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Under the Mango Tree: Lessons for the Insider-Outsider Researcher

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ABSTRACT

An auto ethnographic approach is used to examine the insider-outsider identity of a researcher who is of Pacific Island descent and is also a member of the academy, within the western framework of the dominant culture. Stories from her researcher experience bring situated knowledge into a space that is fraught with tensions, and is highly competitive in nature. Discourses of 'othering', power and privilege provide paradigms for critical analysis of the academy.

While storytelling is not new, it is a powerful methodology used by the author to 'theorise from the flesh' and to point to past experiences as critical incidences of where her multiple identities are renegotiated as a result of border crossing between her home culture and position as a researcher in the university. She explores the fluidity of the space she occupies as a researcher of her community while working within the academy. Furthermore, she argues that members of the minority cultures at the academy can recognise and use their own positions and voices for enquiry from within.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, multiple identities, personal narratives, Pacific Island

Introduction

Members of the academy like myself, who are of Pacific Island descent and are based in western institutions overseas sometimes return home to carry out research. This work is vital as it primarily seeks to validate and bring our traditional knowledge into a space that has long been occupied by western constructs. It is also a good opportunity to engage in work within one's own community, especially if the agenda will give back to the community in some form or another. The latter point is in line with the importance of reciprocating within the Pacific Island culture. Pacific peoples who are willing to give and contribute to others will in turn be given to. In relation to research, it is important to give to the researched and in return you will be reciprocated as a sign of an authentic and respectful relationship.

This paper tells the story of my experience when visiting my home country to carry out research. My story is important as I hope to illustrate the tensions that exist due to the multiple identities that we embody as members of the academy as well as of the minority communities (such as Pacific Islanders) we research. The dichotomy of insider-outsider is not a new phenomenon and has been addressed by many scholars such as Linda Tuwhai Smith (1999), Spivak (1990) and more recently by Carmona & Luschen (2014), and Kaomea (2001).

Auto-ethnography is a combination of ethnography and autobiography. In relation to research and writing it describes and examines one's personal experiences in order to understand cultural and contextual experiences. Auto-ethnography utilises a narrative enquiry to point to past experiences as critical incidents of change in an author's life. Chan (2008) argues that as a method of enquiry the 'integral self' provides a lens for understanding a particular culture and society through the use of cultural descriptions and ethnographic explanation. The strength of auto-ethnographic approach lies in how it can enhance one's own understanding of self and others. It is defined by how it is user friendly to researchers. When combined with a critical narrative way of looking at one's experiences it can help to progress the different contexts towards a more functional and useful relationship. In this case, the lived realities of the self, culture and academia are examined with the intention of discovering a common point where they connect.

This paper refers to self as the ethnographer and brings the self together with culture into the academic terrain. In doing so, the approach employs an auto-ethnographic method whereby the author can use critical narrative as a lens of looking at past experiences to illuminate the self and the 'other' in different contexts. Auto-ethnographic facilitates the recalling of memories and stories.

Storytelling when used as an instrument to bring the self into research space is powerful as it allows the researcher to bring personal experiences to the fore and to interrogate them more consciously while sharing them with different audiences and analysing them theoretically. As a user-friendly method, the data lies within the heart and mind of the researcher making it personal and easy to relate to. By bringing my story to the fore and then applying an interpretive lens to illuminate how self, culture and academia traverse with one another it also illustrates how storytelling can be a powerful research tool.

Story from the field: Under the mango tree

A few years ago while on a research trip to my homeland, I experienced being an insider-outsider in my own community. For my project, I needed to recruit three cultural experts from the community. The ethical research guidelines of my institution require researchers to approach potential participants via a third party so as not to put undue pressure on them. Institutional guidelines for carrying out research within the Pasifika communities (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Samu, Finau, 2001) require that a researcher work with a research or cultural broker from the community who can speak independently to potential participants about the researcher and the study. A period of time is given for them to think about the study and to decide if they want to be involved. Once they agree verbally, the researcher can then meet them and discuss how they proceed in order to carry out the study.

Once I arrived on the island, I quickly engaged two cultural brokers to speak on my behalf to potential participants. My insider status made it relatively easy to enlist the cultural brokers for the study. One was my brother-in-law and the other my half-sister who both live in Tonga. Below is my story based on my experiences of when I visited the first cultural expert to discuss the study and to carry out the interview.

The first meeting was with a Tongan cultural expert who is a composer of traditional Tongan music and a choreographer of traditional *tau'olunga* (dance). Before the meeting I was reminded by my cultural broker to dress in my Tongan traditional wear. I was slightly taken aback that I needed to be reminded and at the same time I was also a bit bemused, but nevertheless I agreed. So in the Tongan summer heat, there I was dressed in a long *tupenu* (skirt) a dress and a *kiekie* (a belt like item made from the pandanus tree and worn around the waist). I looked respectable but needless to say it was hot, and I also felt awkward.

We arrived at the house. My brother-in-law told me to sit in the car and wait until he came back. I noticed that there were a few people sitting under a mango tree. A few minutes passed and it slowly dawned on me that the interview was going to be held outdoors, under the mango tree even with pigs and chickens running around. Up to this point I had envisaged that we would meet inside the house of the cultural expert.

A few minutes later, my brother-in-law returned and told me to follow him. He walked in front carrying a box of food items (rice, sugar, flour and meat) I had brought from Auckland as *koha* (gift) for the participants. When we got to the mango tree, my brother-in-law went into a short speech to introduce me. He started by linking me to my late grandparents and then to my husband. I started to get slightly annoyed. I understood though that this is the protocol of how you introduce yourself to people who may not know who you are. You begin by stating your genealogy and then in this case I was quickly linked to my husband – which was slightly one sided on my cultural broker's part. When, my brother-in-law referred to me as *finemotu'a,* which loosely translates into 'old lady or old bag', I was definitely annoyed. Then he went on to say "*Ko e lele mai pe 'a e finemotu'a koe ni*". The word *finemotu'a (*old lady) and *lele* (or run) is used to indicate my lower status to the cultural expert, he continued that I was there to learn and gather knowledge.

After greeting the cultural expert, I proceeded to greet and kiss the other three people who were sitting around under the mango tree. I quickly established a link with the cultural expert through his wife as a few minutes into the introduction I recalled that she used to be my Home Economics teacher at my former high school. I instantly remembered that she did not think too much of my cooking or sewing skills back then. From memory, she told me that what I had made for my sewing project was only good enough to be used as a doormat or to be thrown away. Back then, she went for the first option and proceeded to use my *tupenu* (formal long skirt) as a doormat. That was in the late 1970s and I didn't pay too much attention to it; however, as I was recalling this it began to make me feel more annoyed! I think I was annoyed at the realisation that (back then) my teacher did not have much faith in my ability. However, I quickly pushed it to the back of my mind.

I sat down on a chair and we began the interview firstly by explaining the need to tape record our conversation and then we moved to chit chatting, building up rapport with one another looking for a common point of connection. The best way to describe our encounter is what Vaioleti (2006) describes as *Talanoa* which is an oral tradition of indigenous Pacific culture. He describes *Talanoa* as a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and their aspirations (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 21). Halapua points out that prior to European contact in the history of the Pacific, there was no writing system, *talanoa* was the medium used to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. Although it is not the focus of this paper, Vaioleti (1999, 2006) has since developed *Talanoa* as a culturally appropriate form of carrying out research with Pacific peoples. In this context, it was important for us to engage in a conversation or *talanoa* where we talked about family members that live in Auckland, then onto family members who have passed away, politics, weather in Tonga in comparison to Auckland, and my days of being a high school student of his wife and so on. We discovered that we knew other family members on both their side and mine. We reached a point where we had struck a commonality. Finally about an hour or so later I felt that I had reached a point where I have been *allowed in* to begin to talk about my study. I had reached my point of entry. I began to introduce my study by giving a general background of Pacific Island students studying in universities and the support that is required for their success. A few hours later our conversation came to an end. It was a long meeting, much longer than the typical one to two hours of research interview stated on general institutional ethics applications. Throughout the duration of our conversation, the cultural expert's wife remained with us and every now and again her husband would draw her into our conversation. Mostly she agreed or offered further clarification of details in relation to her husband's explanations and stories. At the end I remember walking away feeling grateful that I had been privileged to receive such rich narratives of people's personal perspectives and life experiences.

Back in my office in Auckland while transcribing the interview, I had to laugh as roosters crowing, dogs barking and cackling of chickens in the background interjected our conversation.

Personal reflection

In reflecting on my story above, I was home where I had grown up and consider myself to be an insider. I am always happy to go back and visit my homeland and to see friends and relatives. However, on this trip I realised that I was considered as an outsider because I came in the context of a researcher who is carrying out research in my own community. Even though in my mind I belong to this community; I am an insider but as a researcher, I was experiencing being considered and treated as an outsider. I was being described in a language that positioned me as an outsider and I recall feeling very awkward in this very familiar context.

How was I an insider-outsider? Jankie (2001) argues that language is a tool of empowerment and representation. It is central to how knowledge is constructed, authorised and it can separate and shape relationships. In this case, the language used by my brother-in-law to introduce me and show respect to my participant and his family was also used to position me as the researcher, an outsider and one of lower status to the participant. In doing so, we acknowledged the participant as an expert and holder of important traditional knowledge and someone who graciously agreed to share this knowledge with others. Smith (1999) asserts the importance of indigenous protocols in carrying out research in indigenous communities to ensure the intellectual property rights of participants is duly recognised. Equally important is the need for the process not to confiscate knowledge but rather understand that knowledge is shared and that the relationship between researcher and participant should be reciprocal. The researcher may have to be comfortable adopting a humble subordinate position to the cultural expert participant. In this context, the researcher is a cultural expert who is the participant. Smith (1999) refers to this as a strategy for decolonising research methodologies. She points out, "...when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms" (Smith, 1999, p. 193). In doing so, the research process gives those who have been marginalised an opportunity to exchange information within a familiar and safe frame of reference (Chilisa, 2012). From a Tongan and Pacific Island perspective, the research process is said to be respectful and ethical.

Language is the cornerstone of any cultural preservation and also process of decolonising the mind. It can be used to colonise culture, values and the mind (Thongo 1986). An awareness of this allows insider-outsider researchers from colonial contexts to consider what language to use in their research. Although the academy's discourses of privilege are in English, the insider-outsider may have their mother tongue to give them access to knowledge and understanding that would be difficult for outsiders to reach.

The language I used during the interview illustrates the above point. Although I speak Tongan fluently I was worried about slipping into speaking in English during our conversation. Having lived overseas for over thirty years in a country where English is the main language of communication, my own mother tongue is reserved mostly for home and conversations with family and community members. As an insider of the community and someone with an in-depth knowledge of the culture, together with my lived experiences of the dress code and language issues I was slightly unnerved. This terrain can be daunting especially given there are no guidelines provided in any research manual that one could refer to or quote when documenting the experience.

Respectful representation is also critical to how participants view the researcher. It helps to ensure that an authentic connection is achieved between the researcher and the researched. This can be demonstrated in different ways such as the use of appropriate language and wearing of appropriate clothing. Louis (2006) sees this as a way of demonstrating respect. Along the same vein, Steinhauer (2002) argues that respect is much more than saying thank you and please. Rather it is how the researcher presents themselves to participants. This helps to create a sense of trust in the researcher and the agenda that he or she brings to the meeting. Time is equally important, that is, giving time to allow the participants to speak and for the researcher to really listen to what they have to say. During our meeting, I made a conscious effort to ensure that I speak only in Tongan. My meeting and interview with the cultural expert took several hours, face-to-face meetings and dialogues should not be dictated by time. It takes time to establish a genuine connection with your participants. Showing humility and generosity towards your participants further demonstrates an honest effort to uphold ethical principles of carrying out research in any community. This includes wearing of appropriate clothing even if one is feeling awkward and in my case 'boiling' in the summer heat of the tropics.

In this context, I also believe that as an insider to the researched community one has the advantage of being attune with the nuances of a familiar context. Dillard (2003) describes this as a sense of comfort or belonging that can also be problematic. However, I believe that drawing on one's own personal knowledge of the home culture is an authentic approach to the situation. Sitting under the mango tree conducting a research meeting amongst the company of other family members and their friendly pets is a scene far from what I have read in the research manuals at university. Yet I understood it to be an authentic environment that enables me to have a 'real' connection with my participant. This understanding comes from being a member of the community of the researched. It is also important to view the experience using the appropriate cultural lens that is vital to understanding the cultural practices grounded in this context. Sitting under the mango tree and talking with the cultural expert is more than a research meeting where information was being passed on from one person to another. Rather we were engaging in what traditionally was the norm for transmitting knowledge in our culture. Thaman (2000) refers to the indigenous notion of teaching and learning or *ako* in Tonga where one learns through a process that involve listening, imitating and observing and where informal education took place within one's home and wider community. Today, the term *ako* is also used to refer to formal process of education. Similarly in traditional Maori culture '*ako'* was seen as "inclusive, co-operative, reciprocal and obligatory" (Lee, 2005. p 5), a process described by Metge (1986) as "education through exposure" (p. 3). The learning process in traditional Tongan and Maori involves all members and the life of the wider community, a context where valued skills were passed down through different mediums such as myths, legends, song and dance as well as cultural rituals (Thaman, 2000). More significantly, learning and teaching did not take place in isolation to everyday life. Thus our meeting under the mango tree amongst the everyday life of the participant and open to members of his community

reflects a traditional process of learning that is underpinned by cultural values and grounded in a communal context. I argue that this is what one can refer to as an authentic engagement with members of the researched. In reflecting back, the moments where I felt awkward such as having to wear traditional Tongan attire in the summer heat were consequences of being an insider-outsider to the community. However, this is not something to be alarmed at. My perspective as an insider-outsider and my training in a western university provided me with a framework for negotiating the tensions that exist due to the multiple identities that we as indigenous academics occupy. It is important to view this from a strength base as much of the literature on insider-outsider has questioned the ability of the researcher (who is also a member of the researched community) to be objective due to their closeness to the researched (Kanuha, 2000).

Subedi (2014) pointed out that one of the strategies for ensuring there is authenticity on our part is to illustrate our knowledge and competency of the language and shared experiences. This is the strength of narratives as they open up the space for genuine conversations between the participants and the researcher who is an insider-outsider to the community. The use of the local language where possible is also very important in creating an authentic connection with the participant. Jacobs-Huey (2002) posits this as the process of 'negotiating legitimacy' of insider-outsider researchers when working with their own communities. In doing so, participants are presented with the opportunity to evaluate the authenticity of the researcher as their own. This component of carrying out research in one's own community is vital as participants will inevitably evaluate the sincerity of the researcher and can often pick up any lack of genuineness on the researcher's part. By wearing my traditional Tongan dress I was showing respect to my participant and his family and at the same time using the local language was an act of legitimising myself as a member of the same community.

The use of the local language and taking time to make a connection with the participant and members of his family is vital to how the people of Tonga relate to one another. 'Chit chatting' at the beginning is a way for us to find a common ground for engaging with one another, talking about family members both local and abroad as well as those who have passed away is critical to how we make a connection and establish a relationship with each other. The Tongan concept of *va* or inter-relational space is relevant here. *Va* is a concept that exists within many of the Pacific (Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Rotuma and so on) cultures and generally means space between people or things, Kaili (2005), a live space in which the relationship is maintained and developed. Both Kaili (2005) and Thaman's (2008) point out that when *va* is used to describe inter-personal relationships there are also specific behavioural expectations. Those involved understand the basis of their relationship and their respective roles and will therefore act accordingly. Thaman (2008) argues that this is central to a peaceful existence and inter-personal relationships of members of society. In relation to an insider-outsider researcher, it is important to recognise and invest some time in one's inter-personal relationships with the participants.

As an insider-outsider

The experience of being an insider-outsider is not new and can be expressed in many different contexts. Kaomea (2001) reflected that she continues to feel partially as an insider-outsider both within her community and the academy. While this is not original, others, such as Said (1993), Spivak (1990) as well as Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) have highlighted an aspect of insider-outsider that is relevant to this paper: the existing ambivalence that occur when researchers negotiate the dichotomy between indigenous communities and that of western academia. Indigenous communities often feel a sense of nervousness towards their own members who have been educated within the western system; at the same time the academy feels a sense of discomfort about the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge in the academy (Spivak, 1990). Consequently, indigenous academics who work and research their communities occupy a space that is filled with many tensions as they themselves assume multiple identities. There is a sense of obligation to one's own community and the need to uphold local protocol and at the same time one must meet institutional requirements. Kaomea (2001) wrote about how indigenous academics struggle to meet competing expectations of their communities and of the academy. While the academy values theory and evidence her native Hawaiian culture places emphasis on experience. In relation to carrying out research, the academy often expects a relationship that is detached, enabling objective research whilst Kaomea's (2001) native Hawaiian community value a relationship that is authentic, long lasting and intimate.

In writing this piece I recall the words of Tongan poet and scholar Konai Helu Thaman who articulates the above point well in her poem below.

Your way objective analytic
Always doubting the truth
Until proof comes
Slowly quietly
And it hurts

My way subjective gut-feeling
Like always sure of the truth
The proof is there
Waiting

And it hurts

Thaman (2008, p. 461)

Problematising the role insider-outsider in a postcolonial context is useful for this conversation. Of importance to me (as a researcher and member of the researched) is the question of what I represent to the participants, the idea of whether I was part of them or do I have a foot in each camp. Given my background and where I originate from I would like to think that as an insider-outsider I am part of the researched and that having a foot in each camp adds value to my work. More importantly, I understand that this does not mean that I am less a member of my own community.

Narayan (1993) states that researchers draw on their own sense of identity as insiders as well as outsiders in order to construct themselves and the researched. As a result, all researchers bring to the field their own experiences and acquired knowledge that shapes the relationship between themselves and the researched. This affects how one positions oneself in the *va*, the active relationship.

One's status as an insider to the researched or culture that is being studied does not guarantee total acceptance or treatment as an insider. Being an insider-outsider means that both the researcher and the researched share a common ground and this can mean accessibility to the community being studied. Despite what the literature points to as problematic in this situation, I believe that much can be gained when the insider-outsider is also a member of the researched community. However, both insider-outsider researcher and researched play a significant role in structuring power relations in the research process. Smith (1999) refers to this as indigenous researchers working in postcolonial contexts where insider-outsider can draw on their own experiences and multiple identities, knowledge, and putting forth an agenda to employ the tools of the dominant construct (Lorde, 1984) to promote and validate the research knowledge from insider perspectives.

Lessons from the inside

Returning to the story of under the mango tree, I realised that as a researcher I was considered an outsider to my own community. My academic training requires me to take on the perspective and persona of an outsider and not as an insider member of my community. Once we engage in academia it is difficult to go back especially within the research context. If you are returning back to the mango tree, you are not returning as the same person. But this is ok. You return with tools and knowledge that you can add to your community. The most important thing here is to be aware of the possible prejudices that are at play. A lack of awareness is problematic as it brings a tension between yourself as the researcher and the lens you employ to examine this particular context.

In closing this story, it is important to recognise that for many of us there is real tension between the multiple identities that we embody especially when we move between our own communities and academia. This auto-ethnography reinforces for me the belief that it is possible to be an insider-outsider especially in the activity of research. Below I offer a number of key lessons (in no particular order) I learnt as a consequence of my experience of being an insider-outsider researcher:

1. Do not assume that because you are from a community you are an insider.
2. Follow the ethical guideline of your institution and of your community.
3. Take time to establish a rapport with your participants, as their perception of you is very important to the authenticity of your study.
4. Consider what will be your 'way in' or 'point of entry'. You may need to assume a subordinate status. This is ok—it is part of cultural appropriateness.
5. Be respectful and be prepared to give back and reciprocate.
6. Think about how you will include your participants' voice in your research so that they are part of your journey too.
7. Remember that you are in a privileged position to receive your participants' personal stories. Take care of this rich data and pay respect to those that have gifted them to you.

Decolonising research does not mean that one rejects western theories and perspectives (Smith, 1999). It encourages deconstructing western constructs through collaboration between native researchers themselves as well as between native researchers and non-native researchers. Collaboration pushes native researchers to consider the relevance of their academic knowledge and hybridised identities in developing research knowledge. Collaboration here refers to problematising the relation between knowledge and power, researcher and researched in post-colonial contexts.

Also as insiders-outsiders, the selves we bring to the field as indigenous members of a culture are relevant to the researched as they shape participants' relationship with us, the roles we assume, what language we use, the depth of knowledge obtained and how we report on it. By doing so, we recognise the political nature of research and the complexities involved in the pursuit for culturally appropriate scholarship.

It has been assumed that being an insider brings many benefits such as accessibility to groups, the ability to pick up on and understand the nonverbal cues as well as have a deeper understanding of the researched group. On the other hand, insiders have also been accused of being too biased in their interpretation because they are too close. Therefore the insider's strength can often be the outsider's weakness and vice versa. In my case, I have come to realise that being in the position of an insider-outsider researcher adds

value to my work and my identity. It has enabled me to bring realistic interpretations to what happens which are both relevant and valuable for working in both contexts. More importantly, the experiences of being an insider-outsider inform my practice as a member of the academy and as a Pacific Islander and at the same time, the engagement with my participants can be said to be authentic.

Biography

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