**Personhood, interconnectedness, and critical ecological democracy**

**Ron Nicholls**

Abstract

As a result of a preliminary agreement between the Whanganui iwi and the Crown in August 2012, the Whanganui River in New Zealand became a ‘legal person’ in the same way that corporations and other non-living entities have the status of personhood, and consequently the River has rights, protections, privileges, responsibilities and legal liability according to western law. On the surface this seems to be another example of the emerging trend towards attributing rights to particular features of the natural world. From another perspective it raises difficult issues associated with an understanding of what we mean by personhood, the existing landscape of legal, social and political concepts attached exclusively to natural or legal personalities, and the attribution of personhood to various entities beyond human beings. This is particularly relevant in the context of the diverse worldviews of the participants involved in the negotiations associated with the Whanganui River agreement, and the paper introduces a number of innovative possibilities for discussion from the growing storehouse of recent evidence-based scientific and ecological thought.

Moreover, I argue that it is imperative that new conceptual positionalities are envisioned from the perspective of cosmologies and ontologies that define personhood in terms of wholeness and interconnectedness. Though fundamentally in opposition to prevailing western conceptions of personhood, this approach offers spaces for ontological and relational epistemological standpoints embedded in Indigenous and ecological worldviews and knowledges. Thus, personhood specifically develops within the relationships to our social and natural systems as a multidimensional, integral, and coherent whole. The paper also introduces critical ecological democracy as a vehicle for exploring epistemologies that re-theorise perception as a multi-layered participatory process**;** a perspective largely structured around conceptualisations of thinking and learning processes which affirm the interconnectedness of experience, language, and situatedness.

Speaker Biography

Ron Nicholls is a Lecturer and Open Universities Coordinator in the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research at the University of South Australia. His research focuses on global and national Indigenous issues, alternative worldviews, experiential learning, and peace studies. Ron has also worked as a professional musician and from 1980-1995 held the position of Lecturer in Music at the Centre of Aboriginal Studies in Music, University of Adelaide. His recent publications and presentations have focussed on the necessity of forging innovative ways of being and the movement toward a post-enlightenment world.