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Insights into Positionality and the Voicing of Indigeneity in Research: Towards a Critical Theory of Inbetweenness

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Abstract

Western empirical research holds to rules and guidelines informed by the natural sciences, positivism, deductive reasoning, objectivity and precise measures as gold standards of inquiry. Contrasting this worldview, the relational qualities and interconnections essential to Indigenous research are seen as problematic that must acquiesce to the norms of scientific observation. This paper draws upon the literature of key Indigenous researchers and the author's insights from situated experiences and examine the ways in which the Indigenist paradigm challenges empirical standards in relation to positionality. That is, addressing the struggles of the 'insider' and 'outsider' standpoints, speaking to the dilemmas of identity, and negotiating the space in-between cultures (Kaomea, 2014). The question of insider and outsider even among Indigenous researchers can be regarded as a space of solvency and richness. The paper contends that with truth and reconciliation and the international recognition of Indigenous rights comes the need to strengthen and politicise Indigenous voices in all its forms. It is especially pressing in the area of knowledge development and dissemination. We share our stories of walking between worlds and reflect on our work experiences across nations. In the end, we hope to advance interest in the narratives affirming Indigenous research as relational, contextual, spiritual and situational.

Keywords: Positionality, Indigenous research, inbetweenness, power, Western scientific paradigms

Introduction

Academic papers have been written on the subject of Indigenous research and *insider-outsider* positionality for decades. Particularly as these relate to a research investigator's understanding of themselves, their sense of place and purpose. This experience does not occur in a vacuum. In actuality researchers who conduct research reflect and negotiate their practice and expectations all the time. While it is relatively clear that the issue of reflexivity and self-referencing is important, the action of negotiating one's own positionality and behavior is far less clear. Thus somewhere in between lies the norm for research. This poses a challenge and an opportunity for Indigenous researchers who experience this on a daily basis.

Negotiating positionality is not just an up-front personal undertaking. It is, in and of itself, a values-driven process centered around identity (Moffat 2016; Holmes 2014). On a broader note, it has bearing on Indigenous peoples' political and cultural claims to exist. The difficulty is that in academia, there is a tendency to see Indigenous peoples, their values and methodologies based on their ways of knowing as if they get in the way of good research. The production of high-quality scientific evidence, in a Western[1] researchers' mindset often leads to invalidate Indigenous values, practices and ways of knowing (Smith 2012). We, as researchers, feel obligated to engage with this issue while conceptualising our own ways of what it means to be Indigenous. Drawing from indigeneities and practices as researchers from Aotearoa New Zealand and Taiwan with work experience in northern Europe, the United States and the Pacific, we hope to establish a meaningful dialogue about the process *by,* and the context *in* which research is conducted between different worlds and worldviews.

Scientific empiricism often undermines and censures indigenous research claiming it compromises standards of objectivity, observation, and statistical significance. These are held as the gold standards of research that for Indigenous researchers, are seen as problematic, disabling and harmful. Indigenous-centered research and Western research do not coalesce on questions of "What makes good objectivity? What constitutes bias? Who sets the standards and writes the guidelines for what is translated into acceptable ethical research?" These are questions we are faced with. To answer these we look into our positionalities for possible solutions. That being said, the term "positionality", as we contend in this paper is an existent and embedded construct in the mainstream research narrative, yet, does not fully address or appreciate the basic issue many Indigenous scholars and researchers must contend with. And that is, power.

Positionality for us is not just a construct, but a set of actions needed to transform and reclaim the cultural and political space that determines who belongs *in*, and who belongs *out*? (Wilson Waziyatawin 2004). In essence it is about how boundaries are negotiated and what influence this has on Indigenous researchers and their work. We use the metaphor of "Voice" as it has

[1]Western in the context of this paper refers to the pervasive norms, ethics, traditions, customs, belief systems, political systems, artifacts and technologies that have their origin and association with 'the European-centric global Coloniser'.

power and energy to speak across the discourse and legitimate one's actions to move between the western and Indigenous research paradigms.

As researchers we organise our thinking and practice around ensuring we undertake meaningful, accurate and respectful research. This requires that we reflect on our experiences that include recognising our positions of power, authority and influence and maintaining ethical and moral standards.

It is our aim to challenge and interrogate the complexities of these seemingly self-evident themes with our lived practice as Indigenous researchers. We hope through engaging with these themes in Indigenous research while reflecting on our views, we are able to provide a deeper understanding of what these mean in everyday life.

"Who and Where Are We At?": On Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality and the Indigenous *voice* - in essence locates the politics, and by implication, the values and biases a researcher(s) holds as they focus on the space they control in relation to the research they undertake (Chilisa 2012; Bourke 2014; Smith 2012). The personal worldviews of a researcher are shaped by the beliefs, political convictions , religious and spiritual worldviews and understanding of time and space. It is premised on how we take ownership of our biases and discipline our subjectivity and self-interests. Positionality reflects to some degree a choice in which to exercise power at will. Choice in this sense is based on a set of fixed cultural, social, and political propositions such as gender or ethnicity, and, less fixed propositions such as those associated with one's own life.

The subjective-contextual milieu in which we as Indigenous researchers operate daily involves an ongoing process of negotiating our positionality, or our 'situatedness' in relation to the aspirations and needs of those communities we study and serve. This requires understanding and acceptance of how we enter and exit space that allows us to reposition and shift our perspectives in relation to where we stand in the research process and in accordance with our research design. In this regard, a premeditated approach is necessary to be able to articulate, identify, reconstruct, critique, and understand the dynamics between our academic institutions and our politics. While reflexivity, that is, the idea that a researcher must acknowledge and share themselves in the research, and, seek to understand their role (Smith 2012; Cohen et al.

2011: 225) are important humanistic and ethical considerations, they are also about vulnerability, power relations and intergenerational obligation. By affirming positionality and reflexivity it ensures Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous knowledge are maintained (Semali et al 1999; Kukutai & Taylor 2016).

As researchers, the disconnect we both felt when returning home to our communities to study was a visceral experience. The bifurcated challenges of straddling expectations of our western training and our relationships with community and our families took an inevitable toll on our confidence (Wilson 2004). What we needed to appreciate then, as we do now, was that our connection to land was always central to our research practice and paradigm. We believe we must open our minds to the ongoing discussions that push past the rhetoric of Western versus Indigenous. We were taught by our elders the importance of being supportive, respectful, and open to new learning to enrich our lives. The protocols, rituals, engagement practices and knowledge we gained provided the framework that we see as now vital to our resilience and convictions as researchers. To accept that all research undertakings are predicated on the virtues of trust and respect is to accept there is humanity in science and compassion in research. That spirituality, genealogy, land, and identity are as important as objectivity and observation themselves.

The opportunity to reflect on our positionalities and to explore the methodological, epistemological and ontological directions have allowed us to reject the imperialist assumptions imbued into the academic traditions and critique the power dynamics associated with western research (Said 1978). We see research thus, from Indigenous people's perspective, as a tool for re-empowerment and social and political change.

"What is at stake?": Indigenous Research Ethics and Review Boards

Typically, research ethics, professional standards, and values as well as, competencies, while shaping research are constituted in an ethical review process through Institutional Review Boards - also known as Independent Ethics Committees (IECs) and Human Subject Committees (HSCs) – that are duplicitous to the point that, the rules governing ethics are designed by the very institutions that use their power to discredit Indigenous ways of knowing and dismiss Indigenous methodologies as unsubstantiated (Wilson 2008). This, then, begs the

question who do ethics committees serve and who do they protect? Through the recurrent acts of giving power to voice, indigenous researchers who were once convinced their positionalities were nebulous and biased are now confident in shaping their research that matters to, for, and by Indigenous people themselves. The formation of American Indian and Alaskan Native tribal and community ethics boards based on traditional values, for example, are negating obstacles created by academic and institutional imperialism (Harding et al. 2012; Tsosie 2007, see also Ho-Chunk Nation 2005). Past and continuing abuses of Indigenous people's rights have underlined the serious need for them to develop their own institutional guidelines and practices.

Empiricism and positivist sciences regard ethical rules as a form of transactional power which must be rigorously enforced. However, while pledging to work respectfully with communities there is a disingenuous undercurrent to this relationship. From an Indigenous perspective, standardising and conforming to western norms, perpetrates the unfair and unbalanced power relations of an iniquitous exchange in obligations. It is complicit also if real penalties for violations of Indigenous cultural space and rights are not guaranteed. It is conceivable for research to be conducted among Indigenous communities without such consideration to a wholistic,[2] reflective, or a clear articulation and agreement of who controls power. Indeed, western institutions propagate a misleading narrative in distinction – either one is an insider or an outsider, but never both at the same time - while questioning, even downplaying, the struggles Indigenous researchers must constantly endure moving between and around often conflicting cultural spaces.

Axiology is the central theme that drives us to do our work. Ethical conduct and relationship building are the basic cornerstones to effective investigative practice. As such, research should remind us to reminisce and consider the overall health and wellbeing of our humanity and our planet (McGregor et al 2003). While our training conditioned us to conceptualise in a linear way rather than relationally, it was unsettling but important that we reflect back and

[2] We use "wholistic" rather than "holistic" purposefully as do other Indigenous writers including Bowers (2010) and Absolon, (2010, 2016). It an expression of honoring and validating the wholeness of Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous culture and spiritual, ancestral ties to sacred land. In the Māori language, the language 'wholeness' translates several ways; *katoa*, meaning "all"; *oti* meaning "to complete"; *whakatairanga* meaning "to embody"; *mauri* meaning "life principles"; and *hana* meaning "to glow". It, therefore, describes essence, magnificence, and radiance that is contextual, relational and in a state of constant flux. The argument I make emphasises Indigenous people's right to define meaning for themselves even if this is contrary to correct English spelling or meaning.

acknowledge the degree to which we were ourselves unknowingly complicit in exacerbating the marginalisation of our own communities.

Reflecting Our Journeys: Voicing Our Struggles

Reflexivity, or what we understand as Indigenous researchers as, "*giving voice*" to our ancestors resonates with life's 'concentric dualities' and binary opposites (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Downes 2003) and is an explicit acknowledgement of accountability to sacred lands and connection to our past, present, and future (Kawharu 1980) as well as to colonial resistance.

Giving voice recognises that Indigenous research is connected to the ancestral world and that this world, is living and breathing. It acknowledges that socio-historical and the political loci and social identity of researchers influences their orientation and the design, implementation and interpretation of their research (Jacobs-Huey 2002). Hsieh (2017) in her work stresses that the colonial embodiment of politics and justice also plays its part in giving voice and this has to be disentangled. It is important to understand that there is a complex arrangement of relationships always connecting researchers to the social processes of their research and daily lives (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 17) and, that there is no possible way we can escape negotiating domains of negativity as a way of improving one's practice (Polat 2004). Giving voice is a rejection of the assumption that western research *per se* is somehow protected against or dismissed from past violations against Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous researchers know the sharing of their stories, their genealogies, connections to land, and speaking truth to power is crucial to overcoming cultural and historic trauma. It is a way of recalibrating and surmounting the very real challenges and vulnerabilities associated with positioning ourselves as best we can within the institutional contexts we serve. We work in universities, healthcare and social research institutions and the challenges associated with locating ourselves is manifested in our abilities (and also our inabilities) to function in-between the space and within the "context we have inherited" (Heath Justice 2016, 25). We also know the imperative of reconnecting oneself culturally and spiritually in terms of our age and our gender in relation to our research participants and community. Though this gives some comfort in reducing any sense of bias or partisanship, for us this is not the point. A key principle of indigenous research is to strengthen ties not to diminish or deny these. As a relational principle

it must be acknowledged that we can never describe anything as it is, no matter how impartial of reflexive we are. We can never be objective or describe our reality, let alone someone else's. Language and cultural protocols are human constructs. Even radical Indigenous epistemologists like Manulani Meyers (2013) would argue that someone else's experience and interpretation of text and language, especially, if or when, translated from that of the coloniser are socially, politically, and culturally constructed; where, *meaning*, is framed by *hegemony* or ideological ascension of the ruling class (Femia 1981).

Positionality statements are what we consider as important declarations and disclosures of intent, and these are standard for any researcher entering their own, or the communities of others. They are formally expressed guidelines governing behavior. The idea of Giving Voice is not the only means to bridge gaps or reduce harm for Indigenous researchers. Research methods, as we have mentioned, are not value-free in their application because our values impact the process. We should therefore accept claims that research also has a fundamentally sacred obligation not to misguide or mislead.

Developing an Indigenous Research Framework Centered on Betweenness

Indigenous research as a movement is shifting how academic institutions engage with communities. As Linda Smith and other Indigenous scholars note, balancing competing epistemologies requires a clear strategy of contradistinction. They also understand shifting power structures is not easy. At a pragmatic level it means decolonising manners and conduct, developing new teaching and collective learning styles, valuing story-telling ("talk story") as data collection; and, ensuring methodologies are guided by ceremony and protocol (Yang 2004). To envision what Indigenous research can aspire to be is to affirm the intersection of cultures and the rich compilation of traditions.

Indigenisation and its concomitant Indigenism is a commitment to developing policies, practices, scholarship, and philosophies of knowledge that sets a new intellectual agenda based on sacred and spiritual elements (Garroutte 2006; Hart 2010; Hart et al. 2016). The sacred and the spiritual provide new dimensions to the important work necessary to substantiate the value of Indigenous research. These dimensions include strategies that would help:

- Decolonise the Sciences by:
  - Avoiding cultural pathological stereotyping
  - Giving critical reflection to, and consideration of, western approaches in terms of their relevance to the indigenous experiences
  - Influencing policies that address relevant social, environmental, cultural and spiritual issues
- Reclaim our Critical Indigenous Narratives by:
  - Recognising cultural beliefs, values, and practices germane to indigenous sovereignty and connections to ancestral lands and embedded in what we say and mean;
  - Validating and promoting indigenous knowledge and theories of change that strengthen health and wellness practices;
  - Developing inclusive strategies to help orientate local and other cultural perspectives;
  - Promoting indigenous practices that support environmental sustainability and wellbeing;
- Heal our Spirits by:
  - Being consistent with healing concepts of wellbeing that reflect the rich knowledge sources deriving from the community;
  - Encompass micro, mezzo and macro (wholistic) practices, levels of assessment and interventions;
- Re-connect ourselves to Place by:
  - Critically responding to health and socio-economic disparities in culturally enterprising ways;
  - Incorporating spiritual imperatives that acknowledge social, economic and environmental justice;
- Re-empower our communities and future generations by:
  - Incorporating the experiences of youth into all research;
  - Guiding the development of appropriate interventions and skills from other cultures;
  - Committing to developing global and local indigenous leadership; and
  - Giving power to their voice

The above is by no means definitive and is a part of an important iterative process. An Indigenous research process for us embodies empowerment and change. With this in mind, we illustrate our understanding as both Māori and Tayal, the elements of research (see Figure 1).

At the core lies who we are wherein, the pikorua (infinity symbol) signifies the constant journey we take (spiritual, physical, emotional) between and in-between the space and through reconnections and rediscoveries comes the invention of new ideas and creation of new knowledge (Wilson Waziyatawin 2016). The next outer ring captures our journeys as Indigenous researchers and our positionalities, reflexivities and commitment to Giving Voice. At the peripheral edges of the diagram are the ocean waves representing the great seas that connect and bind us all. Within the diagram sits the five diamonds containing the principles of Indigenous Research. The shape and colors of this figure are traditional to both Tayal and Māori cultures. The diamond patterns symbolise for the Tayal the eyes of the Ancestral Spirit (*Utux*) who project blessings, unity and connectedness, similar to the Māori *waharua kōpito* (paired diamond shape) symbolizing the intersecting of people, their stories and values to remind us that change is imminent when and where cultures meet. The black coloration is symbolic of the realm of potential and the heavens and male/masculine element. The red represents the coming into being as in birth; the transition from one state to another or what Māori refer to as, *Wheiao*. It also represents Mother Earth as the sustainer of all life. The white represents light and the realm of Being, and ripples of change and life. For Tayal and Māori water is the source of life, the white thus represents the *llyung* (river) that run through the veins of all of us. Maori refer to this as *wairua* or, spirit – *wai* meaning water, *rua* meaning two pathways. It is of the physical world and symbolises purity, harmony, enlightenment and the female/feminine element.



Figure 1. Indigenous Research Agenda based on Tayal and Māori. Image designed by Yi Hsiu Chen.

The work to constantly (re)position oneself is not easily charted. Moving toward Indigenous measures and evidence-based practices are not only a strategy defined in concrete terms but are refinements of "what can and might be?" In many ways indigenous researchers and educators are transforming how we conceptualise and engage with communities. This is particularly important as standardisation, clinical trials, and logic reasoning cannot represent the worldviews of an increasingly diverse global population. Indigenous learning institutions like *Whare Wananga* (Indigenous Universities) in Aotearoa New Zealand, Colleges of Indigenous Studies in Taiwan and Tribal Colleges in the United States continue to redefine positionality and research methodologies that serve to better interface indigenous and western education, technologies, and knowledge systems. This is to manifest indigenisation as a

paradigm that sits outside academia and western research frameworks. To better understand its integral ties to change, policies must be developed to ensure open and inclusive decision-making.

Central to our work has been the support, trust and love we have both received from our elders. Their grace and stature and, at times, their rebuke and their scolding gave us reason to work better and harder. We valued their wisdom and guidance and learned much from their spoken words as we did from their moments of silence. They were attentive in guiding us through the doubts of our western training. They affirmed our identities, in all its imperfections and helped us understand the importance of staying focused and grounded.

Indigenisation is a commitment to justice, equity, and wellbeing, and to engage in active efforts to strengthen indigenous cultures given the precipitous rise of corporate education and for-profit research enterprises whose business model looks to appropriate and monetarise knowledge (Donaghy et al. 2017). Indigenisation is not assimilation nor is it acculturation where Indigenous cultures must change to something that they are not. Rather, Indigenisation is about uplifting cultural integrity and our ability to weave and strengthen knowledge systems to understand and appreciate others, irrespective of their race, creed, gender, worldview or age (Wilson 2008). Decolonisation focuses on actions to dismantle systems that perpetuate Western colonial ideologies of superiority and privilege (Laenui 2006). It acknowledges two important considerations. First, how does one dismantle a system that perpetuates the status quo, and then go about redistributing power? And, second, how does one reevaluate and revitalise cultural knowledge and traditions within the wider system that is still intolerant to change?

We believe it is important to focus on both context and substance of indigenised practices as a way to better understand the ideological differences between decolonisation, multiculturalism and cultural competency. The goal, as we see it, is to transform research and education institutions by developing measures and indicators that systematically perpetuate prejudice, discrimination and racism. Transformation through education then has an opportunity-cost that can be leveraged with open-source online resources and low-fee registrations that can give access to all. The aim is to provide a nontoxic space for Indigenous researchers, scholars and practitioners to expand their knowledge and develop ideas relevant to indigenous communities. It is important to create a diverse *vita* of researcher-practitioners; of leaders, women, and

younger generations who can transcend and transform institutional boundaries. Giving voice is important to building such capacity to face the new cultural global realities of the modern world.

We understand our role is not to presumptively claim our rights over our own knowledge systems but to facilitate an unfolding of converging ideas. We understand the way this has happened has been through Western systems and institutions that appropriate cultures, and, imbue privilege and entitlement upon themselves. The tools used to perpetuate such practices are labeled as gold standards, research integrity, cultural competence, and accountability. Indigenisation aims to augment this by repositioning and closing down those mechanisms that perpetuate intellectual and cultural abuses (Mataira et al. 2005). We must review and redesign how we assess and evaluate those instruments used to measure research outcomes. These stem from our acknowledgement of ancestral practices centered on the virtues of love, trust, reciprocity and respect (Pohatu 2004).

Conclusion

Among one of the many reasons why our journey is important, lies in our responsibility to give voice to ancestral knowledge and traditional wisdom, and, actively engage our communities in ways to decolonise the academe (Smith 2012; Kanuha 2000). How universities begin to redress proprietary ownership and their faith in corporatism has to be clearly and explicitly challenged (Giroux 2002; Mihesuah 2004). Indigenisation is political, and as such, we as Indigenous scholars, researchers, students and educators in the academy, must be able to speak safely, openly, and critically about knowledge development, science, decolonisation and institutional reform.

In our efforts to appreciate the wisdom of journeying in-between cultures we have come to understand how important our struggles and vulnerabilities are to the indigenisation process. Indigenous communities are resilient and forgiving not because they have capitulated but because they have maintained their rituals and traditions to thrive in hostile environments. We are empowered through collective wisdom and centuries of innovation and enterprise. As we embrace our positionalities of inbetweeness, new practices begin to emerge. For example, including cultural protocols as key protective factors and ethical considerations in the

decolonising of research. What Graham Harvey (2003) describes as decolonisation through the acknowledgment of Guesthood. This involves trusting the processes of Indigenous people and how these shift the perceptions of the researcher as a guest, converting them to being "local". This is one way in which indigenisation affirms the strengths of local people and forces researchers to look at themselves.

The purpose of our paper has been to explore and affirm what indigenising research means in terms of positionality. What does to indigenise mean as we navigate through a politically mired research process? What practices are best considered appropriate? What is the narrative of inbetwenness and how can we translate this into principles and guidelines of ethical practice? How do we measure and validate what takes place inbetween the intersecting space? And, where to from here in terms of direction? These are questions we have only touched on and require ongoing exploration.

So how can we work towards a better understanding of positionality? Reclaiming indigenous epistemology is about validating ancestral ways and applying these to today's context. On this point, we acknowledge the extraordinary contributions made by the collective strengths of Indigenous visionaries, particular our women ,who have been active and instrumental in resisting the tyranny of oppressive forces (Fournel 2007; Fox 2011). They are the consummate voices in what Turner (2006) describes as "word warriors" in their ability to speak to, rally, nurture, and reaffirm the fight against inequality and environmental injustice (McGregor 2007; Trask 1999).

A significant component of our journey as researchers has involved our learning through the struggles and in reflecting on our own biographies as Indigenous scholars. It is encouraging to see the evolving synergies of western knowledge and indigenous research and an openness to examining new possibilities with greater input from our communities. There is also growing consensus to validate traditional methodologies and to question the intent of Western academia. Our efforts to focus on the construct of inbetweenness is to better understand and appreciate that resilience is forged in how we overcome discord, dissonance and our personal doubts and fears in spaces we are often uncomfortable in. As we look to the legacy of our ancestors we understand the power of their benevolence and truth of their abundance thinking. As we look within we find our strength in our voices. A strength that uplifts our confidence to reclaim our

heritage in our work. Harnessing the space between paradigms is a source of our learning and one we will continue navigate to better serve our communities.

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