Issues and Processes in Indigenous Research

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This article presents a range of issues pertaining to research in indigenous communities. Research is a viable means to mobilize and reempower indigenous people by providing "empirical ammunition" for validating realities and supporting political initiatives. Traditional approaches relying on inferential statistics can only remotely capture the everyday social realms of indigenous societies. The tensions generated from conflicting perspectives have stretched the boundaries of traditional research and led to new sensibilities that emphasize multimethod research approaches. Acceptance of broader conceptualizations of scientific inquiry leads to the evolution of paradigms and techniques that enable social scientists and policymakers to hold a clearer understanding of indigenous lifeways and issues. This article explores issues related to indigenizing the research process and specific challenges related to trust, access and protocol, reality and authenticity, and appropriate research methods.

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The traditions of social science and research spawned belief systems and epistemological strategies that enabled scholars to construct meaning in the world around them. They placed a great emphasis on explaining phenomena through theories that were rigorously assessed using empirical observation. Highly prescriptive methodologies were created that were consistent with specific theories or concepts in question (Morrow, 1994). Ideologies of social science that emerged from the scientific-industrial age continue to influence commonly held notions of rigor and quality (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 2002). The residual effects of objectification and "value neutrality," nomothetic and etic science based on probabilities, and single causal modeling and narrow positivistic sensibilities define our ideas of good science. Social science research, as we know it today, emerged from this Western scientific orientation.

Theoretical formats and paradigms emerging from this era are remiss when it comes to understanding indigenous phenomenology (Kahakalau, 2004). Traditional approaches relying on inferential statistics can only remotely capture the everyday social realms of indigenous societies. Yet, alternative methods, including grounded theoretical approaches that serve to provide holistic impressions of phenomena, are deemed "soft" and lacking in credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The tension generated from conflicting perspectives has stretched the boundaries of traditional research and led to new sensibilities that emphasize multimethod research approaches.

Bolland and Atherton (2000) described a heuristic paradigm that accepts all research methodologies and does not privilege any ontology, epistemology, or method. They proposed a relativistic approach that suggests there are no universal standards of right or wrong and that all knowledge is dependent on the subjective knower. The acceptance of broader conceptualizations of scientific inquiry leads to the evolution of paradigms and technique that enable social scientists and policymakers to hold a clearer and deeper understanding of indigenous lifeways and issues.

The traditional period of positivism and associated methods and paradigms has done much to damage the reputation of social science in indigenous communities and has created challenges for subsequent generations of researchers—both non-indigenous and indigenous—to erase the perceptions of anthropologists, sociologists, and others who exploited these communities' trust and goodwill. Moreover, it has been difficult to convince indigenous leaders of the utility of empirical

data in terms of protecting their rights, resources, and traditional and customary practices. As Smith (1999) stated, indigenous people are on an important quest to recover their languages and epistemological foundations. Research is a critical means to reclaim their histories.

This article presents a range of issues and themes pertaining to research in indigenous communities. In any indigenous society, especially those that continue to be subjected to colonization, members are afflicted by severe social and health problems. Research is a viable means to mobilize and reempower indigenous people by providing "empirical ammunition" for validating realities and supporting political initiatives. Research success is as much about process as it is about method. It is as much about rapport as it is about science. It is as much about timing as it is about contractual commitments. Such dichotomies pose many challenges for indigenous research.

Gaining Trust

Many communities, especially indigenous ones, have an inherent mistrust of government and university researchers. The mistrust is drawn from a history of exploitation from outsiders and a general community impression that results from studies that unilaterally benefit the academic careers of researchers. Communities have acquired a political sensitivity and savvy that requires researchers to explain how the study will benefit residents. Overcoming the barrier of mistrust is the first major challenge in conducting research in indigenous communities. A researcher may possess an immense amount of technical and methodological knowledge and have the right motives for engaging in community-based research but still be denied entry into a community. Residents bent on preserving their cultures and communities are not impressed by credentials and technical know-how.

In locales where communities are tightly linked through cultural or political affiliation, there is a high level of exchange between civic leaders. Researchers acquire reputations based on who typically contracts them (state, private developer, community), the rigor of their work and quality of their product, the applications of the study results, sensitivity to community protocol, and the extent to which they make long-term commitments to a community. In many situations, the

reputation of the researcher precedes them, and this determines their level of acceptance. For example, research consultants in Hawai'i who are frequently contracted by developers for environmental impact assessments have at times been systematically locked out of indigenous communities opposed to development projects. On the other hand, research consultants who traditionally work in indigenous communities and have applied a participatory-action approach leading to tangible benefits are often sought after and embraced by these communities. Level of compensation can be considered a determinant of motivation. For example, some residents may question the motivations and community commitment of high-paid research consultants, whereas those consultants working on a pro bono basis will not be accused of "doing it for the money."

Access and Protocol

In indigenous communities, there is an array of culturally based protocols that must be applied when initiating a research project. Contacting and gaining endorsements from the "right" persons (often respected elders or *kūpuna*) will determine the degree to which a researcher is able to access other critical informants. Communities—and indigenous ones are no exception—are fraught with dynamics related to family affiliation, length of stay, history of personal contact, political orientation, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnic relations. It is requisite for researchers, through reconnaissance, to explore and gain an awareness of these dynamics. Negotiating ties with one sector may inadvertently close the door with competing sectors in the community and obviate a cross-sectional analysis.

Engaging a community in research requires many of the same strategies as community organizing, such as exhibiting culturally appropriate mannerisms and adopting a nonintrusive style. In indigenous communities, maintaining objectivity through social distance is counterintuitive to gaining the trust of residents through a process of social immersion.

Social distancing does not permit a researcher to embrace the culture and its intricacies and subtleties, let alone gain access to residents who are inherently suspicious of strangers. Abiding by cultural protocol—such as asking permission rather than imposing oneself, sensitivity to nonverbal situations, sharing family

background and genealogies especially if they are tied to the geographic area, speaking the dialect and using idiomatic language, and generally building a base of commonality—is a means to establishing rapport and trust.

Thrusting uninvited onto the community scene with a research agenda is a form of "carpetbagging." This seemingly standard approach in earlier years has generated widespread skepticism in indigenous communities and has subsequently created barriers for well-intended researchers committed to gathering critically needed data. Under such conditions, researchers must lay the groundwork for research by convincing community leaders that empirical data can be vital ammunition for promoting policies and planning decisions aimed at community preservation and social development.

In Pacific cultures, social reciprocity is a critical aspect of interpersonal relations. From an indigenous perspective, the economy of speech between negotiating parties is a good predictor of balance and parity in a working relationship. The role of the researcher is to listen, to acknowledge the intelligence and wisdom of the residents, to incorporate indigenous perspectives into the research methodology, and to involve a working team of residents at every phase of the research process. "Politically enlightened" communities strive to develop true partnerships with researchers by providing critical information that guides the research process.

In many Pacific societies, strangers greet one another by reciting their family genealogy. This protocol is significant in that it serves to inform each party of the other's lineage and pays homage to one's ancestors. While there are varying degrees of this practice—from the highly ritualized to a less formal and indirect inquiry into one's family background—the practice remains strong. In Hawai'i, for example, the typical first questions of a stranger are, "What high school did you graduate from?" and "Are you related to so and so?" (with the same surname). These questions serve to tie a person to a community or island and to gather important information on his or her family background. Such contextualization serves as a means to appraise the person.

Researchers are not immune to this practice. Despite a researcher's credentials and academic qualification, indigenous residents are keen to learn more about the researcher's values and motives, which are often linked to place and family of origin. For many indigenous people, credibility is derived from the integrity of the individual and less so from academic degrees.

Trust and social bonding are contingent on the extent to which people share common features. Behaviorally disparate parties must overcome huge obstacles to know enough about the other to trust them. Establishing trust is facilitated by behavioral and semantic concurrence. Fluency in the native language when it is the first language of residents breeds trust and removes major logistical problems related to translation and conceptual equivalence.

Striving for Authenticity

The community of researchers working in indigenous communities must recognize that society is indoctrinated with a colonial version of historicity, the rendition of which serves to justify colonial mastery. Much of the accepted narratives on indigenous people are really the narratives of colonialists and cultural *hegemons* (Touraine, 2001). In the Pacific, indigenous claimants have emerged to assert contending visions of the cultural past. There is a revitalized struggle occurring globally among indigenous people to manage, define, and promulgate their own histories and cultural realities.

This legacy—and subsequent movements to alter previous conceptions—has politicized the research process. Indigenous communities are becoming aware of the power of research and its utility and are assuming greater control over who is involved and how this research is conducted. Past attempts to document the lifeways of indigenous people were fraught with cultural biases, misinterpretations, and even deliberate efforts to deceive foreign observers as a form of mockery. Communities are taking corrective action by supporting research that promotes authenticity.

Authenticity has many different attributes. It refers to a phenomenon that acquires meaning by its placement within a dynamic ecology. Authenticity is circular rather than linear, has differential manifestations and timeframes, and is intuitive—even precognitive. It is about people's interpretations of, and reactions to, phenomena that are drawn from deeply embedded values and culturally constructed notions of reality. Researchers bent on finding "truth" must reconsider mythology, lore, and

superstition as terms used to describe and denigrate indigenous beliefs. That is, a phenomenon that is not easily demystified and apprehended through measurement is often deemed to be imaginary.

In many indigenous Pacific cultures, spirituality and metaphysics are essential elements in an ecology that supports human well-being. Western social science does not have available methodologies capable of apprehending indigenous spirituality and other empirically elusive phenomena. Authenticity is brought to bear through methods that are adapted to capturing the inherent qualities of spirituality and other phenomena.

While objectivity may be viewed as critical in any research venture, maintaining personal distance impedes the comprehension of authentic culture. Even researchers who manifest excellent rapport and behavioral sensitivity must spend volunteer time with subjects of inquiry to observe a spectrum of behaviors because behavior is situational and multidimensional. Immersion in an indigenous context provides researchers with an opportunity to see the essence of social interaction. Relying on multiple data sources enables researchers to coalesce empirical themes and draw whole and more complete impressions.

Appropriate Research Methods

The positivism that emerged during the modern era is gradually being replaced with heuristic paradigms promoting notions of data discovery and triangulation (Bolland & Atherton, 2000). This multimethod approach is well suited for securing rich descriptions of indigenous life conditions. Statistics drawn from multivariate analysis are useful in determining broad relational patterns between factors. Statistical results represent the tip of the phenomenon and should be placed amid other forms of empirical data as a way to cross-validate impressions.

Some researchers who subscribe to a multimethod research approach use survey results as the central force that drives the acquisition and interpretation of qualitative data. This is problematic if measures are unreliable across cultures, data processing is prone to systematic error, samples are unrepresentative of indigenous

populations, and so forth. Methods used in data gathering should not be staged as an incremental process with one method taking precedence over another. Rather, they should be stand-alone activities contributing to a broad, multidimensional dataset that is triangulated or woven together into mosaiclike community profiles. After all, communities are nested, layered, multidimensional systems; single data source profiling is reductionistic.

Other than the typical quantitative survey and qualitative key informant methods, there are highly viable research methods we have learned to use with indigenous communities. One such method is Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, which we have used to chart behavioral patterns related to traditional and customary practices, subsistence patterns and resource areas, sacred sites, and population changes (Minerbi, McGregor, & Matsuoka, 2003). In other studies GIS has been used to demarcate land ownership boundaries and jurisdictions, zone designations, service locations, and catchment areas.

GIS is an indigenous-friendly technique because it is highly participatory and visual. One data-gathering exercise we have used is to have resident participants identify significant areas by placing color-coded dots on large topographic maps, each color representing a different cultural activity. The size of the dot relative to the map does not reveal confidential information to the public. Data acquired in this manner are transformed into GIS maps and used to assist social planners and decision makers in determining the location and extent of cultural impacts related to proposed development projects. The technique resonates with indigenous informants because it is used to collect data that are "placed based."

A major challenge in indigenous research is settling on a time frame that satisfies the expectations of funders or contractors and addresses community issues related to the time-consuming process of building trust and rapport. Researchers must find a pace that moves the study forward to meet contractual agreements while sensitive to participant involvement. For indigenous participants, who may not be used to being subjects of scientific inquiry, it may require more time and persuading to garner a sample large enough to validate results. Westernized cohorts who understand the utility and power of empirical data are generally less resistant, and thus time requirements are easier to meet. Although research plans are posed at the outset of a study, it is critical to maintain a degree of flexibility. If a methodological approach does not resonate well with participants, then

alternatives must be considered. In some cases, even pretesting instruments does not always provide investigators with enough predictive information regarding their applicability.

On multiple occasions we have been a part of a larger communal research process that involved civic and indigenous leaders, heads of government agencies, and business leaders from the geographic areas of interest. The study or task group served to develop a conceptual framework, reviewed questionnaires for language and content, publicized the study, organized community involvement, assisted in interpreting study results, and helped develop an empirically based action plan. From beginning to end, indigenous leadership was enmeshed in the research process. The depth of their involvement encouraged communities to assume ownership of the data and to realize the significance of research in terms of policy development and social planning.

The joint involvement of multiple stakeholders ensures objectivity and a government-facilitated planning and action process. Constituents create a context for multiperspectivism, buy-in, and ultimately the validation of indigenous issues and practices.

Conclusion

Indigenous communities are faced with the "double whammy" of experiencing disproportionate social problems and having a paucity of empirical data to support policy and program initiatives aimed at improving quality of life. The quality of existing data is also a subject of concern, as much of the data were collected by colonial researchers/ethnographers who imposed hegemonic principles on indigenous experiences. To a certain extent, the decolonization of methodologies (Smith, 1999) requires abandoning established epistemologies and perspectives and creating new methods from the inside out. That is, we must accept the relative nature of the culture-related pathology and well-being and create and align methods with elements of the experience to best represent them. These representations must be woven together as a way to restore the integrity of indigenous cultures and histories and counter the systematic fragmentation that has served to dehumanize and disempower indigenous peoples.

A reconceptualization and reconstruction of modes of scientific inquiry can occur when we reflect on the realities facing indigenous people. For example:

- The systematic dismantling of indigenous cultures through colonization must be considered when we conceptualize well-being. Historical legacies can be a basis for understanding posttraumatic reactions that extend well beyond our current conceptions.

- Ancestral memory, drawn from centuries of oppression, provides plausible explanations for mistrust and nonconformance—especially when conformity means buying into a system that replaced an indigenous one eradicated through colonization.

- Collective people have an inherent ecological orientation. This orientation has led to the development of highly sophisticated social economies that provide safety nets and elevate resiliency.

- There are limitations in creating social dichotomies (e.g., indigenous vs. Western) given the norm of cultural diversity in Hawai'i. New paradigms promoting multiple perspectivism are more appropriate given our complex social realities.

- Indigenous families are superorganic structures existing across time. Indigenous families alive today are merely "here and now" manifestations of a long lineage of genealogical associations. There is a strong recognition of the temporal nature of human existence.

- A stable indigenous community is an organic system that undergoes a lifecycle. As such, we must be mindful of the long-term effects and outcomes of community-based programs and realize that program evaluations are designed to measure short-term outcomes.

Each of these realities has implications for research designs and can serve as a starting point for creating new methodologies and techniques. The ultimate goal of indigenous research is the elevation of awareness and sensitivity by authenticating experiences for the sake of creating meaningful policies and practices that promote the best interests of indigenous peoples.

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