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Autoethnography as a Decolonizing Methodology: Reflections on Masta's What the Grandfathers Taught Me

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Abstract

As an Asian graduate student and a Native professor at a U.S. Midwestern Predominantly White Institution, we reflected upon Masta's (2018) article, *What the Grandfathers Taught Me: Lessons for an Indian Country Researcher*, to examine the decolonizing aspects of autoethnography. Masta's use of autoethnography to explore her experiences provides a deeply personal view into the phenomenon of living and researching Indigenous in an America that is inherently White in character, tradition, structure, and culture. The use of participatory and constructivist Indigenous autoethnography places the lived experience of an Indigenous woman at the center of the study, using the Indigenous lens to respect the cultural values, beliefs, and teachings of a community that remains largely overlooked in Eurocentric research. Such an appreciation and understanding led us to argue that autoethnography is a promising decolonizing methodology which has the potential to inform decolonization and social justice movements.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Decolonization, Indigenous

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Autoethnography as a Decolonizing Methodology: Reflections on Masta's *What the Grandfathers Taught Me*

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As an Asian graduate student and a Native professor at a U.S. Midwestern Predominantly White Institution, we reflected upon Masta's (2018) article, What the Grandfathers Taught Me: Lessons for an Indian Country Researcher, to examine the decolonizing aspects of autoethnography. Masta's use of autoethnography to explore her experiences provides a deeply personal view into the phenomenon of living and researching Indigenous in an America that is inherently White in character, tradition, structure, and culture. The use of participatory and constructivist Indigenous autoethnography places the lived experience of an Indigenous woman at the center of the study, using the Indigenous lens to respect the cultural values, beliefs, and teachings of a community that remains largely overlooked in Eurocentric research. Such an appreciation and understanding led us to argue that autoethnography is a promising decolonizing methodology which has the potential to inform decolonization and social justice movements. Keywords: Autoethnography, Decolonization, Indigenous

As an Asian Vietnamese female student taking my first graduate-level research methods course in a U.S. Midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI), I, Dung Pham, was introduced to autoethnography by Dr. June Gothberg, a female Native professor. Dr. Gothberg is among the less than 1% Native American/Alaskan Natives full-time professors in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES; 2018) or what Masta (2018) identifies as "a token . . . a statistical anomaly" (p. 841). I am also underrepresented, being among the less than 1% Vietnamese international graduate students in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, IIE; 2019). Both being female non-Whites in a PWI gave us common ground and created scholarly space for us to share our life experiences and explore the ways of knowing and the construction of knowledge pertaining to social science research. We were able to challenge each other "to think of new imaginings of research design that deconstruct power and privilege to benefit knowledge, communities, and participants" (Stewart, 2020, p. 18). Through our conversations, we found that we situate our research using a critical theory lens that seeks to promote social democracy, justice, and human emancipation and uncover and challenge power structures; we are both for using research "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 242). As such, we were especially interested in research methodologies that align with our research agenda and considered that autoethnography can potentially be one of such methodologies. Our shared status of being minority in a PWI and dominantly White society and our ontological and epistemological beliefs that are deeply rooted in a critical theory lens as researchers inspired us to consider autoethnography a decolonizing methodology.

It was the fall semester when I was taking the Fundamentals of Evaluation, Measurement, and Research course. Dr. Gothberg (personal communication, September, 2018) shared "many students who enter this course have little background in methodologies and methods and often their novice understanding is guided by a post-positivist paradigm." It was

the day before the start of Thanksgiving break. Dr. Gothberg challenged the class to read Masta's (2018) article, *What the Grandfathers Taught Me: Lessons for an Indian Country Researcher*, and consider whether autoethnography was *real* research. I spent the entire break reflecting on Masta's paper, considering the method, journaling my thoughts, and creating a lengthy response. After I submitted my response, Dr. Gothberg reached out to continue the discussion.

The following is our exploration of the decolonizing aspects of Masta's (2018) article. Masta's (2018) use of autoethnography to explore the experiences of "being a Native person in mostly White space" (p. 841) and "conducting Indian Country research with the Indigenous teachings" (p. 842) provides a deep interrogation of living and researching in the "Western/European dominant research community" (p. 842). Using autoethnography, Masta was able to use her personal experiences in her Indigenous community to inform and frame her research practice. She was able to put "the Indigenous experience at the center of the research rather than in relationship to the dominant [White] group experience" (Masta, 2018, p. 843). This is in contrast to most of the research on issues related to the Indigenous communities in the U.S. and around the world for which research has been "conducted *on* Indigenous people, culture and lands without the permission, consultation, or involvement of the people being researched" (Ormiston, 2010, p. 50). In her plenary address at the American Evaluation Association, Fiona Cram (2011) shared that was what "universities rarely remember, communities never forget," further sharing on the mistrust between New Zealand's Indigenous population and those in *ivory towers*. In Canada, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), 2014) states,

> Research involving Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been defined and carried out primarily by non-Aboriginal researchers. The approaches used have not generally reflected Aboriginal world views, and the research has not necessarily benefited Aboriginal peoples or communities. As a result, Aboriginal peoples continue to regard research, particularly research originating outside their communities, with a certain apprehension or mistrust. (p. 109)

Clearly, "[non-Indigenous] scholars used the experiences of Indigenous people for professional and financial gains and did not use their findings to better support Indigenous communities" (Masta, 2018, p. 843). Using Indigenous methodologies that *give voice to the voiceless*, such as autoethnography, places the lived experience of Indigenous people at the *center* of the study, using the lens of Indigenous people and respecting the cultural values, beliefs, and teachings of the communities. "Indigenous research methodologies push against the dominant practices that sometimes unwittingly and sometimes purposefully, will replicate, reinforce, and perpetuate settler colonialism," which has exerted ongoing profound influence on the structure and practices of Indian Country educational research (Masta, 2018, p. 843). Decolonizing research ideologies and practices gives opportunities to dethrone the dominant discourse of knowledge production and loosen the grip of neocolonial paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In the context of settler colonialism in the U.S., it was a common practice that scientific inquiry served as an arena for *objective* representations of the lives and experiences of non-White people to White people (Masta, 2018). Such a research practice, by and large, reinforces the White and colonial ideology while marginalizing the non-White and colonized, thereby pushing them further from each other on the power continuum. By contrast, in Indigenous research practices using methodologies such as autoethnography, "those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected

to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens" (Richards, 2008, p. 1724). Thus, the autoethnographic account Masta (2018) presented focuses on the right side of the power divide – "the powerless to whom we should be directing our sociological gaze" (Delamont, 2007, p. 2). Given that the issue of non-White versus White or the more colonial versus the non-colonial that Masta (2018) touched on has long been an issue of public concern and interest, her autoethnographic account can be of interest to a larger community beyond "those who already know and love the author" (Walford, 2004, p. 412). While giving the author scholarly space to tell her personal story, it has the potential to inform decolonization and social justice movements that have been occurring throughout the history of the U.S.

In this paper, we present our critical reflections on Masta's (2018) autoethnographic work using a post-colonial theory lens through which we look at social problems and issues. We also seek to highlight the potential of autoethnography as a decolonizing methodology, bring it to attention to researchers, and demonstrate the ways to conduct autoethnography to decolonize the social science research arena that has long been White territory using Masta's work. Our ultimate aim is to encourage future researchers to consider using autoethnography to assist the decolonization and social justice movements in the academic sphere by providing them with initial yet fundamental understanding of how this could be accomplished. The article is organized as follows. We begin with a brief review of autoethnography and its history and development in the U.S. context with its issues of colonization, power, and decolonization. Next, in light of this background understanding, we identify and discuss the elements in Masta's (2018) work that speak to decolonization with a view to demonstrating how autoethnographic research could be used to assist decolonization and promote social justice. Additionally, we further highlight the strategies to ensure the propriety of autoethnographic research that were brought up by Masta (2018). Finally, we close the paper with our personal reflections and future directions for research that seeks to embrace human emancipation and social justice.

Autoethnography as a Decolonizing Methodology

Autoethnography is a description and systematical analysis (*graphy*) of personal experience (*auto*) to make sense of cultural experience (*ethno*; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Seminally, it was referred to as a form of account about the culture of a group given by its own cultural members (Heider, 1975). Using the *self* as the principal research venue, autoethnographers reflect on "[their] personal life . . . pay attention to . . . [their] physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions . . . use . . . systematic, sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience . . . [they]'ve lived through" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). Given these, autoethnography is inherently a self-reflexive practice. The critical and cultural aspects of this methodology have placed autoethnography as one of the forceful and compelling research methods to assist in decolonization processes (Chawla & Atay, 2018).

Decolonization is a process by which Indigenous people dismantle and deconstruct Eurocentric ideologies that impose superiority and privilege over Indigenous communities while honoring the Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Cull et al., 2018). In the United States, decolonization can be dated back to the colonial era of European colonization of North America in 1500s. These early Euro-American settlers considered their knowledge, values, and beliefs superior and sought to eliminate Indigenous people and their civilization (Steinman, 2016). This unbalanced power dynamic permeated everything from politics to academic, the colonization spanned "far beyond just the physical appropriation of land" (Masta, 2018, p. 842).

In the 1990s, the growing recognition among academics about the dominance of Eurocentric thoughts and approaches in social research led to the critical movement in ethnography and the emergence of autoethnography (Chawla & Atay, 2018). In 1998, Harding shared:

> Eurocentrism is thought of as an expression of individuals' false beliefs and bad attitudes, just as are related cases of racism and sexism. These beliefs and behaviors of individuals are more adequately understood as the consequences, not the causes, of institutional, societal, and civilization (or "philosophical") social structures and discursive assumptions. (p. 12)

Much like the current movement in the Facebook group, *White People Doing Something* (2020), the solutions were not focused on empowering non-Whites but rather on a White solution to fix things. Similarly, academic critical ethnographic works were still mostly produced by White researchers rather than the non-White minority groups as originally intended by the critical turn (Chawla & Atay, 2018). The problems with this included the violations of the ethics of doing research as aforementioned and the failure to fully account for the experiences of the researched—the minority, oppressed, marginalized, and underrepresented groups such as Indigenous people. Autoethnography emerged as a potential research method to solve these problems.

Autoethnography encourages "autoethnographers to write against harmful ethnographic accounts made by others—especially cultural "outsiders" [historically, majority and White researchers]—who try to take advantage of, or irresponsibly regulate, other cultures [minority and non-White groups]" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 4). In this regard, autoethnography supports social justice, a common value that most societies strive to achieve. That an *insider* researcher does research about their own communities would add critical perspectives to the popular stories told by *outsider* people, the important difference between etic and emic research. Lumen Learning (2020) explains:

> An etic view of a culture is the perspective of an outsider looking in . . . The etic perspective is data gathering by outsiders that yield questions posed by outsiders. An emic view of culture is ultimately a perspective focus on the intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society, often considered to be an 'insider's' perspective. . . . The emic perspective serves the purpose of providing descriptive in-depth reports about how insiders of a culture understand their rituals. (para. 2, 4)

One controversial example is depicted in the historical White retellings of the U.S. Thanksgiving Day. "These [stories about the first White settlers in the U.S. coming from England on Mayflower ship and their celebration and expressing of thanks for their first successful harvest] were not the stories of my ancestors, although my teachers treated them as such" (Masta, 2018, p. 841). There are similar misalignments between the stories about and told by the Indigenous Māori people and the mainstream English-speaking people in New Zealand. The ethnographic accounts given *by* the Māori people, *about*, and *for* them encompass the feelings and senses of being "insiders" to understand the long and rich history of the tribes involving "hardships, humor, struggle, war, and lived experiences . . . the interconnectedness between whānau [extended family], hapū [clans], and iwi [a tribe or confederation of tribes]" (Whitinui, 2014, p. 465). Gaining an in-depth understanding of the Indigenous culture sufficiently to depict and live the lives of Indigenous people, unfortunately, remains elusive to the "outsiders." That is why Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may ascribe different

interpretations to the same story (Whitinui, 2014). The misalignments reflect "unethical and incomplete" research practices (Adams et al., 2015, p. 11) and thus should be corrected.

Decolonizing Aspects of Masta's (2018) Autoethnographic Account

It is obvious throughout Masta's article that she sought to use Indigenous worldviews from the teachings she learned from her extended family to inform and frame her research on issues related to the Indian Country and to put the experiences of Indigenous people at the heart of the inquiry. She felt that autoethnography made these possible by creating scholarly space for her lived experiences of being Indigenous and being connected to Indigenous communities. Subsequently, this allowed her to promote the Indigenous system of knowledge and culture and challenge the Eurocentric approach to research. As Masta admitted,

> applying the Seven Grandfathers lessons was my attempt to challenge the colonial nature of research . . . is a direct response to the practices of Western-centric research . . . an intervention in an academic structure that almost always privileges Western-centric perspectives. (pp. 850-851)

Masta's (2018) situating of her study and selection of research method [autoethnography] showed signs of her strong desire to decolonize Indian Country research which has long been Eurocentric/White dominant. Inspired by her experiences of being Indigenous in a White space, she reflected on the tension of being both Native and an academic. In her paper, she mentioned not fewer than three times that she was struggling to navigate the tension between what she learned at school, which was inherently White in its structure and culture, and what she learned at home, which was Indigenous in nature. The tension, unfortunately, was not unique to her. As she cited Smith's observation, "many indigenous researchers have struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own and other indigenous communities, with whom they share lifelong relationships on the other side" (p. 847). She chose a research agenda that "centered on decolonization" (p. 848) to allow her to conduct research as part of her academic life while honoring her Native identity and her people's ways of life, showing that autoethnography can be used as a strategy to navigate the tension. Additionally, her systematic observations about Indian Country research conducted by non-Indigenous researchers reinforced the injustices related to an etic research approach that continues to colonialize and marginalize the Indigenous communities to which she belongs. She explained that doing Indian Country research requires "using methods focused on making the Indigenous experience centered, and not in comparison to the White experience in the US" (Masta, 2018, pp. 841-842). Further, she considered autoethnography an inclusive research method and a means to decolonize the Eurocentric research practices to give sufficient room for Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

What does it mean to make the Indigenous experience centered and "what does it mean to rely on Native culture and knowledge when designing and conducting research?" (Masta, 2018, p.845). Masta used a number of strategies to ground her research in the Indigenous system of knowledge and culture and center the experience of Indigenous people and communities while challenging the Eurocentric worldviews on research. These included (a) consulting key members, parents, and teachers of the Indigenous communities, (b) respecting their perspective and wisdom, (c) using a culturally responsive form of member-checking that appreciates and gives the research participants—Indigenous people the opportunity to decide which information they feel comfortable to disclose to non-Indigenous people, (d) using storytelling to collect data, considering it supportive of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom,

and (e) using analytical frameworks that take the positionality of Indigenous people and communities in Western society into consideration to guide the data analysis.

Masta's use of a theoretical framework that acknowledges and honors the values of the Indigenous communities to guide her research can be compelling evidence of her burning desire to decolonize the Indian Country research territory, which is historically White dominant and Indigenous marginalized. Using Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TCRT), she centered the positionality of Indigenous people and their experiences as marginalized groups in a White dominant space. TCRT allowed her to capitalize on the Indigenous worldviews to design, implement, and analyze her study. As Masta noted,

> This is exactly what I've [she's] been waiting for. Using this theory makes so much sense. It's focused on Native positionality, addresses the sovereignty/colonization issue, and recognizes that marginalized is a structural issue, not just an individual issue. This theory feels respectful, like it really does take into consideration Native perspectives. It's not just a White theory applied to Natives. (p. 847)

The *Seven Grandfathers* Masta learned from her family reflect the Indigenous ways of knowing and being by sharing origin stories and the standards of conduct for her Indigenous community. For example, the story sharing the idea "to cherish knowledge is to know wisdom" (Masta, 2018, p. 844) taught by her aunt encourages Indigenous people to cherish Indigenous knowledge in every aspect of life. Applying this lesson, Masta used a participatory approach to her autoethnographic study that involved consulting, respecting, and trusting the perspectives and wisdom of Indigenous community members, adding a layer of Indigenous credibility and trustworthiness to the study. Notably, her conversations with the research participants and other Indigenous community members did not solely focus on getting the data for her research project but showed her deep care and respect for them and their perspective on how her research could best serve them and their communities. "Although we [they] shared no tribal affiliation, I [she] respected their perspective and wisdom as Native community members" (Masta, 2018, p. 845). This is genuinely in stark contrast with the research done by Eurocentric "research poachers" whose interest lie in how to best exploit the experience of the Indigenous participants for professional and financial accomplishments rather than in how their research can benefit and better serve the Indigenous people and communities (Masta, 2018, p. 843).

Additionally, Masta's efforts to put the Indigenous teachings and values above the traditional Eurocentric standards of doing research, which historically are set by non-Indigenous scholars, showed her strong determination to disrupt and dismantle the Eurocentric research world. One of the Indigenous worldviews she sought to put into practice was to express kindness to her research participants by sharing her own stories of being an Indigenous in a White educational space in exchange for their sharing of their own experiences. This practice, as Masta was well-aware, may clash with the conventions of doing research that consider the researcher's personal sharing a potential source of bias. Oftentimes, in the traditional research world such as that dominated by the positivistic world view, "while it is unlikely that researchers will treat their participants poorly, it is uncommon for researchers to express generosity toward their participants" (Masta, 2018, p. 845); it is a common practice that researchers keep a distance with the participants to present an *objective* account of and "*God's eye view*" on social phenomena (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1662), resulting in research being done *on* rather than *for* the researched. Despite her awareness, Masta was determined to follow her Indigenous lesson "to never ask for something you would not give yourself" (Masta, 2018, p. 845). She also considered that "this [her personal sharing with the participants] did

not compromise my [her] research, it made it stronger" (Masta, 2018, p. 850). Such a courageous action of an Indigenous researcher challenges the currently accepted scientific inquiry practices created and imposed by non-Indigenous scholars. Hence, her autoethnographic account can be used to destruct the colonization of Eurocentric norms of practices in the educational research space while embracing and reinforcing a more balanced and holistic approach to doing research. This approach [autoethnography] is more balanced with respect to the power distribution between the researcher [White/non-Indigenous people] and the researched [Indigenous people]. Subsequently, it disrupts and dismantles Eurocentric research paradigms that are inherently White and non-Indigenous owned and dominant, a type of social injustice in the academic sphere created and reinforced by colonization. Autoethnography that honors the Indigenous perspective is "a particular type of holistic approach to research design and implementation" (Masta, 2018, p. 851).

Finally, Masta's complete integration of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom, the *Seven Grandfathers* lessons, into her study reflected her determined efforts to show non-Indigenous researchers proper ways of doing Indian Country research, making them more "widely recognized" (Masta, 2018, p. 841). Specifically, Masta used the *Seven Grandfathers* lessons to guide her navigation of the researcher-participant relationship in collecting data as aforementioned and her data analysis strategies that embraced the voice of the research participants – Indigenous community members. One of the *norms* of analyzing Indigenous research data can be to act bravely and speak the truth "in all situations, no matter it costs to us [Indigenous researchers]" (Masta, 2018, p. 848). Following the teaching, she was faithful to her participants' experiences even though reporting such experiences could place her at professional risk. As such, doing Indigenous research is speaking truth to power (i.e., the non-Indigenous communities, which historically refer to the mainstream White group in the U.S. context). In her study, Masta applied practices to break the power dynamic between researcher and participants, treating the participants equally and considering them a valuable source of knowledge. "I [she] saw myself [herself] as equal to my [her] participants—not "better than" or more knowledgeable" (Masta, 2018, p. 849). Masta's constructivist speaking truth to power approach can potentially inform the design and implementation of future research, encouraging the use of Indigenous research methods to decolonize the educational research space that is historically dominated by ethnocentric worldviews and methods. Ultimately, as discussed elsewhere in the paper, the effort to achieve social justice is not confined to the oppressed and marginalized but also should be made by the society at large, and autoethnography strives to "make life better" for all (Adams et al., 2015, p. 2).

Conclusion

Masta (2018) demonstrated how autoenthnography has the potential to decolonize historical ethnocentric research methods and brings new ways of knowing and understanding the world and people in it. Her strong desire to establish her identity as an Indigenous researcher who was keen to align her research practice with her *Indigenous* "ways of knowing, doing, and being" (Whitinui, 2014, p. 468) expanded the practices that "disrupt and dismantle Western knowledge systems" (Masta, 2018, p. 843). Even after entering academia, she did not abandon her cultural and racial identity as an Indigenous person, but rather, used her background experiences to do research on and *for* her people while fulfilling her professional goal of obtaining a Ph.D. degree in the educational spaces of White people. Being an Indigenous American to Masta (2018) is a *gift*, the "gift of indigeneity" (Whitinui, 2014, p. 460), to take pride in and to give to others by making them better understand the Indigenous cultures and lives. Her attempt to become "culturally liberating human-beings" (Whitinui, 2014, p. 456) should be taken as complementary rather than hostile to the research done by non-Indigenous

people in the way that it would give outsiders etic perspectives and support collaboration to include the emic perspective. Autoethnographers do not only "speak against" but also "provide alternatives to" the dominant and taken-for-granted culture (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3).

As a non-White, non-American Asian student in the U.S. and a non-White Native American professor at a PWI, we continue to experience and learn about power distributions and how an *insider emic* perspective could present the reality of cultural lived experiences in the form of qualitative research. Masta's (2018) work provided a complementary and important piece of knowledge about Indigenous ways of knowing, ways of living, and ways of approaching knowledge generation. She inspired the telling of our own stories about being Yellow, Red, Black, or Brown in a White dominant space using autoethnography and inspired us joining her to "use autoethnography as a tool to remove conceptual lenses, immerse myself [ourselves] in systems different from the Western-centric systems I [we] was [have been] trained in, and challenge the hegemonic nature of Western research practices" (Masta, 2018, p. 844). Masta gave us the confidence to consider self as "interesting enough to write about in journals, to teach about, to expect attention from others" (Delamont, 2007, p. 5) that paves the way to embracing self in future research.

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