Methodology Issue

Methodology and positionality: A process of weaving the individual to the collective

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Abstract

Identifying a methodology can be daunting to an emerging researcher, but the key is to start from your place of strength – knowing who you are, your readiness to engage with an in-depth study, and what story is needing to be brought to light for the benefit of society. “Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group” (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 628). Your positionality should guide the research process as it determines your relationship to the study. The key to good research is relationships, and your positionality determines relationality, or your connectedness to the world around you. Positionality brings purpose and helps define your research objective and the tikanga (correct procedures) that align to that purpose allowing the methodology to take shape. This article shares considerations I took as a Pākehā (person of European descent) researcher when choosing a methodological framework that weaves together Indigenous and Western methodologies to honour and uphold the mana (sense of self-efficacy, pride, power) of the people and places where the research was conducted, meet the guidelines of academic study, and represent my positionality and passions.

Determining Research Objectives – The Why

In my work in the Indigenous education space in Hawai‘i and Aotearoa over the last two decades, I witnessed first-hand the shallow understanding many educators have of their own whakapapa (ancestry in connection to place) and the history, language, and culture of the Indigenous people and place where they teach effectively stifling the growth of Indigenous knowledge systems to the detriment of society. Based on this positionality, I determined that my PhD study would provide guidance to teacher education programmes (TEPs) in Hawai‘i and Aotearoa on how to ground in Indigenous knowledge systems. As a Pākehā, I also wanted to clarify how non-Indigenous educators could support Indigenous resurgence efforts by offering context, content, and strategies for us to serve as transformational allies. Based on my personal experiences and relationships – my positionality – I began to envision how a research study might be woven together.

Weaving your Why into your Design

When designing your methodological framework, it is critical that your research objectives are clear, and you continually return to them to ensure the processes you follow allows you to reach your objectives. These objectives serve as the pattern for your weaving providing guidance on materials and process. The next key step is identifying theoretical underpinnings to guide the research design. I determined critical epistemologies calling for "emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression" (Denzin, 2017, p. 8) would help me reach my objectives. By understanding my positionality and the goal of the research, consulting those I had relationships with who were on the frontlines of Indigenous education, and diving into the literature, I determined the most effective and mana-enhancing approach would be to ground in an Indigenous Research Paradigm (IRP) (Wilson, 2003) and weave together Kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophical approach), Kānaka ʻŌiwi (Native Hawaiian), and critical Western epistemologies (Critical Pedagogy, Settler Colonial Studies, and Liberation Psychology).

The methodology began to unfold guided by the book, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (Smith, 1999). I determined oral-storytelling and semi-structured interviews would be most effective approach to gather moʻoleleo/pūrākau (stories, narratives, history), ʻike/mātauranga (knowledge, wisdom), and manaʻo/whakaaro (thoughts, opinions, ideas) from 20 Hawaiian and Māori Indigenous education leaders on 1) a future vision for mainstream TEPs grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and 2) roles non-Indigenous educators can take to support Indigenous resurgence.

In identifying my research participants, I tapped into my personal and professional networks that had been cultivated over the years. I defined an education leader as an individual respected by their community who has dedicated their personal and professional lives to their respective Cultural Renaissance leading to the revitalisation of their Indigenous language and cultural practices and the development of an Indigenous education pipeline. My supervisors were critical in this process. I initially selected supervisors based on personal relationships and their leadership in Indigenous education. My primary and secondary supervisors are Māori, and I had an additional Hawaiian Cultural Advisor. They were critical in helping to develop my participant list and making introductions to individuals I did not have a personal relationship with.

To ensure an IRP was followed in the application of my methodology, the opening of each interview focused on whakawhanaungatanga (a process for establishing relationships). I

shared my background and the intentions for the research study, and then gave ample time for the interviewee to share how they came to be involved in the Indigenous education movement. Through this process, we began to make connections and share our personal stories and aspirations. I then asked the first research question allowing as much time as needed to discuss before moving to the next question and using follow-up or probing questions if needed. I closed the process by sharing the next steps and thanking them for their time and contribution.

In identifying Western qualitative methodologies to analyse the data, I reviewed the historical context and practices of various approaches and determined Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Thematic Analysis would be the most useful while enhancing the Indigenous methodologies. These processes supported me to weave together the narratives and themes that emerged from the interviews.

Weaving the Individual to the Collective

This research has required a deep exploration so that I, as the researcher, continually ground in who I am, my intentions, and how the research can produce "knowledge that documents social injustice, that recovers subjugated knowledges, that helps create spaces for the voices of the silenced to be expressed and 'listened to', and that challenges racism and oppression" (Smith, 2012, p. 199). The challenge I found is many Western practices, when employed in an educational and research setting, cause distress in that they can be extractive and exploitative and do not focus on building respectful, reciprocal relationships; validate oral and other Indigenous traditions of knowledge transmission; and prioritize Indigenous knowledge and associated values and approaches. Therefore, my research design focused on weaving intent, process, and outcomes to honour the mana and respect the cultural values and traditions of the people and places I am honoured to call home. As a Pākehā settler, I have had to unpack my cultural backpack which holds methodological constructs rooted in a DIE (dominate, individualize, and exclude) cultural construct (Laenui, 2000). This cultural unpacking and repacking is a lifelong process, and there have been times where I have filled my backpack with items that were not mine to take – cultural appropriation. I have had to learn the reasons why through the guidance and feedback of mentors, colleagues, and friends as well as experiences that have enhanced my knowledge of Indigenous culture allowing me to more clearly see how my actions have been detrimental. There is a fine line between cultural appropriation and appreciation that is in constant flux depending on the context. Through my methodology, I work to cultivate tikanga – processes and practices – that help me to clarify my positionality and walk this fine line. This has been crucial in the development of a methodological framework.

Glossary

‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language) and te reo Māori (Māori language) are used to convey Indigenous perspectives. While English translations are provided, these words hold much deeper meaning than the translations offer, and experiencing and understanding these meanings is another aspect of the reserach process that should be considered in your research design. An H denotes a Hawaiian word and a M a Māori word.

‘Ike (H) – knowledge, wisdom

Kānaka ‘Ōiwi (H) – Native Hawaiian

Kaupapa Māori (M) – Māori philosophical approach

Mana (H/M) – a person’s sense of authority, influence, self-efficacy, purpose, pride, and belonging; mana can also refer to a person’s influence, power, status; a supernatural force in a person, place, or object

Mana‘o (H) – thoughts, opinions, ideas

Mātauranga (M) – knowledge, wisdom

Mo‘oleleo (H) – stories, narratives, history

Pūrākau (M) – stories, narratives, history

Tikanga (M) – correct procedure, custom, habit, lore, method, manner, rule, way, code, meaning, plan, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context

Whakaaro (M) – thoughts, opinions, ideas

Whanaungatanga (M) – process of establishing relationships

References

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