Be(com)ing a "Metaconscious" Outsider Researcher: Reflections from the Qualitative Study on Mentoring Native Hawaiians

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In this paper, I reflect on my experiences with being an outsider researcher during my dissertation in which I worked with six undergraduate Native Hawaiian mentees and their six faculty mentors. Four mentor participants self-identified as Hawaiian themselves, whereas two mentors were non-Hawaiians. In this qualitative study, I explored the ways in which engagement in mentored research activities influenced the Native Hawaiian students' learning and development, including academic persistence and scientific identity formation. I conducted interviews with mentees and mentors, observed the mentoring interactions, and analyzed documents that participants shared with me. The study was conducted in 2018 at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where I pursued a doctoral degree in educational psychology as an international student. Coming from a Slovenian and non-Hawaiian background, I discuss in this paper how my researcher identity shaped and was shaped by the research process. I focus on the strategies that I used to facilitate trust within the participants and to enhance the collection and interpretation of their stories.

The Researcher's Identity and Purpose

The implicit assumption behind differentiating outsider researchers from insider researchers is based on group membership. Researchers who are not members of the group under study are deemed to be *outsiders;* whereas, researchers who study populations of which they are also members are positioned as *insiders* (Adler & Adler, 1987). In insider studies, the researcher shares an identity, language, historical memory, and experiential base with the participants. Considering the study's focus on Native Hawaiians, I am not a Hawaiian, was not born and raised in Hawai'i, and neither English nor Native Hawaiian are my first language. I was born and raised in Maribor in Slovenia and moved to Hawai'i in 2014 to study educational psychology. My Slovenian, non-Hawaiian background and lack of shared and long-term experiences with Hawaiians suggest that I approached the study as a "perfect," or absolute, outsider researcher. What, then, did I have to offer our research community and to inform educational practice? Conducting such a study, what did I have to offer the world?

Historical Memory

Outsiders must recognize their own selves and continually pay attention to positionality and construction of knowledge in the research process (Seidman, 2013). Reflecting on my Slovenian background, the ancestors of the Slovenians were the Slavs, who had their own language and culture. The Slavs founded the oldest known Slavic state, Carantania, in the 7th century, but it did not last long. Until the 20th century, Slovenia was generally politically and socioeconomically controlled by foreign powers, including the Habsburgs, the Austro-Hungary monarchy, and the Venetians. Early, after the foreign occupation, the Slovenians emerged as a unique nation and forged their own identity, despite the ongoing oppression and sustained pressure to assimilate. Slovenia became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after the First World War, and later, part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the Second World War. In 1990, after more than 70 years of living as part

of Yugoslavia, the Slovenians built a consensus for an independent path—the Republic of Slovenia, a country with a multiparty democratic political system and Slovenian formal language. Given these historical events, my sociocultural background and historical memory speak to one nation's efforts to sustain its culture and identities.

Coming from a small European country formerly occupied by foreign powers, I appreciate the perspectives of colonialism and the legacy of colonialism in Hawai'i. I hold a strong belief that taking of land, tourism, commercialization, military facilities and activities, and appropriation of Hawaiian culture have greatly and negatively influenced the circumstances and well-being of Native Hawaiians. I have been impressed to learn about the educational achievements and improvements for learning and development of Native Hawaiians over the last few decades. However, there is much to be done to ensure the development and sustainability of Native Hawaiian culture. By pursuing research on mentoring Native Hawaiians, it is my goal to contribute to this effort and give back to the Native Hawaiian people for their inspiration and understanding as they have shared their lives, places, and desires with me during my studies in Hawai'i.

Lived Experiences

I became interested in Indigenous populations in high school after reading the book *How can one sell the air?* which was translated into Slovenian by Burgar and Kuzelicki (1994). The book described the stories and history of Chief Seattle's tribe in the 18th century during treaty negotiations with the U.S. government, which was intent on forcing the Native people of Washington's Puget Sound onto reservations. I deeply related to the Indigenous ideas of connectedness with the natural environment and responsibility for others. My interest in Indigenous cultures increased when I moved to Hawai'i and met a few Native Hawaiians. My cross-cultural interactions in Hawai'i, including with Native Hawaiians, enhanced my knowledge about their cultures, increased my awareness and appreciation of diversity, and helped me better understand where I come from and who I am.

Reflecting on my researcher positionality in the study further, I possessed knowledge about student learning and identity development and had experiences of being a mentee in research activities. My knowledge and perceptions of mentoring college students were shaped by my personal experiences and the literature on mentoring culturally diverse students. The positive mentoring experiences that I received from my mentors during my undergraduate and graduate education fostered my research skills and persistence in college. I became familiar with the positive influence of mentoring on underrepresented students during the process of conducting my master's thesis. Results of several studies reviewed, including my master's thesis, showed that engagement in mentored research activities positively influenced students' learning and development.

By focusing on identity development of Native Hawaiian mentees, my background and experiences disrupted my initial position of being a perfect outsider in the study. Therefore, I positioned myself as a "multifaceted" outsider. Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, but is generated through "group consciousness" and awareness of others and oneself (Meyer, 2008). In the study, I wanted to learn from Native Hawaiian students and mentors about the ways in which they create their meanings and understandings of the world, and how mentoring interactions and culture influence Native Hawaiians' identity development. I perceived my role as the one who could inform and (re)shape the 'outside' view and practices with the 'insider' view and experiences.

Building Trust within Participants

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), developing trust is essential to collecting sound qualitative data. Unlike in insider research, where *trust* represents the foundation upon which insider researchers construct their study, outsiders are expected to build and maintain trust over the course of the research process. Given the Hawaiians' history of

colonialism, I worried that Native Hawaiian participants might question my research intentions and motives. To address and face these concerns, I built rapport and strove to establish reciprocal relationships with each participant, in order to initiate the trust building process.

Giving Back

Relationships, or interdependence, are the cornerstone of the Hawaiian experience which generates knowledge and influences how the universe and those who inhabit it engage with and learn from each other (Meyer, 2001). I attached a statement of my researcher positionality when reaching out to potential participants for the study. In the statement, I described my academic and cultural background and the reasons for my focus on Native Hawaiians. I was explicit about what I hoped to accomplish and how I hoped to reach these goals. I identified and communicated mutually beneficial study benefits, including giving back to the Native Hawaiian communities and helping sustain Hawaiian culture. I shared the Slovenians' history in imperialism and their efforts to sustain Slovenian culture and language, in order to my express my empathy and understanding of Hawaiians' history of colonialism and their efforts for sovereignty and self-determination.

During the research process, three male mentee participants, which represented all male participants, expressed concern about my outsider status when they asked me about my reasons for focusing on Native Hawaiians. The signed consent forms and ongoing consent from all participants to take part in the study suggested that communicating with participants the researcher's positionality positively influenced the research process. Specifically, sharing the understanding of one nation's efforts to sustain its culture, language, and identities and the discovery of mutually beneficial study gains enhanced the participants' trust and support for the study. I intensively communicated with participants my desire to help with community-based activities and offered my assistance to help sustain the Hawaiian culture and the natural environment. I also invited student participants to co-publish the study' s findings in scientific outlets.

Discomfort during Observations

In the study, the greatest challenge of creating a comfortable and trustworthy research environment came at the observational process. I collected the observational data as a non-participant to understand the mentoring relationships in their natural settings, while staying separate from the mentoring activities and relationships. I observed all mentoring pairs at least once in a formal mentoring setting, which included individual and group meetings. My impression was that during the observations of one-on-one meetings, participants often felt uncomfortable being observed. During the observation process, I often felt uncomfortable as well, especially observing the pairs when they met alone. I felt privileged to have a unique and invaluable opportunity to capture mentored activities in process. Yet, observing the pairs in more private settings made me aware of being an outsider in the study.

Gathering Insights through Stories

For the study, I conducted two individual interviews with each participant. The interviewing process is often fraught with power tensions, such as "who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, [and] who benefits" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 101). Literature suggested that participants from Indigenous backgrounds often perceived a conventional interview with sequential questions as a sign of disrespect or being "noisy" (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). Given these notions, I aimed to create a comfortable and validating research environment for the participants and thus, gather knowledge through conversations or stories.

Storytelling

The conversational method or style of collecting data builds on oral storytelling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm and "involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of

sharing story as a means to assist others" (Kovach, 2010, p. 40). In order to collect rich and descriptive data, I created an interview topic guide with semi-structured questions that I developed from a scoping review of the existing literature and the study objectives. I had a list of broad topics, and their relation to the participants' experiences meant that they were covered naturally, with minimal prodding from the researcher. My intention was to hear the *story* of each participant; I did not want each participant's voice to become lost in the group's collective. Instead of conducting "standard" interviews with multiple questions, I asked my participants to tell a story about what they were discussing. I strove to follow up with each story in a way that could further facilitate the participant's self-reflection and inspiration. I often incorporated my interpretations of the story when introducing the next topic and asking the participant to share thoughts. This helped me verify my thoughts with the participant to ensure my understandings matched their stories and reflected their thoughts.

A "Talk-Story" Conversation

Conducting qualitative research with Indigenous communities requires "meaningful involvement and great sensitivity to culture, history, tradition, and cultural protocols" (Waller, 2017, p. 1). In the Hawaiian tradition, to communicate and dialogue is to *talk story.* Hawaiians learn and share their stories and ideas in a "talk-story" conversational style of speech (Au & Jordan, 1981); the talk-story pattern includes overlapping speech between individuals with one speaker beginning to talk before the other finishes. In this style of conversation, co-narration occurs as individuals retell an account together. Such conversational practice refers to opening yourself up to learning in the give and receive process (Sing, Hunter, & Meyer, 1999). In the study, participants and I openly discussed both research-related topics and more private matters. Our study meetings would start with sharing our experiences over the last week(s) or following up with a specific situation that was shared at one of our previous meetings. I also asked participants about the progress of their research projects and they often asked me back about my experiences with my dissertation. When participants and I talked story about the mentoring relationship under study, I carefully listened to their stories to "allow the essence of the problem to be explored … in ways that fit the context, situation, and circumstances" (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 167). The conversations often included overlapping speech between the participant and the researcher that was grounded in the respect and appreciation of other speaker' s perspectives.

As a storyteller, collecting data through stories helped me retell and *voice* both the participants' stories and the context to highlight the ways mentoring influenced the Native Hawaiian students' learning and identity development. Asking participants to tell a story opened opportunities for self-reflection, analysis, and personal growth; many participants shared that they benefited from the conversations, such that they deepened their understanding of themselves and their work and *re-membered* themselves and their stories.

Interpretation of Stories

As human beings, we travel with past histories that are shaped by our experiences, beliefs, values, and "historically-effected consciousness" (Gadamer, 2004). I worried that my non-Hawaiian background and lack of shared and long-term experiences with Hawaiians might limit my ability to understand and interpret participants' experiences and beliefs. I was aware that where the social, cultural, and linguistic distance between participants and the researcher is significant, the potential for misunderstanding of data collected is likewise significant (Mosselson, 2010). I aimed to rectify this through ongoing reflexivity and by being metaconscious or "fully conscious subjective" (Meyer, 2008) of my biases and influences in all aspects of the research process.

In order to maintain a sense of critical distance from the topic under study (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008), I consciously stepped *back* from action in order to understand the phenomena under study.

"There is no self-understanding without other-understanding" (Fay, 1996, p. 241). Accepting this proposition required an understanding of the ways in which my background and experiences were different from participants' backgrounds and experiences, as well as the ways in which they were similar. Continuous self-reflection helped me to understand the meaning constructed around both the participants' and my stories and perceptions. This helped me to become aware of the multiple realities that existed behind the data and that "there are other interpretations of life, brilliance, and knowing" (Meyer, 2008, p. 230). I developed a better understanding of my own positionality in the study and the diversity of perspectives within it, including how my knowledge and beliefs both influenced, and were influenced by, the research process. Positioned as an international student and mentee from Slovenia who studied educational psychology in Hawai' i and who wanted to give back to the Hawaiian communities, I encountered more nuanced relationships in the research process. Indeed, I shifted between my outsider, non-Hawaiian identity and my insider sense of purpose and experiences from mentoring relationships. These shifts helped me to better understand the self that I brought to the collaborative research setting and *the self* and knowledge that was co-constructed in that setting.

Keeping the Stories Authentic

From the Hawaiian perspective, "knowing" is not divorced from our awareness, from body, from spirit, and from place (Meyer, 2001). I invited participants to comment on my interpretations and used their feedback to keep with the authenticity of their voices. I included quotes from participants' stories and perspectives to support conclusions that arose from data analysis, to let the participants' voices stand on their own, and to allow those interested to draw their own conclusions from the data presented. After the interviews, I created memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to understand, self-reflect upon, and track the information obtained from talking with participants. I wrote the memos immediately after the interviews to keep my reflections and thoughts fresh. The memos allowed for constant interpretation of the data and for review of bias through the research process.

I approached the study with a strong belief that supportive and caring mentoring relationships enhance students' learning and identity development. To minimize my assumptions, I also elicited data on negative examples contrasting with my interpretations. For example, participants' responses from interviews suggested professionalism, equality, and reciprocity in the mentoring relationship and therefore, aspects of the non-hierarchical relationship. Given the fieldnotes from the observations and the mentoring pairs' feedback on my interpretations, the senses of friendship in mentoring suggested safe and mutually respectful mentoring relationships, where mentors served as friends, advocates, and research collaborators, while they also represented a source of guidance and more advanced others. Mentors, both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian, valued the mentees' active engagement and voices (i.e., mentees' comments and questions) in their research activities. Acknowledging that *"all* ideas … and *all* theories are simply *interpretations"* (Meyer, 2008, p. 230), I kept an open mind for fresh and pioneer interpretations of the ways mentoring influences the learning and development of Native Hawaiian undergraduates.

Rewards of Collaboration

While discipline-specific literature on research methodology provides an understanding of how to collect and analyze data, little is known about the social and cultural exchanges that occur during the research process and how these may influence us afterwards (Gupta & Kelly, 2014). Reflecting on the dissertation process as a whole, the study took me on a tremendous learning journey that included growing spiritually and intellectually. I received an indescribable amount of knowledge and inspiration from the participants. I found new cultural tools that help me understand and approach my own

situations, experiences, and beliefs. Research with Indigenous communities is a dedication that extends well beyond the study process or article submission: it is a lifelong relationship and commitment (Lavallée, 2009). I recognize my responsibility to assist the participants, both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian, with their requests and needs.

As I paid close attention to the sound of the data and reflected on my positionality in the study, my guiding principle of "serving the larger" materialized, this time with serving as a researcher co-creating pathways for just and culturally-sustaining education and the society. Indeed, regardless of one' s cultural background, the development of a conscious mindset for diversity and humanity begins with critical self-reflection and understanding of the cultures and circumstances of the communities that we serve and engage with. Thinking of what this line of research means to me, I feel grateful and privileged to have collaborated with and learned from current generations of Native Hawaiians, who continue to sustain their Indigenous identities and culture, while fighting for their sovereignty and rights with dignity and strength.

I set out, in this paper, to reflect on my own experiences and challenges as a researcher from a different culture while studying and working with Native Hawaiian mentees and their faculty mentors. My journey, which juxtaposed my role from both outsider and insider perspectives, examined identity and led to insightful and profound learning, collaboration, and connection. Through self-reflection, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in the study and take a more critical look at my own biases and responsibilities as a researcher. I argue that sincere, critical awareness of one's positionality in the research process, particularly when studying historically underrepresented groups, not only allows for a better understanding of what, how, and in what ways the research knowledge is produced, but ultimately challenges and enables the researcher to address this in a more responsive and culturally sensitive way.

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