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Research for Counselling Practice Bridging Between Cultures

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Abstract

In many professional fields, including counselling and education, there have been significant efforts to bring practice and research closer together. However, for each situation and each new practice problem and responsive research question, there is bridging to be done. This paper takes the form of an autoethnographic essay: it tells a story of the first author's engagement in a small research project that offered opportunities to negotiate her way toward collaboration and respect as a researcher in her own community. As a school counsellor, she held concerns for the positioning of a small group of Pasifika students in the school. This research aimed to consider how the school might do better in serving the educational interests of these students and their families. The article focuses on the shaping effects of the research for the first author's professional and personal life. Its argument is that her experiences as researcher have profoundly shaped the counsellor it is possible for her to be.

Keywords: school counselling, research, cross-cultural, Tongan parents, autoethnography

As a newly appointed school guidance counsellor, I found myself witnessing the stories and experiences of a small group of Tongan students in ways that had not been available to me as a classroom teacher.¹ Hearing these students' stories and experiences from the position of counsellor, I began to understand, in different ways, how some school practices had not always had the inclusive effect intended by the school's stated ethos. As I heard the students' stories, I began to appreciate that while their families and the school held similar hopes for the students' educational success, in other ways there were distances between their home and school lives that the young women were

navigating daily. I began to realise that I had little understanding of what it is like to cross a bridge daily between different cultural beliefs and practices.

Other school staff had developed a similar awareness of the positioning of these students and in response had introduced some new initiatives in a bid to offer more inclusion to Tongan students and their families. However, it occurred to me that the people most affected and with the most knowledge about navigating between cultural differences had not been consulted about these developments. The question of what the girls and their families might say if they were consulted led to a small research project (Waters, 2008) in which I sought their perspectives.

The processes of research, particularly the consultations with Tongan students and parents, led to my taking some halting steps on a personal journey part-way across a bridge between cultures. In doing so, I started to appreciate, in a more embodied way, that ideas I had previously viewed as *common sense*, and upon which I made personal judgements, have their origins in culture. This realisation has opened up space to do things differently in my personal learning and in my counselling practice. In becoming a researcher with and for others, I have learned much more than I anticipated about myself, my work, and my life.

Some Cultural Differences

The school in which the study took place is an upper-decile school with a special character based on Christian values and beliefs. In contrast to some schools in other parts of New Zealand, a small number of the students (5% of the school roll) are Pasifika. Many of these students' socioeconomic circumstances are very different from those of the majority of students. Their cultural lives are also very different. There are many ways in which this particular group of students whom I meet in my work as guidance counsellor are required to inhabit different worlds in and out of school. As a teacher, I knew this, but in the course of the research I gained a more meaningful understanding, which I have taken into my work as a counsellor.

The literature had told me that the collectivist base of a Pasifika society contrasts with the more individualistic base of mainstream New Zealand (Alefaio, 2007; Metge, 1990). The dominant culture, reflected in the institution of school, favours competitiveness, independence and individualism (Cahill, 2004; Jones, 1991). The school curriculum in New Zealand produces individualism by rewarding individual thought, questioning the teacher, and critiquing taught knowledge (Jones, 1991). Yet generally,

Pasifika children are brought up to put the community first by accepting their allotted place in society and respecting unquestioningly the authority of those with a higher rank (Campbell, 1992; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Jones, 1991). On these terms, Pasifika children tend to be discouraged from expressing themselves in adult company, thus creating a pattern of communication between adults and children that does not particularly encourage curiosity or the critique of taught knowledge (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Jones, 1991). While it would seem that traditional practices of teaching, in which the teacher imparts knowledge, would advantage Pasifika students, the more general curriculum expectations produce and place value on individual thought and achievement.

Pasifika students thus tend to be asked to stretch between two worlds. The school expects them to work independently at their schoolwork and to complete their own homework, while at home their identity is largely defined through their membership of and responsibilities to the extended family. Relationships with and commitment to the extended family and wider community and its activities shape their daily lives.

Although in my own personal history there are strong links to family and community, I am nonetheless influenced by the centring of individuals inherent in pālangi cultural practices. As a member of the dominant culture, the stories that have produced my identity as a pālangi middle-class woman can easily be taken for granted and it is inevitable, despite my efforts to resist, that I will draw on them. Indeed, the practices and beliefs of a dominant culture are usually understood as *common sense*, rather than as unique constructions of that culture (Black & Huygens, 2007; Tatum, 2007). These dominant practices and beliefs have also infiltrated and been taken up by other cultures in Aotearoa, and at times are difficult to recognise. In my learning in this project, I endeavoured to step away from the familiar knowledges and practices of my own culture as I sought to understand more of the experiences of those from a culture that was largely unfamiliar to me. This stepping away from the familiar was and is a constant challenge, as the stories from my culture pervade daily life.

Cultural Considerations for the Research

From the outset, I expected and hoped that this research would open my mind to understandings that my culture and life experience had not made available to me. The process of the research constantly provided opportunities for me to be accountable, reminding me that I could not afford to be complacent: there was too much that I did not know. Davies (1993) suggested that we do not see the shaping lens of the pane of

glass through which we are looking until the glass is shattered: the metaphor of the pane of glass encapsulates my experience of gaining a glimpse of the cultural lenses through which my own life has been shaped.

My challenge in embarking on this research was to act on my good intentions in ways that acknowledged that I was a cultural outsider. I was conscious of some of the limitations I brought to this project and that these had the potential to have colonising effects. The words of the Tongan researcher Vaioleti (2006) reminded me of my responsibilities: “Pacific peoples have endured years of disempowering research, with little social or economic improvement in their health and education” (p. 22). Good intentions notwithstanding, research has the potential to further marginalise Māori and Pasifika people (Anae, 1996; Bishop, 2005; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Smith 1999; Vaioleti, 2006).

Researchers in the past have taken stories of research participants and have submerged them within their own stories, and retold these reconstituted stories in a language and culture determined by the researcher. As a result, power and control over research issues such as initiation, benefits, representation, legitimisation and accountability have been traditionally decided by the imposition of the researcher’s agenda, interests and concerns on the research process. (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 103)

As I engaged with the relevant literature, I found over and over that indigenous writers were protesting the colonising effects of what had gone before in the name of research.

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

Increasingly, I found myself questioning whether I should proceed with the research project. However, the daily presence of young Tongan women in my counselling room and the positions they inhabited in the school structure were a constant and compelling reminder of my professional responsibilities. To do nothing would be to fail to respond to the school’s and the counselling profession’s value of social justice (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002). The question then became how research could be carried out in a manner that was respectful of cultural difference, and thus non-colonising.

While the literature offered many cautions, such as those cited above, it also offered some guidance about how I might proceed in order to engage in the kind of culturally respectful research to which I aspired.

If researching ethically is about respecting human dignity, then it is critical that the process is culturally appropriate for the participants. It is imperative that Pacific research ethics (protocols) emerge from Pacific world views in order to keep synergy with the methodology and to protect the integrity of participants as Pacific cultural beings. (Vaiotei, 2006, p. 29)

Research that is based on respectful practices seeks to research “with” rather than “on” people in ways that treat them as “competent authors and accountants of their actions” (Burman, 2001, p. 262).

Respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct. (Smith, 1999, p. 120)

Writing about his experiences as a Pākehā researcher involved in research on Māori education, Glynn (2007) advocated that non-Māori researchers should seek to be “unknowing rather than expert, responsive rather than controlling” (p. 3) and be more involved in listening rather than talking. He described seeking both permission from and the support of kaumātua for a research project by following and being conversant with the appropriate cultural practices. Following Glynn (2007) and Cahill (2004), I took the step of seeking advice from the school’s Pasifika mentor, who took up something of a brokering role between the students and their families and me as researcher. She also offered to draw on the skills and knowledge of her uncle, who holds a position of influence in the Tongan community. I deeply acknowledge and express my appreciation to both Vasi and her uncle for their support of this project. The story of learning that unfolds below would not have been possible without their contribution.

A Personal Journey

From these more general perspectives, I now turn to the ways in which the process of the research has shaped my personal understandings and thus my professional life. I believe that acknowledging my own learning is part of the reciprocity Smith advocated, and part of offering accountability. A second piece of writing, in preparation, uses the more traditional research format to report participants’ perspectives.

When I embarked on this project, I thought of the research process in an academic sense. I didn't realise it would be an emotional and extremely thought-provoking journey, taking me down difficult paths that have led me to confront ideas I have taken for granted for many years. I started to understand the ways in which this research was forcing me to ask hard questions about my cultural understandings and values that I had not faced so inescapably before. I use the word *inescapable* advisedly to describe the sense of relational responsibility I experienced and continue to experience—toward the participants and to the school's Pasifika mentor, Vasi, and her family. The generosity they offered so moved me that the research was and is always present for me.

Learning Collaboration

Vasi, whose role as the Pasifika mentor sees her working with the school's Pasifika families, had a central role in facilitating this project. Warm and mutually respectful, my relationship with Vasi is not without complexity. As an older woman, age gives me a position of seniority in terms of Tongan culture. In addition, I taught Vasi when she was a student at the school, and we have each had to adjust to a new relationship as colleagues, but again I have a senior role. I did not want to take advantage of these positionings in a relation of power, preferring to offer inviting position calls (Davies & Harre, 1990; Drewery & Winslade, 1997) that might allow us to develop a more equitable relationship. At the same time, there was much for me to learn through our working relationship; Vasi is well-respected by the Tongan community, and has an insider's knowledge of the culture and skills in navigating between cultures. Gradually I came to appreciate that the warm response I was receiving from the Tongan community was the result of Vasi's involvement.

Diary entry, October 4²

I find myself wondering if the conversations I had would have been possible without Vasi's help. I think her presence and support positioned me well in terms of inviting participation and the stories that were told. I rode on Vasi's coat tails, so to speak. It was her support that has given me credibility—it is not something I have earned. It is so humbling. It was an epiphany for me to realise just how instrumental Vasi has been in helping my work gain acceptance and credibility in the Tongan community. I reviewed Fran Cahill's work. She talks about a "broker"—someone with high status in the community who supported her work and introduced it to the participants and hence

gave it credibility. I have read this several times—so why did it take so long to fully appreciate Vasi’s role in my work? I think this process of research opens up new learning in quite a different way to academic reading. On one level, I know these things, but on another, it takes the research to really start to understand.

I had read Smith’s (1999) comment that “respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle” (p. 120). However, as I reflected on my new understanding of Vasi’s cultural contributions through her positioning in the Tongan community and her personal support of me, I came to see cracks developing across the pane of glass that had centred me in the research project. As the cracks developed, I began to realise that the centring of myself as researcher was a product of a dominant story of individualism. With Vasi alongside, opening doors to research conversations, my “existence” as a researcher had become more possible:

Our selves, our minds—and, indeed the society in which we live—are all co-created projects, never solo performances in which we have star billing and others are mere background. We celebrate the other, for without the other there is no existence for us either. (Sampson, 1993, p. 142)

Vasi’s contributions helped steer me toward the kinds of respectful research for which I had hoped.

Noticing Privilege in My Positioning

The personal journey of learning was uneven but ongoing. Before I had met the mothers who were participants in the study, another moment of reflection resulted in another crack in the pane through which I had been looking at the world.

Diary entry, August 2

Vasi has been having difficulty contacting the Tongan parents to make a meeting time. One mother is working at two jobs so is difficult to contact. Vasi has been unable to contact either of the other two mothers. I am wondering if I have the right to impose myself and my study on their busy lives. How middle class of me to think Vasi and I could make a time to visit together...and it would be simple to arrange. I think it is not just “others” who need to understand how it is for people to experience being marginalised. I need to get out of my books and discover reality.

Continuing on the theme of the privileges of my own positioning that were becoming more visible to me, the following day I wrote:

Diary entry, August 3

I have been concerned about how to keep privilege out of my research—but it is there. I think it has always been important to me to meet people on equal terms, to accept people on their own terms, and to value them for who they are. I have resisted discourses around image and judgement despite, or because of, their presence in my childhood. The stories are very present, however, and show themselves in my working environment, socially, etc.—all examples of further marginalisation. I thought I had stepped out of the “box” but find I am actually in it—and I don’t like being there. The prospect of moving out is also uncomfortable.

These reflections on privilege formed part of my preparation for the initial visit Vasi and I made to Anau, one of the mothers I interviewed. Ahead of this visit, I had considered how I could acknowledge my gratitude for the gift of her time in such a busy and demanding life. I wanted to take something that was practical and did not position me as benevolent. After considerable thought, consultation, and conversation, I decided to take a bag of home-grown mandarins. Along with my mandarins, I took the sharpened awareness of how much larger than me this project was. I believe I did enter Anau’s home with a sense of humility and a genuine desire to do all I could to step out of the position of authority conferred by the school. If I entered with humility, I left with even more.

Diary entry, August 10

As I left, Anau gave me the most beautiful Tongan bag which is sitting in front of me. It is really beautiful. My bag of mandarins suddenly felt very inadequate. I said to Vasi I felt bad about it. She gave the giving a Tongan name, māfana, and told me it “means she has warmed to you.” So while I feel undeserving because I went to ask a favour and was given a most beautiful gift that speaks of Tonga and has been crafted with care, skill, and love, I also feel humble to think she has warmed to me. Perhaps I did leave authority at school.



The bag (kato) is a gift I treasure and reminds me of the opportunity I had to learn something of the Tongan values of reciprocity and respect. It symbolises the commitment I have to honour the contribution that the school's Tongan community has made to my research.

The effect of reciprocity is such that when people will give koloa (in this case, time and knowledge) they will expect it to be respected and honoured, and to be used well. (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 26)

Consultation and Learning

I was further humbled a few weeks later when I read the transcripts of interviews with two mothers and with a group of students and realised there was an expressed awareness, not just of the daily challenges facing Tongan families, but also of the strategies that would be helpful in overcoming these challenges. The mothers had many ideas about steps that could be taken by the school to support their daughters in achieving their potential in the school system. This led me to wonder why we had not approached them earlier.

Diary entry, September 10

Why, when there is a problem, do we not go to the people directly affected and find their thoughts on how to get through it? I think it has to do with expert knowledge—and school is a place where this is alive and well. I think it helps to preserve the dominant position and continue the oppression.

Smith (1999) had expressed similar thoughts when she stated:

Communities are the ones who know the answers to their own problems, although their ideas tend to be dismissed when suggested to various agencies and governments. (p. 159)

The mothers commented on some of the obstacles to communication between their community and the school. In terms of communication between schools and their communities, the traditional venue for parents to be heard is at the parent-teacher meetings. Of these, Sela, the mother of a student, said:

As for the meetings for the parent-teacher meetings. The bad side of it, the parents can't really face that. They don't really want to face the...if the teacher is telling you about the bad side of your daughter. They don't want to hear it.

By contrast, when speaking of the *fiefia* night—a cultural celebration in which girls perform traditional dances and music and which many of the Pasifika parents attend—Sela said:

It's like the warmth that the parents have within them when they see their child performing. It's like as if they are proud, it's the warmth feeling, the proudness you get when your child is performing, and you can share it with others as well. It's just parents—like you'd be proud seeing your son up on stage or your granddaughter or your grandson. It's just that warmth feeling, and that's why they like turning up to those sorts of things, because they know that their kids are performing.

In these contrasting stories of parent-teacher interviews and the *fiefia* night, Sela helped me understand that if schools are to hear the voices of Pasifika people, we too may need to walk part-way over the bridge between cultures. Understanding something of the effects of our privilege, authority, misunderstandings, and judgements, we might find ways to position ourselves better so that we might listen to, accept, and take seriously the views and understandings of people from cultures other than the dominant one. Gorinski and Fraser (2006) cited Beveridge (2004) as stating that a school-community relationship “characterised by reciprocity, trust and respect” (p. 5) is vital for schools, students, and families. If there is to be a better understanding between Tongan families and the school, Sela’s words showed me the importance of forums that are judgement-free and that foster two-way, open communication that will create the space for respect for difference and for shared understandings.

A further opportunity for learning occurred through my reflections on the mothers’ perspectives on the Polyfest, a significant annual event for Auckland schools and Pasifika communities, a time of fierce competition and much celebration. Our school’s support for students’ participation in this event had been seen by the school as contributing to bridging between Pasifika families and the school. From one mother I heard a story of pleasure, a story that I might have anticipated. When talking of the effects of her daughter’s participation in Polyfest, she said: “She’s proud to be Tongan because she’s happy to talk. She likes to find out more about the Tongan background. My background, my husband’s background. She’s much happier now.”

Another mother, who had more than one daughter at the school and in our Polyfest group, was less enthusiastic, telling me that she found it very stressful to have to make the costumes the girls wear at Polyfest: “It’s too much. Too much for me... It’s a very hard job to do this.”

As I read the transcript later, I witnessed myself becoming a little defensive about these latter comments. I knew the effort that two of the teaching staff put into helping with the costumes, staying behind after school to help the girls. However, as I reflected further, I realised that the parents of girls in the school drama production are not expected to make their daughters' costumes, nor are the cast members responsible for them. I found myself questioning why there was a different expectation of Polyfest participants and their parents than of school production participants and their parents. I also recalled the pressure that many of the Pasifika families are under in the workplace and how little time they have outside work and family commitments. And yet, they provide transport, music, and cultural expertise for the performance, and they make costumes for the Polyfest. I saw now how this mother's comment on her own situation had drawn my attention to an inequity of which I had previously been unaware. I understood how the school was better resourced to support performances in dominant cultural traditions.

Putting Learning into Action

By the time I met with the students, these reflections and new understandings were adding to my sense of responsibility for the ways in which I would put the learning into action. Such an opportunity arose spontaneously during the research conversation with the group of Tongan students at school. One means the school uses to communicate with parents is the weekly school newsletter. The students talked about the newsletter during the group research interview. One student commented:

I give my mum the newsletter and stuff but she still doesn't really understand some stuff. But of course, she's from Tonga.

As the discussion about parents and newsletters continued, the students suggested that if the newsletters were written in Tongan, they thought their parents would be more likely to read them. I consulted with Vasi and together we agreed which of the recent events could be celebrated by inclusion in a Tongan newsletter. Currently evoking pride in the Tongan community was the appointment of a Tongan student to the position of Head Girl for the following year. Vasi, with the help of her aunt and the students, went on to compile a school newsletter written in Tongan. We all experienced pride in this first Tongan-language newsletter for our school; it included photographs and was eye-catching. It was posted to the parents. Many students told me of their parents' reactions when they received it. Several parents posted copies to relations in Tonga. One mother framed her copy.

When I heard the reactions to the newsletter, I once again experienced a sense of humility. The school's gesture of taking a step towards bridging understanding had given pleasure and pride to many of the Tongan families. As I reflected on this series of events, it seemed to me that the act of listening and responding to what was said was an important way of showing respect. I am reminded of Kaethe Weingarten (2010), who said that "small actions need not be trivial" (p. 8). Placed in the context of the challenges the Tongan community faces in Aotearoa, the production of a newsletter was in some ways a relatively small action for the school to take, but one which was meaningful and brought a sense of being valued.

The opportunity to produce a newsletter was only one focus of the learning the students offered me. I also witnessed how they not only cross a cultural bridge each day, but they are also able to extend a helpful hand to others who are crossing different bridges. I asked:

Has anybody got anything else that they would like to tell me about how we can help girls who are Tongan at [school] feel as though their culture is accepted and that their identity as Tongan young women is affirmed in the school?

From them came the response:

Maybe not just the Tongans. Maybe we could involve the other cultures as well. Maybe they might feel left out. The Tongans are the majority but we're not the only ones. And if other cultures realise that we're trying to help them, maybe their parents are having the same problem as our parents are, like not understanding what is happening in the school as well. That could help, maybe.

I experienced a great sense of warmth and awe when I heard these words, and later when I read the transcript. While I had been focusing on what I perceived to be a problem for Tongan students, it was evident the students' perspective was not limited to their own lives but took in the wider landscape of the school community and others who may be similarly positioned. Not only did they recognise that cultural, language, and institutional differences make it difficult for parents to communicate with school, but they also suggested that the same problems that their parents were experiencing were also likely to be affecting others.

I found myself wondering whether or not I would have been as generous or had the same insight and empathy for others had I shared their experiences. I thought about the length of time it had taken me to gain the beginnings of an appreciation of how it

is to navigate between cultures. I realised that the kinds of privilege I had experienced had blinded me to understandings that the students, through their daily navigations, had already arrived at. When I thought of the different positioning the students and I had in the school hierarchy, I once again experienced a surge of humility. Despite their youth, the students were much more experienced bridge-crossers than I was. I now appreciate that in many ways I am the learner and they are my teachers—at the same time as my professional position means that I must take responsibility for my own learning and for contributing to the students being positioned well for their learning at our school.

Research for Counselling Practice

There was much that I had not anticipated when I began this research journey. I had hoped that the research would somehow help me to respond more effectively, in my role as guidance counsellor, to the Tongan students whose lives, I could see, took on particular complexities in our school. That hope has been fulfilled, in part. The work is ongoing, of course. I had not anticipated that in fulfilling that hope I would also be offered such a rich opportunity to learn about myself and for my work. Earlier in this article, I referred to Davies' (1993) metaphor of the pane of glass that is not visible until it is in some way cracked or shattered. How did I prepare myself to see the glass through which I was seeing, and so to get to see differently?

While at one point I noted in my research diary that I needed to “get out of my books and discover reality,” it was also by going to books that I prepared myself to learn. My reading about Pasifika students in education would have convinced me of the responsibility I had to learn, had the regular presence of the students in my counselling office not already convinced me. That reading was a step toward the bridge. And then I read the words of New Zealand researchers (Bishop, 2005; Glynn, 2007; Smith, 1999; Vaioleti, 2006) about the potential for harm when research has colonising effects. I listened to both their cautions and their guidance.

A further kind of bridging was going on for me here, bridging between books that told stories of others' experiences, and my experiences in my work and life, and my learning directly of others' experiences. And I was not alone in this bridging: Vasi's role as a cultural broker was critical to the possibilities of this practitioner research study. She was further supported by members of her family. I also consulted regularly with my online colleague-in-support, Jane Harkness, who helped me bridge between, first, the dilemmas I was identifying; second, what I already knew; and third, what it might

become possible to know and do when I noticed privilege and then positioned myself with humility and an intention to learn. Again, Davies et al. (2006) offered a metaphor that describes this stretching into new experiences as both my own life and the lives of others became more visible to me. As a researcher, I was a subject “in process, vulnerable to inscriptions that may be opaque to her and yet developing the power to make the discourse and their inscriptive powers both visible and revisable” (p. 101). The inscriptive power of dominant discourses in my own life, the life of our school, and the lives of students and their families was made more visible through this research project. As I saw the ways in which dominant cultural discourses worked out in my life, I was able to make revisions that were more fitting with my hopes for my practice.

The personal challenge for me is to continue to be a bridge-user, and not to allow myself to fall back on the familiarity of the cultural understandings of a dominant Eurocentric society. The kato given to me by Anau is a constant reminder of the responsibility I have to continue to be a bridge-user and to be open to learning more of other cultural beliefs and understandings in order to honour those who have contributed to this research project and all that they made available to me to learn. The process of stepping on to the bridge through this research project has opened my eyes to other ways of viewing the world. This has had impacts on my counselling practice, many of them in small ways. For example, when I meet Pasifika families in my guidance counsellor role, I have found that building relationships by talking about small everyday events, away from any problem, helps to establish mutual understandings. I can then become a conduit for families, opening access by bridging between them and the school. It is through paying attention to that which is important to the other that understanding can be built.

We must...descend into detail...if we wish to encounter humanity face to face.
(Geertz, 1973, p. 133)

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Notes

1. This account is told in Averill's voice, but has been written by both authors. based on Averill's Master of Counselling research, which Kathie supervised.
2. Averill's diary took the form of an online research discussion with another MCouns research student, Jane Harkness.

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