

# Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into research practice

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge within contemporary research practice. It has arisen from an opportunity to work with I-Kiribati students undertaking an Australian tertiary education.

Given the problem of undertaking research within this group it quickly became evident to me that there was a need to utilise a research approach that enhanced understanding of the authentic lived experiences of the I-Kiribati students. This has led to development of the Authentic Human

Engagement Framework which provides the underpinning guide to the research process. This framework combines the traditional ethnographic methods with contemporary Four Seasons of Ethnography by Gonzalez (2000). This approach was inspired by Māori ancestors and a desire to more deeply understand my I-Kiribati cousins. This approach has enabled deeper understanding of the I-Kiribati experience and the researcher's journey which could not have been obtained by using western scientific approaches alone. It has provided an authenticity, balance and a harmonious way of being to establish a research partnership which enabled the participants to be present throughout the research process.

## Introduction

I had a unique opportunity and a responsibility to develop an understanding of the I-Kiribati students as a combination of my employment and undertaking a research dissertation. From this unique perspective I had a strong feeling that this story must be told and that the voices of the I-Kiribati student must be heard. My mother is from New Zealand and my Father is Australian. There has always been a mystery about my New Zealand connections as my mother was relocated to Australia at a young age. During this research process I learnt that my grandfather was of Māori decent (Ngati Huri) and that my great grandmother was a teacher and a scholar of Māori ways, famous for surviving the Mount Tarawera eruption in 1886. This was the largest volcanic eruption in the history of New Zealand which killed many people and buried the Māori village of Te Wairoa. I feel that it is important to mention this here as it provides insight into my connectedness with the Pacific region and Pacific people. My heritage

has no doubt influenced the way in which I interact with the participants. Am I repeating my ancestors work in another time and place? I began this journey with uncertainty only knowing that this story must be told. However according to Māori tradition we do not walk alone in our lives our ancestors known and unknown surround us and guide us in our life journey (Simmonds, 2009; Pihama, 2001). I have no doubt that my research path was influenced by my Māori ancestors which has enabled me to gain insight to my authentic self.

## Background

Choosing a methodology which is acceptable to participants and academic requirements is challenging. There is value in not repeating colonial mistakes and allowing Indigenous people to participate in what is written about them. An important objective of this study was to enable the voices of the people to be heard. Due to my position within the group as a student adviser it was imperative to choose a methodology which recognised and allowed for the description and interpretation of

the situatedness of the researcher (Cavanagh, 2010). During the early stage of immersion I began to sense the importance of listening to the student voice if any meaning or understanding was to be gained from their experience. Such meaning is of significance as there is little research concerning I-Kiribati people and their immigration and educational journeys; and without this understanding it is impossible to adequately provide support to students living an international educational experience.

To achieve this objective I turned firstly to the traditional ways that Western research has sought to gain meaning from the lives of others. For many hundreds of years Indigenous cultures have encountered anthropologists who have studied, documented and collected cultural histories (Smith, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Early anthropologists employed qualitative methodology, however traditional methods rely upon the notion that the researcher is in control over the knowledge and its interpretation. Qualitative methodology

according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) allows for the exploration of phenomenon and interactions in order to reach findings which include thoughts feelings and beliefs. Throughout the colonised world the term research is associated with the worst attributes of imperialism and colonialism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). These early transcultural research experiences often had a devastating effect on the local people being discovered (Smith, 2002). Consequently there remains a distrust of the western researcher as qualitative research has represented an objective view of the dark skinned other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Demosthenous, 2010).

In recent times there has been a call for research to be conducted using methodology which provides a voice to participants allowing the true experience of the people to be heard (Rigney 1999; Demosthenous, 2010). This is particularly important for Indigenous people in order to avoid colonial power dominating Indigenous knowledge. Anthropologist in the past have struggled to undertake traditional

scientific approaches, this is mainly due to the nature and context of the research. Within the naturalistic setting Western instruments are inappropriate, and fail to produce significant understanding from the participant perspective. Often only natural communication techniques provide the necessary tools for learning leading to enhanced understanding (Keesing & Strathern, 1998). Further the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies state that "at every stage, research with and about Indigenous peoples must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the Indigenous people" (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), p. 1).

Feeling dissatisfied that the Western approach was appropriate for the research problem, the researcher and the participants. I began to explore alternatives to traditional anthropological approaches, with Ethnography and Autoethnography catching my attention early into the research development. Ethnography according to Fetterman

(1998, p.1) is “the art and science of describing a group or culture”. Further, Denzin (1997) describes ethnography as the recording of lived experiences from the real world. Ethnographic research requires immersion within a community for a period of six months to two years documenting the observations and interactions of social life (Fetterman, 1998; Keesing & Strathern, 1998). As participant perspectives and interpretations are important the Ethnographic design allows for the descriptive voices of the participants to be heard (Watson-Gregory, 1988). I then found Gonzalez’s (2000) approach which incorporated Ethnography and Indigenous science, this approach instantly made sense to me and the puzzle pieces finally began to fall into place. I realized that I had to explore ways in which Indigenous knowledge has been utilised within research practice, and how I could use this approach to understand the I-Kiribati student experience.

Indigenous knowledge is also known as native science and according to Cajete

(2000) describes ways of thinking; knowing and acting which have been developed through interaction with the natural world. The discontent with colonised methodology has led to the development of Maori ways of knowing in Aotearoa/ New Zealand called Kaupapa (e.g. Robertson, Royale, & Demosthenous, 2005). According to Bishop (1998) the obsession that Western researchers have with neutrality, objectivity and distance, removes the Māori people from the development of knowledge. Further the utilisation of such concepts to assert authority increases the segregation of the participants from the research knowledge and disregards the contribution of Maori people, removing them from participation. Kaupapa allows for connectedness and self-determination and includes ways of knowing that according to Heshusius (1994 cited Bishop, 1998) are a mode of consciousness which reorders the meaning of relationship eventuating in a sense of connectedness and a reduction in the focus of the self. Further Indigenous epistemology provides a

“culturally mediated lens based on participation with nature” (Cajete, 2000, p. 4). Thus providing a tool through which the research becomes inclusive rather than an exclusive process.

Martin (2003, p. 6) discusses the importance of the ontological and epistemology stand point within Australian Indigenous research practice. Highlighting that ontology provides “an awareness and sense of self, of belonging and for coming to know our responsibilities and ways to relate to self and others”. The Quandamooka peoples of South East Queensland ways of knowing according to Martin (2003, p. 7) are related to not only land and people, but also to entities. These entities include all of the elements existing within the natural environment including the “waterways, animals, plants, climate, skies and spirits”. This is a relational ontology and through this approach connections are maintained and there is a balance of reciprocal interaction (Arbon 2008; Robertson, Demosthenous & Demosthenous, 2010). According to Martin (2003, p.



9) "ways of knowing inform ways of doing and being". Further Martin (2003) discusses the three main constructs of Australian Indigenous approaches including establishing knowledge of entities and their relationships, and then developing and implementing ways of maintaining the relationships between these entities.

The Four Seasons approach developed by Gonzalez (2000), originates from South American Indigenous epistemology and cultural ontology. It applies four guiding ideals to the Ethnographic data collection process. These ideals describe the elements of the Ethnographic approach and include; natural cycles, the interdependence of all things, preparedness, harmony and balance. This approach likens the phases of the research process to that of the seasons, describing the interaction of the researcher with the participants, establishing relationships and providing a guide for the appropriateness of data collection and interpretation. The incorporation of the Western Ethnographic approaches

with an Indigenous epistemology provides a way of meeting the needs of the Western academic community while respecting Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. In summary this approach according to Gonzalez (2000) recognises spring as a period of preparedness, laying foundations, gaining permissions and positioning the self. Summer represents growth, data collection and rebellion; autumn is for making interpretations, compiling data and preparing to leave the field. Winter provides a time for retreat in order to write Ethnography and speculate about future research.

### Methodology

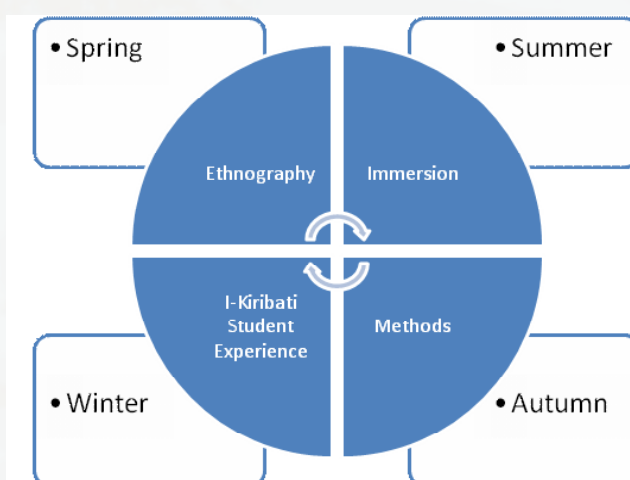
The methodological approach utilised within my research is most effectively described as the process of engagement between the researcher and the participants in order to achieve a meaningful and valuable Ethnography. It provided a way of interpreting my feelings and experiences during the research process, and a framework which is congruent to my experience of the natural world. The framework

depicts an adaptation of the Four Seasons approach to Ethnography by Gonzalez (2000) to the research question and topic. To establish the I-Kiribati student experience throughout their time studying in Australia, there are a series of lenses through which the researcher will view the experience. During the seasons there are different objectives which are met as the engagement develops and changes. This is presented in Figure 1 below.

The model which I have called the Authentic Human Engagement Framework shows that during spring the approach is determined, which moves then to summer when there is a commitment to immersion within the cultural group. During autumn there is a focus on data collection ensuring that the researcher is adequately prepared for winter. As the season of engagement changes and moves around the outside of the model a new lens is created through which the researcher gains a different perspective, establishes new knowledge and undertakes a different part of the process. The model is circular

in order to incorporate the natural cycles of the world, the interdependence of all things, balance and harmony. Indigenous cultures across the world have incorporated the circle as a representation of the cycle of life, there is no beginning and no end it is all one experience as we move through time and space and into the eternal.

**Figure 1. The Authentic Human Engagement Framework**



### Benefits and limitations

While there is much that has already been learnt since anthropology began, there are exciting new developments which enable a merging of traditional and Indigenous approaches, allowing for increased depth, awareness and a culturally appropriate research methods for Indigenous people. Further there is harmony and balance when participants are not forced into artificial interview situations and settings. Gonzalez

(2000) offers an approach which can be incorporated into many Ethnographic settings which relate to an external group member undertaking research

within established cultural and

social groups. However the researcher must have an understanding of the four natural seasons which do not occur in many parts of the world, there are many countries where there is only one season or where there is only a wet and a dry season. Utilising this notion I have interpreted this approach and adapted it to my understanding of natural cycles of the seasons, which has led to the development of the Authentic

Human Engagement Framework. The seasons within the Framework are interchangeable with the individuals own authentic understanding of the natural world from which they originate.

The seasons are not as important to the I-Kiribati (the participants of my research) as in South America, which has informed the seasons approach to research, living in the Pacific close to the equator means only small changes in seasons. Life

for the I-Kiribati relates to the sea, birds, song, sun, stars and the moon, similar to that of the Quandamooka people of Australia (see Martin, 2003). Indigenous researchers from this way of knowing, being and doing would be encouraged to adapt the Authentic Human Engagement Framework to their unique understanding of the natural cycles of their environment, thus ensuring authenticity of the human research instrument. However the seasons discussed do not relate to the

physical climate they are metaphor for the psychological and spiritual cycle of engagement and disengagement.

## Conclusions

The Authentic Human Engagement approach enabled the exploration of rich data which was directly from the engagement with the participants. It also allowed for the learning that comes from the experience of working with I-Kiribati students to be included. Further the approach has provided a way of interpreting the natural development of the human instrument during the research process. This helped to gain deeper awareness of the personal process that is experienced during prolonged engagement and also has provided a basis from which to interpret learning. Moreover, the Indigenous epistemology has enabled a greater depth of understanding due to the ability to incorporate all interactions as meaningful, as well as allowing for the learning to move with the natural cycle of development. This ensured that the process was never forced, establishing a mutual sharing of knowledge and

understanding.

I believe that there is value in utilising this approach; in particular with helping research students to understand the cycle of Ethnography, thus providing a platform from which to interpret and monitor their own personal Ethnographic journey, while providing a link to traditional qualitative methodological approaches and methods. The combination of Western and Indigenous science has the power to change the way the world engages with and interprets cultural and social groups for the purposes of research. This approach could be utilised to develop and enhance cross cultural research methods which meet academic requirements, the needs of Indigenous research participants and Indigenous research students.

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