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Becoming Culturally Proficient Qualitative Researchers by Crossing Geographic and Methodological Borders

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Abstract

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Keywords

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Becoming Culturally Proficient Qualitative Researchers by Crossing Geographic and Methodological Borders

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This article explores how novice researchers develop a scholarly identity as they cross geographic, cultural, institutional, identity, and methodological borders throughout their studies, experiencing insider, outsider, and in-between positions. It hypothesizes that researchers become more culturally proficient through their fieldwork and self-study. The autoethnographic narratives address the social justice issues encountered by two early career researchers who increased their cultural proficiency and self-awareness as they moved across multiple cultural contexts. By shifting back and forth between insider, outsider, and in-between, the researchers became more culturally proficient, developed their voices as researchers, and practiced inclusivity by amplifying marginalized voices. Their self-reflective analysis of autoethnographic writing speaks to early career and graduate qualitative researchers who must recognize their positionality and their placement on the cultural proficiency continuum to be effective scholars in cross-cultural research.

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Culture defines our humanity and identity. Our cultures explain and express our worldview and our worldview is an expression of our beliefs and core values (Birukou et al., 2013; Cole, 2003; Lenard, 2020). As researchers, it is important to acknowledge our own cultural backgrounds as we explore the cultures of others (Cole, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2018; Mead et al., 1973). In this article, we theorize on the nature of geographic, institutional, cultural, and methodological border crossings experienced by early career researchers who navigate being both insiders and outsiders in the research setting, while also crossing the border between traditional qualitative research and autoethnography. First, we define the roles of researchers as insiders, outsiders, and in-betweeners. Then we explain cultural proficiency in the research context. Finally, we analyze the development of a researcher identity through autoethnographic narratives that illustrate positionality and placement on the continuum of cultural proficiency.

Theoretical Framework

Because our work took place in various cultures, a cultural proficiency framework is appropriate. Lindsey et al. (2018) defined culture as "everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you" (p. 29). Cultural proficiency is a mindset. People do not need to know everything about every single culture, but it is important that researchers be willing to learn about cultures to become more inclusive in their practices. Cultural proficiency aims to serve the common good in a multicultural society (Lindsey et al., 2018). Across cultures, people have different values, beliefs, and ways of communicating, interacting, and conducting research (Birukou et al., 2013; Cole, 2003; Lenard, 2020; Lindsey et al., 2018; Mead et al.,

1973). Being culturally proficient requires people to be vulnerable, curious, humble, courageous, open, and reflective.

Cross and colleagues from the Georgetown University Child Development Center wrote a monograph in 1989 that aimed to provide both a philosophical framework and practical advice to improve the service delivery to children of color who were severely emotionally disturbed. Cross et al. (1989) worked with experts in the field as they were concerned that models of social service were not serving all populations equitably. Lindsey et al. (2018) applied this work to the educational field.

The culturally proficient framework is built on the following premises:

- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
- People have group and individual identities.
- Diversity within cultures is vast and varied.
- Each cultural group has unique cultural needs.
- Learning from each other about culture enhances the cultural capacity for all.
- Inherent in cross-cultural interactions are dynamics that must be acknowledged, acclimatized, and accepted (Linsey et al., 2018).

This framework also offers a Cultural Proficiency Continuum that portrays people and organizations who possess the knowledge, skills, and moral bearing to distinguish from unhealthy to healthy practices as represented by different worldviews.

The continuum comprises six phases: *cultural destructiveness*, *cultural incapacity*, *cultural blindness*, *cultural precompetence*, *cultural competence* and *cultural proficiency*. Cultural destructiveness is characterized by individuals who see the differences in cultures and destroy them. Examples include genocides throughout history such as the American forced movement of Native Americans during the Trail of Tears in 1838 and the extermination of Jews during World War II. Cultural destructiveness also involves macro aggressions such as forbidding children to speak their native tongue in school and destroying cultural artifacts. Cultural incapacity is portrayed by extreme bias and belief in the superiority of one's own cultures and beliefs, exhibited by White supremacist groups active in the United States today. Cultural blindness is when people see the cultural differences and dismiss them. Arguing that one is color-blind as a defense against charges of racism is an example that reveals a lack of valuing the diversity of people's skin color. In the Cultural precompetence phase, people recognize what they don't know. This phase is about the awareness of one's limitations when interacting with other cultures. For example, one can recognize that an individual is part of the LGBTQIA+ community without truly comprehending the importance of using an individual's choice of pronouns. Cultural competence occurs when people see the differences and understand, accept, and respect those differences. An application of competency is the designation of unisex restrooms in a restaurant or the setting aside of a prayer space within an organization's edifice. In the last phase, cultural proficiency, individuals recognize the differences, respond positively and affirmingly to differences, advocate, and continue to learn. Cultural proficiency is evident when a school adopts restorative justice as the discipline practice or when individuals join a protest movement that supports marginalized groups. Throughout Corinne's research in educational settings in Burkina Faso and Carol's work on disability in the United States, we moved back and forth along the continuum. The more we made steps towards cultural proficiency, the more comfortable we were in the in-between space as researchers. Our research became more genuine as the research design and process reflected the cultural milieu we were studying and respected the cultural values of our participants.

Crossing Borders Between Insider, Outsider, and In-Betweenness Positionality

Experts in qualitative research have agreed on two distinct approaches researchers can take during the research process. The emic approach (or insider) and the etic approach (outsider) offer researchers different ways to collect data, analyze the information they gather, and then interpret their findings; however, this fixed dichotomy between insiderness and outsidership has been disputed (Beals et al., 2020; Holmes, 2020; Kerstetter, 2012; Olive, 2014; Pike, 1967). Scholars proposed a third position, the in-betweenness, as a researcher's identity can shift from being an insider to an outsider depending on the social, political, and cultural values of a given context or moment (Chhabra, 2020; Edmonds-Cady, 2012; Katyal & King 2011; Milligan, 2016, Shariff, 2014). Qualitative researchers often shift to the in-betweenness space that allows more flexibility and fluidity (Bruskin, 2018; Milligan, 2016).

Being an Outsider

There are both positives and negatives to the outsider and the insider positions (Banks, 1998; Bruskin, 2018; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016; Olive, 2014; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). Outsider researchers enter an unknown locality to conduct research and are cultural outsiders because they may hold different values, beliefs, and knowledge from the participant community. Outsiders may struggle to understand the community's culture, and they may not have robust relationships with locals (Banks, 1998; Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Liamputtong, 2010; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). However, outsider researchers may develop deeper explanations of a phenomenon because they remain more objective, less biased, and are able to bring a new perspective to the research (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hunt, 2008; Banks, 1998; McNess et al., 2015; Dhillon & Thomas, 2019).

Being an Insider

Researchers have contended that insiders often have linguistic or cultural skills that can accelerate access and ease interaction with study participants. Insiders and locals usually share the same social background, culture, and language (Bishop, 2008; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Liamputtong, 2010). Being insiders can facilitate access to local resources, increase trust, and enrich fieldwork (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Falzon, 2009; Liamputtong, 2010, McNess et al., 2015; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). We moved toward insider status as we delved further into our research studies, made cultural mistakes, and grew from our errors to progress towards cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Shifting to the In-Betweenness Position

In the in-betweenness space, the researcher's position shifts between insider and outsider. Several scholars affirmed the necessity of rethinking the insider or outsider approaches, postulating that these approaches are limiting for those conducting cross-cultural research (Arthur, 2010; Katyal & King, 2011; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016; Nakata, 2015). When conducting research across cultures, the researcher is never completely an insider or an outsider. Rather, researchers take on different positions based on the participants with whom they are interacting, the socio-cultural norms, and linguistic familiarity. Power dimensions can shift positioning. McNess et al. (2015) posited that the insider-outsider binary might not be useful when conducting qualitative research across cultural milieus; the in-betweenness positionality may be preferable. The ability of a researcher to shift from one position to another is affected by several factors including the occupation, title, gender, age, physical appearance,

clothing style, parenthood, language, cultural proficiency, and religion of both the researcher and the participant, as well as their sustained commitment to each other (Carling et al., 2014; Chawla, 2007; Shariff, 2014; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). One key aspect to successfully crossing the border between insiderness and outsidership and sliding into the in-between space is adopting a cultural proficiency mindset. The in-between positionalality can be effectively adopted by practicing cultural proficiency.

Becoming Culturally Proficient

The validity of qualitative studies is often debated because qualitative research in various cultural settings often requires crossing borders between being the researcher who works diligently to remain objective and impartial and being an integral part of the lives of the study participants to gain their trust and better understand their experiences (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). Researchers must understand that “researcher” is not a singular role; rather, researchers must embody different characters simultaneously. They can conduct focus groups during the day and share meals with participants in the evening; they can interview participants on specific research topics, and they can converse about family experiences over coffee. They are both objective researchers and fellow human beings sharing a space within a community.

Scholars often question their positionalality as qualitative researchers (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Holmes, 2020). The researcher’s positionalality consciously or unconsciously affects the way the study is designed, the way it is conducted, and how the data is interpreted.

Culture is pervasive and permeates all we do because everyone has cultural and personal identities. For this study, we define culture as our beliefs, core values, and perceptions of those who are like us and those who are different. Some elements of culture include religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, gender, language, and ability. When conducting research across cultures, “researchers must not only be well-versed in qualitative research methods but also know how to work with communities that have been historically exploited by mainstream society” (Ojeda et al., 2011, p. 186). Understanding the cultures in which we lead research, developing a culturally-centered approach to research, and becoming culturally proficient is crucial to produce quality and integrous inquiries (Ojeda et al., 2011; Pelzang & Hutchinson, 2017).

Papadopoulos and Lees (2002) contended that culturally proficient researchers are culturally aware and sensitive. Investigators realize that they are cultural beings and are aware of personal beliefs about the culture at hand (Choudhuri, 2005; Lyons & Bike, 2010). They examine their own values, assumptions, and biases and are aware that culture affects their positionalities (Sue & Torino, 2005). Culturally proficient researchers are knowledgeable and continuously seek to learn about cultures. They take cultural differences into account when designing and conducting a study (Milligan, 2016). Im et al. (2004) asserted that, before starting a study, culturally proficient researchers reflect if and how the research question(s) serve(s) the specific cultural group that is part of the study. They seek the input of locals in the research process and understand power dynamics (Ojeda et al., 2011). Culturally proficient researchers are eager and willing to seek, listen, and amplify the voices of people who may be considered marginalized.

Defining the term “marginalized” and determining who is considered marginalized is important for culturally proficient researchers who want to amplify the voices of these groups (Cook, 2008; Sevelius et al., 2020). One’s own cultural background, levels of power, and cultural context affect these decisions. Researchers can themselves marginalize others by perpetuating top-down power structures based on inequities inherent in the research process (Brion & Rogers-Shaw, 2021; von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017). Pincock and Jones (2020) define marginalization in terms of a population’s socially constructed and contextual

vulnerability to power. Smith (2021) viewed research as a method for colonization of indigenous people through the imperialist determination of what is deemed legitimate knowledge. By using the words of participants and focusing on what they want to share, researchers can avoid colonizing research and acknowledge that the singular authoritative voice of the academy is not the sole determinant of what counts as knowledge (Rogers-Shaw, 2021). Culturally sensitive methodologies can offer marginalized voices a space to be heard as participants tell their stories. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather rich and contextual data that respects and embraces cultural differences (Banks, 1998; Wilson et al., 2016). It is the responsibility of qualitative researchers to protect their study participants and the integrity of the research process by being culturally proficient and inclusive (Stonewall et al., 2017). Therefore, in becoming more culturally proficient, we became better researchers who acknowledged and valued the contributions of our participants who were members of diverse cultures. We grew as human beings through the transformative research process, learning from our mistakes.

While scholarly literature on insider/outsider positionality in qualitative research fully defines the concepts and offers numerous examples of researchers changing positions throughout their fieldwork, there is a lack of attention to how this movement between positions leads to greater cultural proficiency and the development of a researcher identity. There is also a gap in the literature reflecting how the use of autoethnography can contribute to increasing understanding of positionality, encourage movement toward cultural proficiency, and motivate researchers to conduct a self-examination throughout the research process. This study fills that gap by sharing the experiences of two early career researchers whose reflective study of their own experiences increased their cultural proficiency and heightened their understandings of themselves as researchers. The following questions framed the research: (1) What is border crossing? (2) What is insider/outsider status in research? (3) What does learning at the border look like? (4) How does one learn to be a researcher through autoethnography that shares experiences of straddling the insider/outsider boundary? (5) How does one develop cultural proficiency as a researcher? This study contributes to scholarly research by presenting a unique duoethnographic format for sharing reflective narratives that reveal the journey of two early career researchers seeking to discover their own place in the research community and become more effective scholars by increasing their own cultural proficiency and adding a distinctive decolonizing approach to cross-cultural research.

Who We Are and Why We Are Here

A few years ago, Corinne obtained a doctorate in leadership and spent six years in five African countries. It was during her time abroad that she deepened her appreciation and knowledge of the impact of culture on research. Her doctoral dissertation chair influenced her career and research interests because she was provided the opportunity to work in Africa. She was called “the Indiana Jones of Africa” because she had so many adventures during her six years in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. Corinne’s stay in Africa was the richest time of her life. She gained a greater understanding of various African cultures and reflected on the differences with her own Western beliefs, norms, and values. As a native of France who works in the United States, and as a second language learner and speaker, the impact of culture on learning and conducting research is of great interest to Corinne. She believes that learning to work and live within various cultures while embracing and advocating for the differences is the essence of cultural proficiency, social justice, and creating inclusive and equitable systems.

Carol is an individual with a disability. She recently graduated with a doctorate in lifelong learning and adult education. Her autoethnographic dissertation revealed her life of

living with a disability for over 40 years. Her goal was to share her personal experiences to enhance the understanding of others about what it is like to live with a disability and increase empathy through this greater comprehension. In Carol's research on disability, she is often an insider. Yet, while she might be a member of the disability community, she is aware that she cannot speak for others with disabilities nor those who support individuals with disabilities because their experiences are all unique. When she conducts a research study on disability-related issues, she crosses back and forth over the border between objective observer and community participant, which has led to her work on border crossing, identity development, and autoethnography.

We both kept journals and recorded stories throughout our research work over ten years. As we began working together as colleagues teaching in a doctoral program, we shared these original journal entries and narratives with each other through email and collaborative Google documents. After realizing that our autoethnographic writing could be analyzed in terms of our journey across borders as researchers and our developing cultural proficiency, we embarked on a more systematic study of our writing.

Method

Autoethnography is a critically reflexive narrative inquiry where the researcher examines personal experiences in relation to cultural groups. Autoethnographic studies can be situated along a continuum between evocative and analytical autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). The focus of analytic autoethnographers is finding the theories that explain social phenomena, and evocative autoethnographers concentrate on emotional narratives that instigate dialogue on issues of culture (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008; Rogers-Shaw, 2020).

Through storytelling, evocative autoethnographers "sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). The personal stories they share are set within a cultural context so the narratives can shed light on cultural topics. Rather than taking the outsider view of traditional ethnography, analytic autoethnographers look inward toward the self. They tell personal stories that are "used, in part, to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social processes" (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). The deliberate attention to analysis is what separates evocative and analytic ethnographers (Anderson, 2006).

In facing the challenge of deciding how to balance the "systematic, 'scientific' methodologies of ethnography with the evocative, creative, and artistic elements and forms of storytelling" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 67), we were once again in-betweeners. As early career researchers, we wanted our work to be accepted and valued by scholars in academia. We wanted to contribute to the body of academic literature in our field. While we have published traditional empirical studies that do tell the stories of our participants using phenomenology, ethnography, case study, action research, and grounded theory, we were also drawn to the more artistic style of autoethnography.

The first decision we had to make when pursuing autoethnography was where we are located on the continuum between analytical and evocative autoethnography. We wanted to connect with readers through our emotional personal stories, yet we also wanted to analyze our positionality and movement along the cultural proficiency continuum. Our movement between analytical and evocative autoethnography through the narratives and explanations invites readers to reflect on their own responses and positionality and increase their understanding of border crossing and cultural proficiency. In the process of reading and analyzing each other's narratives, we each learned about the cultural experiences of our research partner and increased

our cultural proficiency. We offer ourselves as a model of self-reflection and cultural knowledge acquisition. As researchers, we are visible in our research, we practice deep reflexivity, we both engage with others and examine ourselves, and we use personal stories to illustrate our findings about the cultures we explore.

The Process of Duoethnography

This study uses duoethnography, a form of autoethnography that includes more than one researcher. We examine ourselves as researchers and study each other's journey. By sharing and analyzing our individual stories, we create a unique view of researchers exploring positionality and identity development through border crossing. We are early career researchers who bring our own learning experiences and positionalities to our research work. Corinne is a heterosexual White woman and a native of France where she was raised middle class. Carol is a disabled heterosexual White woman with financial and healthcare security who grew up in an upper middle-class suburb of a major city in the United States.

In duoethnography there is a dialogue between "two or more researchers [who] work in tandem to dialogically critique and question the meanings they give to social issues and epistemological constructs" (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 2). We present our narratives, placing them within the research discourse where others may find connections. This study includes evocative narratives, but it uses the personal stories to support our analysis of positionality, cultural proficiency, and self-study in the research process.

We began by collecting our own autoethnographic narratives about our research experiences in Burkina Faso and within the disability community. To prepare to analyze these stories, we searched for related literature that could provide us with direction, as "the literature review in duoethnography is blended into the written study, and literature is often critiqued as a cultural artifact" (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 20). We consulted ERIC, Google Scholar, and our university library subject databases. We used search terms including cultural proficiency, emic/etic, insider/outsider, in-between, autoethnography, border crossing, researcher identity, positionality, and cross-cultural research. We collected 70 referred journal articles where the focus specifically addressed one of these ideas and was not peripheral to the topic. We included both seminal works and research conducted within the last ten years. We divided the articles into categories that could determine deductive themes that we could apply to our narratives during the data analysis process.

These categories included: researcher positionality, scholarly identity development, finding one's voice as a researcher, amplifying marginalized voices as a process toward understanding one's own researcher identity, practicing inclusion through research, cultural learning through the research process, moving toward cultural proficiency, and border crossing experiences. We split the articles between ourselves by category and initially examined the research studies attempting to draw conclusions from the literature in each category.

We discussed our review of the literature in multiple meetings over the course of several months, sharing what we found and deciding what was most appropriate for our study; this part of the duoethnographic process reflected our collaborative effort to determine the cultural contexts we found within our narratives and link those to existing scholarly work. We were able to then set forth our existing narratives and write additional personal stories (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), "construc[ting] narrative unities and a new sense of coherence as [we] engag[ed] in dialogue" (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 10).

The steps we took in our dialogue followed Torracco's (2016) process for creating an integrated literature review that "reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated" (p. 404). Our conversations of the review of scholarly articles helped us determine

which personal narratives to include in our duoethnography. We found stories from each of us that illustrated the themes we chose to examine. Our initial conclusions were presented at professional conferences, and we used audience feedback to revise and refine our ideas. Finding connections to our autoethnographic narratives led to data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data is our stories. In duoethnography, “data collection (storytelling) and analysis (discussion) overlap in form and content. Stories are shared around specific themes that provide dialogic framing” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 42). The initial literature review provided the themes: crossing geographic, institutional, cultural, and methodological border crossings, insider/outsider/in-between research positionality, the process of attaining cultural proficiency through research work; developing a researcher identity, and exploring autoethnography as both method and methodology.

The next step in the process included searching for autoethnographic stories we had written that were linked to these categories and sub-categories, deductively selecting those that illustrated significant points on the topics. This step was twofold: first, each researcher conducted personal analysis of her own stories through journaling, self-exploration, reviewing existing narratives, and creating new stories, then we performed paired analysis by examining each other’s work and applying the theoretical framework we had chosen. This paired analysis was an iterative process; it was not merely “a repetitive mechanical task but [instead] a deeply reflexive process that spark[ed] insight and develop[ed] meaning ... visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings” (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). We concentrated on narratives revealing our researcher positionality, our scholarly identity development, and our journey toward cultural proficiency through the research process of crossing borders. We shared and discussed these stories. In the process of analysis, we each paid attention to what our partner said, and we revised our narratives to answer questions that we raised and to highlight ideas we discovered through our dialogue (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). At times, we wrote new narratives based on the discussion and then shared those stories in the iterative writing/analysis process.

We adopted a deductive process to analyze the data focusing on the themes that emerged in the study of the literature. We decided to explore our narratives within the broad categories of researcher border crossings, voices of research and identity, and cultural learning. Within the first category, we examined insider/outsider/in-between positionality and traditional qualitative research versus autoethnography. We considered the emic and etic positions of qualitative research, finding the introduction of the in-between position significant to our stories. While we had previously conducted studies using more traditional methodologies, we were intrigued by the ways researchers have used autoethnography. Under the umbrella of research voices, we investigated our experiences of amplifying disparate and marginalized voices and finding our own voice through our research work. An important part of our analysis included concentrating on the amplification of the voices of marginalized participants in the traditional studies we conducted and examining how sharing those voices assisted us in developing our own voices as researchers; speaking through autoethnography offered this opportunity. In exploring cultural learning, we investigated learning about cultures and practicing inclusion through research (Brion & Rogers-Shaw, 2021). We applied this knowledge to our examination of our move toward enhanced cultural proficiency.

Trustworthiness

The “recursive retrospection” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 33) of duoethnography promotes trustworthiness. The relational process of iteratively examining our own work and that of our duoethnographic partner enhanced trustworthiness due to our reflexivity that led to a “shared voice, co-deconstruction, reconstruction, and reconceptualization” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 37). The trustworthiness of this autoethnographic research is visible through the credibility, subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, and contributions revealed.

Credibility is demonstrated through “a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent. It connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 282). The goal of this research is to connect with readers through authentic personal narratives. The duoethnographic nature of this study adds credibility as two researchers independently triangulated the themes and codes through both self-analysis and collaborative analysis of each other’s work. Readers can judge the credibility of our work by considering whether the narratives are believable and offer a realistic rather than a fanciful version of events.

Le Roux (2017) proposed criteria to evaluate autoethnography including credibility, but she added subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, and contribution. In terms of subjectivity, we are clearly visible in the research. We have illustrated self-reflexivity through “intense awareness of [our roles] in and relationship to the research which is situated within a historical and cultural context” (p. 204). The narratives of fieldwork will resonate with readers who will recognize their own similar or different research experiences. Readers can find resonance as they “determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 282). Rigor is found in duoethnography through the transparent conversation between the two researchers; “[d]ialectic conversations have their own rigor...[as r]eaders can ascertain whether the degree of explanation and expression is effective in elucidating particular aspects of the phenomena” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 91). Readers determine the trustworthiness of a duoethnographic text by determining whether the work “enables them to derive general insights that they deem relevant” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 91). By connecting with readers, this study has the potential to educate and inspire other early career and graduate scholars, contributing unique perspectives to research scholarship.

Findings

Our analysis has led us to present a series of connected narratives that illustrate the themes of our work; these are our findings. In duoethnography, there is not so much attention to applications of the conclusions reached as there are representations of our own understandings and examples of our reflexivity (Sawyer and Norris, 2013). Through our research experiences, we crossed several borders related to researcher positionality, cultural proficiency, and methodology. We recognized that the in-between position characterized our research work in multiple ways. As we became more culturally proficient, we developed our voices as researchers and practiced more inclusivity by amplifying marginalized voices. Our self-study illuminated our relationships with the cultures we studied. The dialogue presented meets the objective of enabling the reader “to engage imaginatively in and be altered by the conversation” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 46).

Researchers Experience Positional Border Crossings

In our fieldwork, we have crossed borders between being outsiders, insiders, and in-betweeners. At the beginning of our research careers, we became aware of our positionality and its effects. Both Corinne's experiences in Burkina Faso and Carol's work with adults with disabilities illustrate our movement from outsider to insider.

As duoethnographers, we shared stories of coming to understand our positionality as we encountered various borders we crossed within our studies. Corinne remembered:

When I first arrived in Burkina Faso, I recall feeling overjoyed to spend four months in this country. I was a little uneasy, too, given my upbringing and privilege and that it was my first time in an African developing country. At the time, I did not realize how much I did not know about the country's history and culture or how my own culture could influence my research study. In other words, I was blissfully culturally blind at times and precompetent at best. I had come to Burkina Faso to conduct research in schools. For my first day of research in the field, I got up early and was very much ready to start my qualitative project. At the time, I was seeking to understand how, if at all, school leaders who attended a three-day leadership training transferred the newly acquired knowledge to their schools. This led me to visit many schools in rural, suburban, and urban settings. I interviewed principals before the training and three months after. As I was waiting for my local colleague to go to the first school, I reviewed my interview protocol, I made sure that my recorder had batteries, and that I carried enough consent forms. I was excited and determined to obtain the data I needed to complete my doctoral work.

At the time, study participants knew little about me, but they generously agreed to talk with me because I had seen them in their leadership training and several times after that in their schools. Then, I was an outsider. I was able to remain focused and was even rigidly following my interview protocol. I recall thinking "I just need to get my data." I made a point not to get emotional, deviate from my purpose, and engage in any other matters unrelated to my research. I would conduct my interviews and go back to my hotel to journal about the data, code the data, and get ready for the next day. Following my professors' advice, I was making every effort to stay an outsider, collect my data, and remain detached. This approach was productive yet felt esoteric. I could not help but feel disjointed.

At the initial stage, I spent days resisting becoming an insider even though my personality, my cultural background, and my life experiences were more in line with the insider approach. I spent a vast amount of energy trying to stay neutral by not showing my emotions. I aspired to stay strictly focused on my interview protocol. To help me achieve this focus, I remembered the words of my doctoral colleagues: "get in and get out." My challenge was that I could not just get in and get out because I am caring and curious by nature. The more I knew about the people and their cultures, the more culturally competent I became, the less I could stay focused on my interview protocol only. Rather, I felt the need to engage with my participants on a more personal level. As I gained the trust of my participants, I started to receive invitations to their churches, and I went. I was slowly but surely becoming an insider.

Carol reflected on one story that emphasizes her own border crossing during a study she completed with mothers of children with disabilities.

We were sitting at the kitchen table in Kelly's home on a sunny spring afternoon. I had my list of interview questions printed out on paper with spaces to take notes. I had my laptop open beside me in case I needed to reference materials I had collected on mothers of children with disabilities, and I had the recording device, with my phone as a backup, sitting in the middle of the table between myself and Kelly who sat across from me. I thought I was a well-prepared, objective researcher ready to collect important data on the lived experiences of this mother who had a teenage son with Autism Spectrum Disorder. What I learned during this interview is how difficult it is to straddle the border of insider and outsider in the disability community.

Kelly's son had struggled from preK through high school to fit into the traditional classroom. I wanted to find out what types of conversations Kelly had with other mothers about their children whether those children had disabilities or not. I asked her to tell me about the times she may have dropped her son off at school and met up with friends who were the mothers of her son's classmates and then headed to a cafe together for a coffee and to chat. Her response was: "I don't have any friends. My son is too toxic."

At that moment, my heart broke and I wanted to reach out to her, hug her, and become her friend. Yet, I also wanted to be a competent researcher who could draw out the important stories her participants had to share. I held my tongue rather than immediately jump into the conversation with my own thoughts and waited for her to continue. Through tears, she shared several instances when she and her son were shunned because of behaviors he exhibited as a child with autism. So yes, I collected a lot of great data from this interview. I also made a conscious decision at the end of the interview when the recorder was turned off, to cross back into the disability community, and I spent quite a while with this woman sharing my own stories of mothering a child with a disability, offering my support as one mother to another. This is one example I can share about my experiences crossing positionality borders as a researcher.

Going into the interviews, we were concentrating on the lessons of our doctoral programs about being objective observers; however, we quickly learned that it was not easy to remain on the outsider side of the border as we became personally involved with our participants. We became more conscious of our insider/outsider status. We began to make deliberate decisions to move toward an in-between position.

As we moved toward insider status, we delved further into our research. Corinne reflected on her experiences:

During my work in Burkina Faso, I became an insider when I started to learn more about the Burkinabe culture and the impact of colonization on the people. I started to be culturally competent and moved from blindness or precompetence to competency. The crossing occurred because at one point I was spending more time in Burkina Faso than in my American home. I started to greet and speak like the Burkinabes. I started to notice my judgements towards other white people visiting. I had fallen in love with the country and its people. I felt at home

because I spoke the language, I understood the humor, and I enjoyed other aspects of the Burkinabe culture. This comfort and passion for the country started to affect my research, however. One day, I realized that I was going native and had lost track of my role as a researcher. I knew that I had lost my objectivity when I started to guess what my participants were going to tell me next, when I answered my questions for them, and when I made judgmental comments. I also noticed that I was phrasing my questions differently. I had gone from the scripted open-ended questions to yes-no questions that were biased. I felt guilty that my ancestors had taken all the riches and resources of this beautiful country. My anger resonated in the way I asked my questions and in the way I led my interviews. Something in me had changed; I had gone from the shy, organized, goal-minded researcher to an advocate and activist leading participants to tell me what I wanted to hear. Once I realized I had crossed the line and that I had lost my integrity as a researcher, I stepped back, took a few days off, and journaled before I went back to gather data.

This experience taught Corinne that quality research cannot be rushed to meet a deadline.

Early in her disability research, Carol realized that her own connections to disability might bias her work in the field. To examine her positionality, she began writing an autoethnography that included vignettes of mothering a child with a learning disability (Rogers-Shaw, 2019). Carol endeavored to make sense of her own experiences and at the same time, attempted to offer readers an opportunity to find connections or learn about others when no immediate links existed. Most importantly, she began to understand her own insider/outsider/in-between status more fully. She wrote:

When the flat brown box arrived in the mail, I knew immediately that it was a book. I tore it open and pulled out the hardcover copy of *Title Anonymized*. I held it in my hands and glanced at the abstract art on the front cover, but it was the word “narratives” in the subtitle that caught my eye; one of those narratives was mine. I opened it and scanned the Table of Contents, locating the page number for my story “*Title Anonymized*.” I flipped to page 220 and found my autoethnographic chapter. I felt a bit overwhelmed. What had started as an exploration of my own positionality in terms of disability, an attempt to unearth my own biases and tell my personal story, led to a way to share my voice, and tell what it was like for me to mother a child with a disability.

The year before I had begun my journey as a doctoral student, and as I reread my story on the pages of the book, I felt that I had truly crossed over to become an autoethnographic researcher. I recognized my development from an unsure student who seemed to be flailing in the dark, to someone who had gained significant knowledge of autoethnography, knew how to analyze her narratives in the context of disability culture, and relished sharing her voice on the written page. The first steps on that journey had been taken with a lot of trepidation. I had written about autoethnography for doctoral course papers and given presentations both in class and at conferences. And each time I viewed my narratives again, I moved toward greater understanding of the disability community and my place in it. As I read through the stories others told in the chapters of the book, I acknowledged that I was a part of that community; I was an insider.

What is important to recognize is that researchers are not always completely an insider or completely an outsider. Not only do they cross borders between countries or communities, but they also traverse positionality borders. In the in-between space, the researcher's position shifts between insider and outsider during qualitative research work. The in-between position is affected by several indicators regarding their personal subjectivities (Carling et al., 2014; Chawla, 2007; Shariff, 2014), and we began to understand elements of our identities in different ways as we navigated the research process.

Corinne had needed time to regain her objectivity after going native. During what she called a "research quarantine," time that was meant to help her regain her impartiality, she realized that she could be both an outsider and an insider and that the in-between space was more desirable. Corinne recalled:

I noticed that I was gathering better data while being true to myself and my values when I could skillfully navigate border crossings and move from being an outsider to being an insider. The closer I became to participants, the more openly and genuinely they shared. At the same time, by using strategies to help me stay objective such as journaling, I was able to keep the integrity of the data collected. I understood that my roles as an outsider-insider did not have to be mutually exclusive, but they were rather complementary. I was an outsider and sought to be unbiased to learn as much as possible about the phenomenon while also being an insider who was close with my participants, understood the nuance of the national language, spoke a bit of the local dialect, and progressively learned and embraced the local culture.

As I started my data collection again, I went to meet an elder village chief hours away from Ouagadougou, the capital city. I initiated my interview as an outsider because I had never met the man. We went over the formalities, and I conducted a robust interview. At the end of my interview with the elder, I was deeply touched by one of his comments on colonization and the impact it had on his family and community. He said, "For a while, the only White people we saw were the ones who came to rape our wives and daughters, take our children away, take our lands and possessions, and redesign our country's boundaries to leave us without any major water access. They destroyed us physically, emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically because they forbid us to speak our native languages. But one thing they did not take is our faith."

At that point, I knew I had switched from being an outsider to being an insider. It was apparent because of the way he had talked to me and the way he held my hand. He had also learned of my local name and called me *Wendkuuni* which means in Moore, the local language, God's gift. I knew I was an insider because of the content of what he had openly shared with me and because we cried together (an elderly local man and a young White woman in a patriarchal, traditional, and collectivistic society). To date, I remember the day I spent with my elderly colleague because it was the day that I comfortably moved from being an outsider to being an insider and found myself in the in-between space without shame, remorse, or worries that my data would not be robust, or my researcher integrity compromised. Since then, I have crossed the borders many times conducting qualitative research in several African countries.

In our work within various cultural contexts, we learned that moving from an outsider to an insider positionality was acceptable, something we had studied but had never experienced. We had never been taught that the movement between outsider and insider can be painful and emotional. We recognized the benefits of journaling but had not necessarily journaled for that specific purpose. We realized through our initial research projects that being in the in-between space produced quality research and allowed us to be in line with our values of being genuine, caring, compassionate, and passionate about amplifying marginalized voices.

Cultural Proficiency Can Grow through Research Studies

Cultural proficiency as an on-going journey is not strictly linear (Lindsey et al., 2018); one can move toward more cultural proficiency by gathering research data and learning about aspects of a culture, yet one might fall back to a less proficient phase through making mistakes in interactions with individuals within that culture. Research may lead to greater cultural knowledge in one area such as race or religion or gender roles and be at the precompetent stage in other areas such as class values or linguistics or disability status. Movement to the right on the continuum shows progress, but progress comes over time by making mistakes, by reflecting, and by understanding that cultural proficiency is a lifelong voyage that requires one to be curious, humble, and persistent. Conducting research studies in various cultures can increase proficiency, but there are always gaps in cultural knowledge remaining.

For Corinne, speaking French, the national language of Burkina Faso, was helpful to gain trust of locals, yet she also found that while residing in the country for months at a time and over several years, she gained knowledge of the local culture, both national and tribal, and needed to explore how she fit into this cultural context. She remembered:

Looking back on my cultural proficiency journey, I laugh when I recall my first day in Burkina Faso. I was in the hotel lobby at 9am and kept staring at my watch. The hours passed by and there were no signs of my colleague. I called, texted, and emailed in vain. My colleague arrived all smiles at 11am and I was mortified. I was stressed and internally upset. I thought “How am I going to do all I need to do today with such a late start?” But my colleague’s joy was contagious and so was his attitude. When I asked him if we would be able to go to all the sites, he calmly responded: “No worries.” I later found out that this phrase was the motto and recipe for happiness of the Burkinabe people and that I could use a good healthy dose of it. Seeing me anxiously looking at my phone for the time, my colleague laughed and said: “You people have nice watches, but we have the time.” He was right; that day we did all we needed to do, visited all the schools that were on my calendar, and had a wonderful time laughing about my cultural errors. That day I moved along the continuum by understanding better the notion of time and by being more flexible about my research because as my colleague said “In the end, it will all work out. God is in control.”

On another trip, I visited rural schools. We traveled for hours to reach these schools. The trip was peaceful as my colleague and I moved along the regions, looking out the window at the different architecture of the huts, the crops, and the people working in the fields. I love traveling by car and observing people and their lives. These experiences have been rich and humbling for me. Once we arrived at each school, the first thing the principal did was offer me some water. I politely declined his offer saying: “I drank a lot in the car, and I have a

large bottle of water in my bag.” Then and there I could tell I had made a cultural mistake. Although I had told the truth and justified my being full, being offered water, the most precious commodity in Burkina Faso is a privilege and a great honor that only guests receive. I felt horrible then and still feel ashamed of my reaction. The truth is that I could see things floating in the glass of water he had handed me. I was afraid to drink the water and get sick from it, so I politely declined. Our meeting went on and I think I was well received. On the way back, I asked my colleague for feedback on the water episode, and he responded: “Wendkuuni, when people offer you water, you must accept, people often have very little water, and they walk miles to get it. I know you worry about the water here, so what I do, I accept and take a tiny sip only because I too am worried about this type of water.”

These stories exemplify two cultural learnings, but there were many more that made Corinne a better person and a more competent researcher. Corinne’s learning from her cultural errors enabled her to slide more easily from being an outsider to an insider, while also continuing her cultural proficiency journey.

Carol experienced a very different type of cultural context in her work within the disability community. When she started doctoral study, she planned to focus her research on educational access for adults with disabilities. As she learned about positionality, she began to think about her own experiences with disability. Because her own disability was the result of a chronic illness, she often thought of herself as diseased more than disabled, and she started to wonder if she was “disabled enough” to be considered an insider. She recognized that she could check off the disabled box on forms. Yet, when she thought about being an insider researcher, she wondered if she was claiming disability status merely to become one of the “Us” in “Nothing About Us Without Us,” a central tenet of the disability rights movement. This awareness was important to consider so that she didn’t assume to understand a participant’s situation merely because of her own disability that provided her with similar experiences. She hoped that mothering a child with a disability and teaching students with disabilities might help her avoid these assumptions by offering multiple perspectives on disability. She remembered her early study of disability:

I sat at a table in the library at the end of the stacks. I faced the window that looked out over the lower-level roof with glimpses of farmland below the mountain in the distance. Spread out before me were books on disability that my professor had suggested as a place to start in my academic study of disability. When I started my doctoral study in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education, I knew I wanted to research the educational opportunities of adults with disabilities. I had taught adolescents with disabilities for over 30 years, and while they were often very successful in high school, many dropped out of college. I wanted to explore why this happened. While I had learned to be an effective teacher of learners with disabilities, I was not culturally proficient in my understanding of disability culture. So, I began to read.

One of the books in the pile was *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, published by James Charlton in 2000. It shared stories of disability rights activists fighting oppression. When I left the library that day, the title of the book stuck with me, and I thought about the work of the disability rights movement that advocated for the participation of disabled individuals in the creation of policy that affected them. Its corollary in research

is that studies should not be done on members of the disability community as objects of the research, but rather with them in lead decision-making roles.

I started to think about how, as a beginning researcher, I could embrace an emancipatory approach. I came to doctoral study with various experiences of disability. I knew that my positionality would be a significant piece of my research, but I was less clear on my place within the disability community. As a diabetic, I wondered if I was “disabled enough” to be a disability researcher or was I just diseased. I couldn’t help but cross back and forth between viewing my situation as one resulting from disease and one causing disability (Rogers-Shaw, 2020).

It seemed to me as I drove home late that afternoon that I needed to explore my own relationship to disability before I started to investigate the lived experiences of others in the disability community. The next morning, I began jotting down my reflections in a journal. This eventually led to my first autoethnographic publication (Rogers-Shaw, 2019).

Autoethnography became a bridge on Carol’s path from disabled person to disability researcher. It led to greater cultural proficiency regarding disability culture as she began to understand her own position within that community.

Significantly, our autoethnographic studies highlighted our understanding of our roles as researchers, and the mistakes we made along the way led to greater comprehension and acknowledgement of ourselves as researchers. Corinne recalled:

In hindsight, I feel bad because when I first conducted research in West Africa, I was a rookie. I had not realized how my own culture could impact my training and my research. The lens I brought to my research design and delivery was a White Western lens. An example of that belief system that I carried with me was the story I shared about the notion of time. I was culturally precompetent at best. I knew that I did not know what I did not know. As a result, I made many cultural mistakes. Although I continue to make cultural faux-pas, I have grown in my understanding of the Burkinabe’s culture. I have learned not only to respect it but to embrace and advocate for it. I am aware that I am not culturally proficient yet and may never be, but what is important to me as a person and researcher is to grow and take strides towards cultural proficiency. I realize that sometimes I continuously move along the cultural proficiency continuum, and I embrace my errors and learn from them. One day, I may be culturally competent and the next day, I may go back to being precompetent, omitting a cultural belief or tradition, using a poor example in training, or saying something insensitive given the country’s history with the French colonizers. Nonetheless, I believe that I am moving on my cultural proficiency journey each time I spend time with locals in West Africa and have an opportunity to observe more, travel within the countries, and ask questions of my long-time friends and colleagues. I am also constantly reading and seeking information. The more I learn, the better my research is because it is informed by the local cultural practices, and I am better able to move from the outsider to the insider to the in-between space.

Carol found that when she began to teach doctoral courses, her researcher identity became clearer. She remembered:

I was nervous about the upcoming courses I was to teach in the doctoral program. I had prepared an agenda to organize the flow of each class, created what I thought were meaningful discussion questions, and planned several class activities that I believed were engaging. But I still had a lot of doubt and insecurity. I wondered, what did I know about research that would be valuable to share with my students? Did I really have enough knowledge to be their professor in a research course? I wasn't sure I had the right words.

Early in my disability work, I used many words that although intended to be supportive of those with disabilities, were condescending. I know in the past I used "able-bodied," "special needs," "differently-abled" and I cringe at my misguided attempts to be inclusive. Definitions within the field of disability change and take on new connotations. For example, there is a debate over whether to use person-first language such as an individual with a visual impairment or to use the identity-first language such as a blind person. I remember an early course paper I wrote where I used "person with a disability" over and over again, shortening it to the acronym PWD. It was awkward and seemed to erase the real person. Now I use both terms depending on the format the participants choose, concentrating on presenting their voices in their terms rather than haughtily making that decision for them.

I made it through those first few classes in a blur of optimism and enthusiasm as I tried to use the right terms for theoretical frameworks and methodologies. As I found that I could answer the questions my students asked and provide examples that they found useful, I began to gain more confidence. I became more comfortable in my status as a professor of research methods just as I came to be surer of myself as a disability researcher when I paid more attention to the words I chose.

We have grown into researchers through our experiences and our self-study.

Conclusion

We have moved back and forth across the borders between insider, outsider, and in-between in our cultural studies. Methodologically, we also found ourselves once more in the in-between position navigating between the evocative and analytic autoethnographic approaches as we moved between self-study and the study of culture (Brion & Rogers-Shaw, 2021). The process of autoethnography furthered our cultural proficiency as we entered unfamiliar cultures, learned from our errors, and made some progress on the cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey et al., 2018). Our journeys have significance for other early career and graduate researchers as qualitative researchers need to recognize their positionality and their placement on the cultural proficiency continuum to be effective scholars in cross-cultural research. We have demonstrated how the self-reflective analysis of autoethnographic writing can assist researchers in positioning themselves in the field of qualitative research and enhancing their research skills.

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Author Note

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