

Between two worlds: a psychology student's international experience in Māori New Zealand

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Abstract: A psychology graduate student from the United States, I spent nearly two months with Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga conducting research and collaborating with Māori researchers. Encountering Māori culture as an outsider, I came upon critical lessons necessary to ensure dissemination of indigenous knowledge to students who come from all over the world. These include the importance of collaboration with Māori both inside and outside the workplace, increased immersion with indigenous-based readings and media, engagement with my own developmental process and white privilege, and building skills necessary to foster cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Keywords: collaboration, international student, Māori collaboration, white privilege

Introduction

Before I write about my journey, not only the physical one from a psychology department in the United States to Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (The National Institute of Research Excellence for Māori Development and Advancement) in Aotearoa (New Zealand) but also the intellectual and spiritual, I must first recognize my position within both privileged and oppressed groups. I was born and raised in Israel until, at the age of eight, my parents, brothers and I moved to the United States. My experiences of being part of a Jewish community, raised in a war-torn country during the Gulf War, immigrating to the United States as a child, and coming out as lesbian heightened my sensitivity to cultural difference and systems of oppression. Thus, as an Israeli, American, Jew, lesbian, and white woman, I constantly shift among these boundaries to discover and re-discover my identity and place within the world and social order.

A graduate student at the University of Washington, psychology was an intuitive, if not inevitable choice to make in terms of my home discipline. Beyond a fascination with human behavior, I have had a longstanding interest in the complex interactions of ethnicity, culture, and health and in diversity science. Discovering a fellowship for United States graduate students to study and research abroad was most opportune. Working with Māori scholars and researchers would not only increase cross-cultural psychological knowledge, but also facilitate collaboration and cross-cultural communication.

What I experienced and learned during the seven weeks at Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga as an international student, exceeded my expectations in ways I could not have imagined. As an outsider, I saw two different cultures: the Māori culture and the non-Māori New Zealand culture. It was a challenge learning to negotiate these two cultures while studying a research topic, Māori health, which is highly sensitive and political. With the aim of sharing knowledge and fostering capacity building between Māori and non-Māori, in this paper I reflect upon personal and professional insights, white privilege, and skills necessary to develop collaborative relationships with individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

Personal and professional insights

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate personal from professional insights gleaned through this experience, as they are interwoven. Indeed, unlike Western science, I found that a common realization among the Māori researchers encountered is that the person conducting research is inseparable from the research itself. Research is never purely objective; this starts with the first stage of research: identifying the topic to be studied invariably involves subjectivity. Rather than attempting to mask this reality, Māori embrace it—and common questions to the researcher include ‘Who are you? Where do you come from?’ Thus, an adaptation from the feminist adage ‘the personal is political’ might be ‘the personal is professional’ and vice versa.

To elaborate on what particular lessons have framed my experience, one has been an introduction to Kaupapa Māori. Historically, the term ‘research’ for Māori has been associated with imperialism and colonialism. For over a century and to the present day, Māori have been ‘researched’ by Pākehā under terms not their own. Moreover, there are various ways in which academic institutions privilege Western systems of knowledge over those of indigenous peoples, reinforcing the ‘other-ing’ of indigenous people and research. Kaupapa Māori research is an attempt to retrieve space to plan, organize, conduct, analyze and give back culturally responsive research primarily by Māori, for Māori (Smith, 1999). Kaupapa Māori theory requires engaging all forms of colonial oppression and the structures that create and maintain those oppressions. In this way, being Māori or having Māori participants does not necessarily mean one is conducting or engaging in Kaupapa Māori research. The researcher must, nonetheless, consider the ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ status and how this will impact the research in all its stages, from relationships with participants to how results are interpreted. The key is that the research has to be transformative and challenge the status quo. Thus, conversations and learning about Kaupapa Māori allowed me to appreciate how understanding constructs from an indigenous perspective can influence research and how we think about it.

On a similar note, I have also learned the importance of collaborating with Māori communities as one embarks on a research project. Following participatory action research (PAR) models is especially important, in which the researcher seeks the active involvement and collaboration of vulnerable and affected communities (Stringer, 1996). That is, the research is designed to ensure and establish participation by communities affected by the issue being studied in all aspects of the research process to improve well-being. Thus, involving local Māori and the larger Māori community is critical, and this is true regardless as to whether the data one is engaging with is qualitative, quantitative, newly collected, or secondarily analyzed. The reason this is so important is to respect Māori and their right to be self-determining. As a researcher who was an outsider, this point was especially heightened for me, and I realized that even secondary data analysis involves complex issues that need to be discussed with care. Indeed, research cannot fit within a Kaupapa Māori framework unless Māori can take greater control over the ways in which indigenous issues are discussed and handled.

These lessons culminated in a core insight and an inherent change in the way I view research and, by extension, the world around me. As both a feminist and lesbian, I have analyzed the world through a lens of gender, sexism, and heterosexism—unconsciously. In other words, all experiences are unconsciously filtered and processed through this feminist-conscious perspective. Before my experience in Aotearoa, I was also able to analyze constructs and situations from a cultural/ethnic perspective, but only with conscious effort and only intellectually—something I realized and knew ‘in my head’. Now, this has become more and more of an unconscious process, one that exists not only in my head but that I feel in my gut. I see racism and its impact in places where before I was blind to it, in both overt and subtle forms, on an individual level and at the institutional and societal level.

How did these lessons occur? In other words, what influenced my shift in thinking? What essential properties were in place that allowed me to come to a new appreciation and deeper level of understanding of racism? First, this new way of looking occurred only after several weeks in Aotearoa. This was not accidental, as I believe that the personal relationships developed were central to the transformation I experienced. Moreover, immersion with Māori over a period of time was also critical. That is, working at Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, socializing with office-mates, and learning from Māori researchers coupled with living with Māori, traveling with Māori, attending cultural events, and engagement with indigenous readings and media (e.g., Māori television, Māori-led Internet sites) *together* contributed to my enhanced consciousness of racism, the imperialist context of research, and ways in which ethnicity impacts Māori. In this way, while I collaborated with Māori in the workplace, conversations about Māori self-determination and culture continued at home. On the weekends, I was able to travel and experience different parts of the country while focusing on places of historical and cultural significance to Māori and reading about stories associated with them. Moreover, there is perhaps no better way to engage with Māori culture than to attend events on the marae (tribal meeting grounds). During my time in Aotearoa, I attended a hui (meeting) on te reo Māori at the marae, a powhiri (welcome ceremony) for Angela Davis, a book launch, a farewell for Linda Smith from Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, and a powhiri for her at the University of Waikato. During these events, some general observations indicated a Māori way of doing things and worldview. These included the central role of song, manaakitanga (showing respect toward guests), and the importance of ancestors and te reo Māori.

For international students and others working with Māori, I believe embracing opportunities to immerse oneself in Māori culture—in fact, actively seeking those opportunities—doing so for a prolonged period of time, and developing open, genuine relationships are key in creating a transformative experience.

White privilege

Before working with a group that is different from one's own, I think it is necessary to explore one's own identity and what privileges come along with it. Before my trip to Aotearoa, I was highly aware of both my Jewish heritage and white privilege. I realize now, in retrospect, that working through my thoughts and feelings about being white was critical in order for me to have an optimal experience in Māori New Zealand. I asked myself the very questions I was later asked by my Māori friends: Who am I? Where do I come from?

From a feminist perspective, it seems critical to interrogate whiteness as an object of inquiry rather than only following the convention of interrogating 'the other': of 'helping', informing and analyzing people of colour. Pākehā need to take a good, long hard look at ourselves. We need to recognize whiteness as an ethnic group membership, rather than as an unexamined norm. When we do not engage with whiteness, it is taken for granted, and privileges associated with it go unnoticed.

Engagement with my own whiteness has led me to think that perhaps an acceptable form of 'help' to people of colour is for the white person to study herself and to reveal the partiality, privilege, and situatedness of her knowledge. But this turning inwards to study the self leads to further questions: where does the voice of people of colour fit within Western science? Is white, Western research absolved of any responsibility to integrate minority voices and goals into its own? Is a 'turning-inward' approach a disservice to people of colour who may need assistance, or does it empower them by lending them agency to fight their own battles? There are no easy answers to these questions, but there appears to be a role for both approaches. It is necessary and important to integrate diverse perspectives into Western models and inquiries,

and, at the same time, for white scholars to study and take into account our place and privilege.

The messages I have received about assumed superiority or inferiority undoubtedly shape my perceptions of reality and influence interactions with others. As a white woman, then, my tasks include realizing ways in which I have participated in oppression and benefited from white privilege and developing a positive white identity based on reality, not on assumed superiority (Helms, 1990). Engaging with readings on white identity development has assisted me in this process. Thus, I came to Aotearoa hungry to explore ways in which I could use both my privileged and unprivileged statuses to combat oppression and eager to surround myself with diverse cultural groups and white allies who have given thought to their ethnic identity and have channeled their energies in a positive way. This process of examining my identity is ongoing and fluid, and at times can be uncomfortable and distressing, but it is also liberating and healing, opening doors to new communities, creating possibilities for more authentic connections with Māori, and strengthening alliances necessary for social change.

Skills needed to develop collaborative relationships

International students and other ‘outsiders’ coming to work with Māori can enhance their cross-cultural experience by fostering certain skills. As mentioned above, one of these skills is engagement with one’s own process of development. As a psychology student, this is a skill that has been ingrained throughout my clinical training. The more you know yourself, the better off you are when it comes to knowing others. Thus, students should ask themselves: Where am I within the process of my own ethnic development? What stereotypes and beliefs do I hold about Māori, and how might these impact my perceptions? What do I hope to achieve, learn, and leave behind? What are my strengths and weaknesses? What are my hopes and fears? The clearer one is in their intentions and stage of development, the more learning and growth will occur.

At the same time that one is looking inward, it is also important to look outward. For example, increasing my knowledge-base about Māori both before and during my visit facilitated my understanding of new concepts and the formation of genuine friendships. I recommend learning at least the basics about Māori history and colonization, the Treaty of Waitangi (see <http://Aotearoa.wellington.net.nz/back/project.htm>), the Māori language (e.g., pronunciation), and the current political and social context of Māori in Aotearoa. Moreover, when engaging with research, reading Linda Smith’s book *Decolonizing methodologies* (1999) is a must; the following two websites on Māori-framed research are also useful: www.kaupapaMāori.com and www.rangahau.co.nz. Undoubtedly, a great deal of learning comes from conversations and dialogue with Māori, but supplementing these discussions with readings enhanced the learning, strengthened the commitment to keep learning and to seek further understanding regarding my experiences.

Beyond these activities, I cannot overemphasize the skill of communication, in terms of both listening and openly sharing. By listening, I mean being genuinely interested in the work one is doing and Māori concerns, and being open to alternative views. At the same time, honestly revealing and talking about one’s own life experiences helped me cultivate collaborative relationships, friendships, and understanding. For example, as an Israeli and Jew, I found that a large part of me connects with Māori notions of one’s ties to the land, the sacredness of the earth, and the importance of whanau (family). I understood the significance of holy spaces, not only to one’s history but to the core of one’s spirituality, and of the pain that destruction brings. I also identified with the notion that legacy is passed from one’s ancestors, a vital part in the maintenance of Jewish culture as well. In this way, I came to recognize both similarities

and differences between my ethnic and cultural background and that of Māori. It is important to honour both, and to foster empathy through this continual process of open communication.

For international students who engage with non-indigenous yet marginal and politicized research, another skill that can further opportunity to support indigenous or Kaupapa Māori research is not only to share personal struggles and triumphs but also theoretical frameworks and methodologies. For example, I found it mutually beneficial to notice and discuss how my background in feminist research and sexual minority research could learn from and support Kaupapa Māori research. As Kovach notes:

The greatest ally of indigenous research will be those non-indigenous ‘methodologies from the margins’ that do not hide from but embrace the political nature of research. The sustained autonomy but continued alliance between such approaches is critical. Mutually beneficial and open-spirited dialogue that is critically reflexive of each other’s practice will be necessary for growth. (2005)

Along with open communication, other important qualities for someone doing cross-cultural work include being humble, respectful, and non-defensive while thinking critically. In this regard, it is helpful to be able to identify and challenge one’s own assumptions. Indeed, neither I nor any other ‘outsider’ is an ‘expert.’ Any data I collected or was privy to was owed to the expertise of the Māori I encountered.

Finally, while the above skills are targeted toward non-Māori who plan to work with Māori, I also found certain skills within the Māori I worked with especially helpful to the creation and maintenance of collaborative relationships. In particular, the willingness of Māori to share was perhaps the single most important (and abundant) quality to our collaboration—sharing in terms of openness in conversation, sharing of websites, books, and knowledge, and giving encouragement and opportunities to join in social activities. This helped foster mutually satisfying relationships; and it is through these relationships, if nothing else, that I was able to grow and develop both as a researcher and as a person.

Conclusion

In reflecting upon my time in Aotearoa, I am struck by how much I gained from this experience. Not only did I learn about Māori history, Māori culture, and Māori-led research, but I have taken away at least two other extraordinarily significant and life-altering things: an inherent change in how I view the world, and relationships that will last a lifetime. In this way, I feel that I have taken away far more than I have given. Thus, a crucial question to consider is what can I give back? Kaupapa Māori research always works under the principle of benefiting the community and creating change, and those working with indigenous communities must consider this question throughout the research process.

An essential step toward empowering Māori includes the public revelation, deconstruction, and challenging of dominant discourse, and how it is produced and reproduced. Māori reclaim their identities and shift cultural consciousness daily by revealing how systems of inequality shape their realities and place in the world. Thus, a major benefit of this experience for me has been the creation and emphasis of the goal of enhanced consciousness; enhanced consciousness of the power and complexity of culture, contextual influences, and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which research has excluded and exploited indigenous people.

Moreover, indigenous people are not only victims—they are agents who resist structures of oppression to reclaim their power. In this way, Māori shape their own research agendas—an agenda that is of a theoretical perspective separate from Western science from which we can examine the unique experience, repression, and resistance of Māori, and diverse ways of

being and knowing. For the international student, the simultaneous opportunity and challenge to learn from and with Māori is filled with rewards, perhaps the most important of which is sharing knowledge and building alliances in the common goal of creating culturally-meaningful change toward a more just society.

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