVE NEW ZEALAND ISSUES

Why do we have such high levels of pollution? Why are so many of our young people and farmers committing suicide? Why do we have so many homeless people begging on Queen Street in Auckland? Finding answers to questions like these is front of mind for many of Massey University's social science researchers as they seek to understand why such issues occur in a developed country like New Zealand.



Drawing parallels from international research projects, taking an interdisciplinary approach, and developing close connections with key community groups is central to the work of Dr Vicky Walters and Professor Darrin Hodgetts from Massey University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The pair is involved with numerous research projects spanning several areas of social angst for Aotearoa. And they're keen to ensure the outcomes are accessible with strong policy relevance.

"Working in a university, we are in such a privileged position to be able to spend our time researching interesting and socially significant things. With that comes a responsibility to make our research accessible and have policy relevance. To do this and to gain leverage for change, we need to network and collaborate with different stakeholders like those working in the field and to build relationships and generate information that has value beyond an academic publication setting. All of those things have to be a key part of any research that we do. It's about putting the knowledge back into the context where it began and working with groups for the collaborative creation of policy briefs," says Dr Walters, from the School of People, Environment and Planning.

Echoing those thoughts is social psychologist Professor Hodgetts, who also believes it is integral for researchers to directly communicate with the groups of people they are researching.

Photography by Chris Williams



“We have far too many conversations about groups who are affected by, or living with, social issues and not enough conversations *with* them. If we are serious about changing our social landscape then these people need to be part of the solution and part of the decision-making process,” says Professor Hodgetts, from the School of Psychology.

Dr Walters, who has an eclectic mix of disciplinary strengths ranging from economics to social anthropology and development studies, has worked mostly in India researching governance, urban water, and most recently, sanitation justice issues including homeless people and their right to water; women and their access to toilets; and untouchables involved with the cast-based practice of manual scavenging. She says that although her experiences with India make her appreciate New Zealand, she can't be as proud of her country as she would like to be.

“When I'm overseas I do reflect on New Zealand. I recognise the good things about our country, but I feel that we still have a long way to go. We need more awareness among the public about our social issues and higher levels of empathy and support between diverse groups,” she says.

Central to driving this improvement is raising our understanding of the social world through social sciences research that has an interdisciplinary focus, says Dr Walters.

“Understanding can't exist in isolation. To make the world a better place we need to be increasingly exploring opportunities to broaden our knowledge from interdisciplinary perspectives. We need to combine hard sciences and social sciences. It is the next generation of researchers and scholars who are really going to speak and engage in interdisciplinary research much better. We increasingly have students doing conjoint studies and I think they are going to have real traction.”

She firmly believes that in order to combat multi-dimensional issues, scholars from different disciplines, sectors and fields need to have open discussions, break down their barriers, and agree that all knowledge generated through a fair and rigorous process is valuable and should be respected.

“The more that we can understand how the world can be interpreted in different ways, then the more appreciation we will have of how those different parts of knowledge can work together to be beneficial. We need to make sure we improve our levels of engagement and don't continue working in silos speaking to our own audiences.”

Massey University is the current host of New Zealand's only social science network hub: Engage Social Science (eSocSci). The hub connects academics from New Zealand eight universities, those working in government, and others researching across the Pacific. eSocSci is also encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration acting as platform for the National Science Challenges. This MBIE funded project draws together physical and engineering sciences to boost New Zealand's capacity to overcome the big science-based issues facing the country.

As a lecturer of social sciences students, Dr Walters implements this culture in her teaching and aims to cultivate youth as critical thinkers with the skills and platforms to voice their thoughts.

Dr Vicky Walters lectures in the School of People, Environment and Planning. She received an Early Career Research award in 2014, and a Massey University Research Fellowship for 2015 and 2016 for her research project, Sanitation injustice: Understanding the inequality of defecation in South Asia. She was also awarded an Early Career Research award in 2015 for her project, Rural Distress and Farmer Suicide in New Zealand.

Professor Darrin Hodgetts is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology. His research takes a strong bicultural and indigenous lens to examine social issues such as homelessness and community connectedness. He is a co-leader for EPIC (Ending Poverty and Inequality Research Cluster), which is home to a range of research projects that involve working with local communities, service providers, governmental and international organisations to address issues of poverty and inequality.

For more information about Engage Social Sciences go to www.esocsci.org.nz