

Insider–Outsider reflections from a Native Hawaiian researcher and the use of community-based participatory approaches

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Abstract

Objectives: There is an increasing interest in conducting research within indigenous communities among indigenous and non-indigenous researchers alike. This paper offers the critical reflections of one Native Hawaiian researcher and the process of engaging in research as both an insider–outsider.

Conclusions: Community-based, participatory research (CBPR) offers one model for outsiders to work effectively with indigenous communities, but CBPR also offers valuable principles for insiders who desire to work with their own communities.

Keywords: community-based participatory research, Native Hawaiians, autoethnography

The condition and plight of indigenous populations and their health has been increasingly exposed, domestically and internationally. While there is growing concern over the deleterious factors associated with Aboriginal and Maori health in Australia, the state of other Pacific Islander groups is less known. One such group is Native Hawaiians, who experience some of the highest rates of poor health, for example obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and poor social and mental health outcomes, such as suicide, school drop-out rates, substance abuse.^{1–4} However, outside of Hawaii, very few people know the predicament of Native Hawaiians. The image of Hawaii as a “must see” tourist destination is so overpowering that the truth of the condition of Native Hawaiian people is often met with disbelief and even anger. Still, Native Hawaiians are a resilient people, survivors of plague, pestilence, diaspora, and cultural genocide. Over the years, others have dictated Native Hawaiian priorities, which has largely lead to inaction, invisibility, occupation, and dispossession. Today, others are still dictating Native Hawaiian priorities.

Native Hawaiians also have been exposed to racism and historical trauma. There were an estimated 500,000 to 750,000 people in Hawaii prior to Captain James Cook’s arrival in 1778. By the first official census, the population was 39,504. This dramatic decline in population weakened Native Hawaiians and paved the road for colonization, including the banning of the language from

schools as well as other traditions and beliefs, capitalism, which led to land ownership and the dispossession of land from Native Hawaiian people, and a shift from an agricultural society to a tourist economy, which led to massive land transformations, low-wage jobs, and vulnerability to external forces.

Research that addresses not only health outcomes but is also sensitive to the racism and historical trauma indigenous populations have experienced requires methodologies that are rooted in and reflect the values of the community. By definition, community-based participatory research (CBPR) focuses on social, structural, and/or environmental inequalities through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and providers in all aspects of the research process.⁵ CBPR principles suggest that researchers: (1) recognize and work to enhance communities of identity; (2) build on strengths and resources within the community and facilitate collaborative partnerships, where all partners contribute their expertise to enhance our understanding of a given phenomenon; (3) promote co-learning and

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empowering processes that facilitate reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and power; (4) engage a cyclical and iterative process through feedback and reflection; (5) integrate knowledge and action for mutual benefit, where information is gathered to inform community change efforts; and (6) disseminate findings and knowledge gained to all partners, where ownership of knowledge is acknowledged.⁶

CBPR can be conducted by Native and non-Native researchers, but the implications of being an insider versus an outsider can be quite complicated. To demonstrate these complexities, an auto-ethnographic reflection of the experience one Native Hawaiian researcher is presented below. Through this reflection, I hope to enlighten the reader of my own processes as an insider who is returning to the islands to conduct research with my community, so that it may also inform the processes of others hoping to enter indigenous communities, whether they are insiders or outsiders.

Reflection

As a Native Hawaiian, I have always wanted to work with my own community. When I was a student at the University of Washington, I wanted to do my dissertation on Native Hawaiian well being, but I was told that this was not a good idea due to the lack of available data, the length of time it would take to collect data, and the impact on my future job prospects. It would be best if I studied other populations. When I arrived as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan, I was told similarly that this area of study would not be fruitful if I was to ever hope to obtain tenure. Native Hawaiian issues are too provincial, too insignificant, and not relevant to the national stage I had hoped to stand on.

Now, 26 years removed from my journey away from the islands, I am a full professor with tenure at the number one social work program in the USA. It is now time to do the work. I have gained many skills and strategies from working with African American and Latino communities on the continental USA. However, I have found that many of these tools and strategies amount to very little without a sophisticated understanding of social power and the dynamics of oppression and privilege—or the ongoing development of critical consciousness. Paulo Freire, who is often quoted as coining this term, stated that a commitment to social justice requires a moral and ethical attitude toward equality and a belief in the capacity of people as agents who can transform their world.⁷ Furthermore, he stated that to create social change and to promote social justice, we must begin this process with ourselves—through a self-reflective process that examines the contradictions between our espoused values and our lived experience. Therefore, I present here my own self-reflection as I embark on perhaps the most important journey of my life: going home.

I am aware of the historical trauma experienced by Native Hawaiians described above, but I am also keenly

aware of the microaggressions that Native Hawaiians encounter on a daily basis that seem so innocent to others, but remind me of the oppression that my people face. Sue⁸ describes microaggressions as brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware of the hidden messages they are communicating.⁸ Microaggressions are a form of aversive discrimination that is often perpetrated by many well-intentioned people who believe in equality, but unconsciously act in racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist, etc. ways.⁹ On bad days, when I encounter these microaggressions, I usually smile and answer in the most courteous way I know how. On better days, I try to educate. But as much as I feel the sting of their comments, I must understand that my story is different, and I can have bad days because in the grand scheme of things, I am protected by a shroud of privilege. I can say nothing—because oppression does not require me to actively discriminate to perpetuate it; it just requires that I do nothing to stop it.

As far as my privilege goes, among Native Hawaiians, I am light skinned. I know this privilege has allowed me to be more trusted, accepted, and easily assimilated within the dominant culture. I have also been educated under the US educational system, which taught me to think like the mainstream and represented my path out of the impoverished neighborhood where I grew up. I never heard the word “colonization” throughout my primary or secondary education. The spirituality of my ancestors was taught to me as mythology. Through my assimilation, I was made palatable to the dominant culture, which has allowed me to reap great benefits. At the same time, it is this same assimilation that was forced upon Native Hawaiians leading to the historical trauma many experience today.

As an accomplished researcher and scholar at one of the top universities in the USA, I possess knowledge that might be valuable to my people. However, I must remember that this knowledge may lead me to believe that I know the answers that are best for my people, or that I possess the solutions to their problems. Thus, as I plan to re-enter my community, I must temper my expectations. I must listen. I cannot assume I know, but rather support others who have been doing the work. I must learn what has worked and what has not, despite my years of experience. I must earn their trust, and while this may be easier because of my Native background, I cannot assume that this will give me an “in” to the community or advantage me in any way. I must focus on process and not outcomes, and that trust takes time to develop. I must be prepared for questioning, suspicion, and perhaps even rejection and be okay with this. I need to re-acquaint myself with the history and language of my people. In essence, I need to re-learn what it means to be Native Hawaiian.

My primary strategy for accomplishing this is the use of CBPR. As an outsider working with African Americans and Latinos in Detroit, Michigan, I worked very hard to

earn the trust of my partners. To earn their trust, I told my story and the story of my people and listened to their story. I strived to achieve mutual benefit in all the work that I undertook. I also understood this process took time and energy. Even after achieving a measurable amount of success, I still work every day to maintain their trust, and still face rejection. I have come to understand that I will never be an insider. It is this same sense of vigilance and effort that I need to bring with me to Hawaii, as someone who is an insider due to my ancestry, but who is still an outsider in so many ways.

Thus, as I navigate my insider–outsider status, I am reminded of Adams, Bell and Griffin’s definition of an ally, an individual from an agent group who rejects the dominant ideology and takes action out of a belief that eliminating oppression will benefit both agents and targets of oppression.¹⁰ These authors describe several different characteristics of an ally, including taking responsibility for one’s own learning, and being willing to be confronted, and to consider change. Allies are also willing to take risks and try new behaviors, despite their fear. Furthermore, allies must be willing to make mistakes, learn, and try again. Humility, as an ally, means never being truly culturally competent, but rather recognizing that the pursuit of critical consciousness is a life-long process. I have always strived to be an ally. As I prepare to re-enter my community as a university-affiliated researcher, I must take on the mentality of an ally and continue to reflect, for I am still a work in progress. I must de-colonize my mind and return to my roots, and wherever you may fall on the insider–outsider continuum,

I would like to encourage you to also engage in such reflections.

Disclosure

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