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Afterword: On the unexpected challenges of doctoral studies in Aotearoa New Zealand:
An indigenous Māori perspective

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Afterword: On the unexpected challenges of doctoral studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: An indigenous Māori perspective

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Dr Renée Gilgen was invited to make connections between what the authors in this issue were saying and her own experience as a Māori doctoral candidate. Her response is an example of how a reader might encounter and engage with the papers in this special issue, insofar as Gilgen's indigenous perspective illustrates how readers bring their culturally-informed academic perspectives and knowledge to anything they read, including others' narratives.

An afterword

I began my doctoral study in 2011 and graduated in 2016. My PhD research sought to understand Māori teacher perspectives of their lived realities working in English-medium primary schools, a context I know well as a Māori teacher and to which I have returned to since completing my doctoral research study.

Framed by kaupapa Māori research (KMR) theory, my PhD thesis privileged Māori ontologies and epistemologies to create a culturally safe research design and approach, and to make sense of the participants' narratives of experience. However, researching within KMR theory was not without its challenges. For example, I navigated the challenge of researching within Western perspectives on doctoral research which typically expect there to be a distance between the researcher and participants. However, KMR theory provided a cultural framework which acknowledges that relationships may already exist between the researcher and participants (Kennedy & Cram, 2010; L. T. Smith, 2012). As such, the ethics application process disclosed the personal and professional relationships that existed between myself and the six research participants. Consistent with kaupapa Māori theory and grounded research methods, I first completed a semi-structured interview session with each participant, transcribed the individual conversations and identified themes drawn from the initial data analysis process. The initial themes were then presented to the participants to inform the *kaupapa* (focus) for the following collaborative *hui kōrero* (focus group conversation). There were three collaborative *hui kōrero* in total. As a researcher, I sought to sustain respectful relationships with those who agreed to participate in my study.

Another unexpected challenge that I had to navigate was ensuring that all participants were included in the conversations, specifically when a participant was unable to attend one of the collaborative *hui kōrero*. Therefore, I mitigated the issue by organising an alternative time and venue to



meet with the participant and I presented the kaupapa separately from the group conversation for their consideration, thoughts and reflections. I quickly learned how flexibility was key to the doctoral research processes.

The authors of this special issue have highlighted aspects of their unexpected challenges navigated during their doctoral journeys, in large part so that other doctoral candidates are enabled to consider how similar challenges may be resolved in their own projects. These aspects include selecting the appropriate theories to inform the research approach, complying with ethical requirements, and collecting and analysing the data (information) generated. An emphasis on caring for others (community and environment) and relationships weave through the articles in this issue.

Creating a theoretical framework informed by ontological realities

Locating a research argument and forming an appropriate theoretical framework require a doctoral candidate to synthesise a myriad of literature as a cyclical and iterative process. Both Thomas Everth and Hossein Hosseini reflect on the unexpected complexities they faced when navigating a series of ontological and epistemological knowledge schema to conceptualise a strong theoretical framework and locate their research arguments.

Hosseini reflects on the challenges he navigated when creating a theoretical framework that reflected his Persian culture and identity. He drew from an Islamic and Persian metaphor of Hijrat as well as postcoloniality. By doing so, Hosseini claimed a culturally safe research space to locate his doctoral study so that his participants' experiences as non-Western Iranian doctoral candidates in a Western framed university retained a high level of cultural integrity. I found Hosseini's article closely aligns to the *rangahau Māori* (research) ontologies and epistemologies. As such, I consider Hosseini's contribution to this special edition to offer other non-Western doctoral candidates, and their Western supervisors, a way to negotiate a theoretical research design that is culturally responsive and safe.

Everth found that in order to locate his research argument, he entered the proverbial doctoral "rabbit hole" by exploring a series of literature to create theoretical connections as well as disconnections. While reading his article, "centred on teachers' experiences in the time of the climate emergency", I could not help but defer to the cultural concept, and practice, of *rāhui* (environmental restrictions). *Rāhui* restricts access to a particular area and resources so that overused resources are given time to replenish naturally (Maxwell & Penetito, 2007). Although the practice of *rāhui* is deeply embedded within *tikanga Māori* (Māori values), knowledge of *rāhui* has evolved within Aotearoa New Zealand and continues to reflect the concept of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship).

I also found Atif Khalil's article sobering to read. Khalil provides an example for Western supervisors of non-Western doctoral candidates to advocate for culturally responsive and safe spaces within state funded universities. Such universities in Aotearoa New Zealand are framed by the values and attitudes that reflect dominant discourses (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Orange, 2004; Sinclair, 1991). Khalil navigated his unexpected challenges by engaging with self-study, communicating with his supervisors, joining sports activities and connecting with communities from his homeland. Mediating his struggles to make sense of the difference between his expectations of doctoral candidature and the realities he faced represents, from my perspective, the power imbalance that exists for communities who are marginalised within mainstream societies.

The ethics of care

A doctoral journey requires the candidate to consider how they will ensure that the ethics of care is the forefront of the research study. Candidates create a research design, select the research methodologies and methods they intend to apply, and identify how they intend to create safe, power-sharing relationships between themselves and research participants. Beneficence and nonmaleficence underpin

research ethics to ensure that research outcomes benefit others and do no harm (Cohen et al., 2017; Henry & Pene, 2001).

Nicolina Newcombe shared that she developed the skills of “edgewalking” as she navigated the ethics application phase. She reflected on her experiences of negotiating multiple realities for herself, those of her participants, and the university’s ethics regulations. Nicolina’s insights remind all stakeholders of the importance of ensuring that the ethics process is carefully constructed and dutifully honoured, particularly when researching within diverse communities who experience vulnerabilities.

I consider that ethics of care are underpinned by the tenets of Te Whare Tapa Whā. Te Whare Tapa Whā is a holistic model that proposes four key tenets which underpin hauora, or mental health and wellbeing, from a Māori worldview (Durie, 1998). Maintaining, or striving to maintain, a balance across the four realms; *taha tinana* (physical), *taha hinengaro* (mental and emotional), *taha whānau* (social) and *taha wairua* (spiritual) represents the ethics of self-care, and the care for others (Rochford, 2004).

Te Whare Tapa Whā is also relevant to Julie Hest’s reflexive account. Her transition from using a computer keyboard to dictating all phases of the doctoral research process reveals a tenacity of spirit and mind. Hest’s transitioning from one mode of communicating to a mode that required a lot of time and patience to learn mirrored the transitions her research participants experienced as they moved from one mode of teaching to a new mode. Such insights, from my view, humanise the doctoral research journey, revealing the research journey as similar to other journeys in life.

(Re)establishing relationships with the research participants

Devendra Adhikari’s and Eric Adjei Baah’s articles offer examples of how cultural integrity is maintained within the data collection phase. I also relate to the challenges that can arise when research involves working within our own communities because, at times, we may be considered an outsider even though, as insiders, we are privy to shared cultural norms. I feel that these articles highlight the importance of negotiating the awkward space between the insider/outsider position so that the cultural integrity of the research community is maintained.

Adhikari framed his unexpected challenges by drawing from the shared cosmology between himself and his research participants. Navigating the restrictions and conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic while collecting data *in situ*, Adhikari listened carefully to his participants as they shared their narratives of experience. He recalls the gift of silence as being culturally nuanced and responsive in his role as an outsider researcher in the research context. I found this approach aligned to my cultural norm as an insider researcher in that KMR principles and protocols reflect, “*aroha ki te tangata* (a respect for people) and ‘*titiro, whakarongo...korero*’ (look, listen...speak)” (Gilgen, 2016, p. 61). I also found Adhikari’s insider knowledge and shared cultural norms with his participants mediated the harsh realities they experienced because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Baah discusses a range of strategies he used to alleviate the teachers’ apprehension of his status as a doctoral candidate enrolled in a university located outside of Ghana. By sharing his experiences as an English teacher and assuring his teacher participants of his research role, Baah mediated his insider (teacher) and outsider (doctoral candidate) positions. Similarly to Adhikari, Baah’s strategies to form trusting relationships when recruiting research participants are valuable and highly important.

I had to mediate similar concerns as a doctoral candidate. KMR theory privileged my participants and me space to invite my doctoral supervisors to be part of the series of collaborative *kōrero hui* (focus group conversations). It was important for the participants to include the supervisors who were supporting my doctoral journey and by extension, the supervisors were privy to the stories they shared. Whanaungatanga and the concept of *whānau* (family) are inexplicably connected and, within the realm of KMR theory, the research *whānau* involved everyone, the participants, doctoral candidate *and* supervisors (Bishop, 1996, 1997). *Whakawhanaungatanga* is defined as the process of (re)establishing relationships. From a Māori worldview, the process of whakawhanaungatanga enables a connection to

be made between a researcher and research participants through either *whakapapa* (family connections) or *whenua* (land or regional connections) (Mead, 2003). Once connected, a deeper level of communication opens a pathway to form honest and trusting relationships between the researcher and research participants (L. T. Smith, 1999).

To develop trusting relationships with their research participants both Rong Yap and Rathore needed to adapt themselves in relationship with their research participants. Jia Rong Yap shares how despite entering the research field with assumptions about how the teacher participants would respond to her research questions, she came to restate her assumptions as being misassumptions. Her insights demonstrate a flexibility to reframe research questions and adjust the terminology used during conversations with participants. Rong Yap describes how she became aptly cognisant of the doctoral research process as a cyclical process that involves multiple iterations and offers reassurance that dealing with the messiness of doctoral studies is part of the doctoral journey.

Davika Rathore shares similar insights through her reflective account of the disruption to her data collection phase because of the 2020, Covid-19 lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand. Restructuring her research design so that she could proceed drew new insights for her. Rathore offers a list of useful advice for future doctoral candidates, suggesting that planning alternative approaches to collecting data may help mediate any unexpected challenges should they arise. I am thankful to have completed my doctorate before the Covid-19 pandemic, but as a classroom teacher in an English-medium primary school, I understand how the pandemic has required flexibility in finding alternatives and often innovative ways to meet and complete tasks. For example, transitioning from classroom teaching to online teaching and learning required the teaching team, students and their families to upskill very swiftly with online tools and platforms. Similar challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic also impacted how the following authors mitigated their respective data collection approaches.

Sharuda Saeed, Nutthida Tachaiyaphum and Emilia Achu Fenmachi offer innovative and active solutions to collect data in response to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. These authors' trial and error approaches to mediate differences of time zones and participants' access to the internet and online communication platforms reflects a high level of trust and commitment to the data collection phase that was shared between themselves and their participants. Unable to travel to the Maldives because of the Aotearoa New Zealand national lockdown during 2020 and again in 2021, Saeed developed a research *whānau* (family) using online platforms and tools. She reflects on the unexpected and multiple challenges she navigated to ensure that her research methods maintained integrity. Tachaiyaphum shared the distress she experienced having to cancel her plans to travel to Thailand just as Aotearoa New Zealand moved into lockdown in March, 2020. Tachaiyaphum had to adjust her data collection phase by submitting a revised ethics application as well as communicate with the participants and the Thai university involved in her doctoral research study.

Although Fenmachi had completed her data collection phase in Cameroon and already returned to Aotearoa New Zealand before the 2020 lockdown, the consequences of Covid-19 provided an opportunity for her to explore a new aspect of her research study. Fenmachi re-entered the field using Zoom and WhatsApp to communicate with the research participants. Like Saeed and Tachaiyaphum, the changes to Fenmachi's research methods also required her to resubmit a revised application to the University's ethics committee. Saeed's, Tachaiyaphum's and Fenmachi's adaptations and adjustments to their data collection phases are examples of the flexibility and solution-focused approaches and strategies developed by many doctoral candidates during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Analysing data and sense making

Zahra Mohamed compared her experiences of *teaching* the theories of qualitative data analysis (QDA) with *applying* the theories of QDA. She realised that analysing participants "lived realities" is also highly iterative, non-linear and reflective. Mohamed's insightful account of the "messiness" that occurred when

grappling with her own data offers reassurance to beginning doctoral candidates that qualitative research is highly challenging because analysis occurs at all phases of the doctoral journey. Her article is an example of the challenge many doctoral candidates experience as they navigate the academic rigour of qualitative data analysis.

Mairaj Jafri's article discusses the unexpected challenges he faced when analysing his data. He uses the term "missing values" to describe the omitted participant responses to his online research survey. Propelled by the frustrations he experienced when having to find a way to understand the causes of the omissions, the subsequent "creative tension" underpinned his determination to mediate the "messiness" of the data analysis phase. The salient point shared by Mohamed and Jafri is that it matters not whether data is generated quantitatively or gathered qualitatively, similar tensions emerge when analysing data.

Analysing data can also pose challenges to doctoral candidates regardless of the research paradigm. Applying a KMR perspective, three analytical concepts emerged as I grappled with making sense of the participants' narratives during my doctoral journey. As such, it helped me to term the stages of the data analysis with each of the following concepts (see Gilgen, 2016). Meaning "perception or view", *te kitenga* refers to the open coded analysis of the individual semi-structured interviews and the following series of collaborative *hui kōrero*, or focus group conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). *Neketanga* (to shift or move) reflects the process of reassembling the data to generate the relationships across categories and emerging concepts. The final analysis process, *pito mai raro*, or underlying core principles, involved organising, reorganising and cross-referencing concepts, literature and visual representations of emerging categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). KMR theory has been a deliberate construction of Māori ontological and epistemological paradigms of knowledge (Henry & Pene, 2001; G. H. Smith, 1997; L. T. Smith, 2012) and characterising my analysis using these three concepts under KMR added to the integrity of my research.

Concluding thoughts

The authors' articles in this issue demonstrate immense resilience, most having to not only navigate the impact of a global pandemic and subsequent restrictions, but also intellectual flexibility and personal commitment to find solutions to successfully mediate unexpected challenges of the doctoral journey. They highlight the importance of mediating diverse ontological realities and ethics of care while forming safe relationships and making sense of the participants' contributions to the research study. Collectively, the authors offer meaningful insights that might reassure the doctoral candidate fraternity that navigating the "choppy waters" of doctoral studies is deeply personal, relational, academically challenging and highly reflective.

I have aligned the unexpected challenges I have read about within the cultural concepts and values that I consider normal from an Indigenous Māori perspective. I do not claim to present a single view of *tikanga Māori* (Māori values); rather, I have drawn from my own understanding, experiences and perspectives as Māori. The cultural theory and principles through which I viewed the articles are, 1) KMR theory, 2) Te Whare Tapa Whā, 3) Whakawhanaungatanga, and 4) Te kitenga/neketanga/pito mai raro. It must be noted that KMR theory and tikanga Māori principles and values are fluid and are recognised within the reflections that the authors have shared and my own experience and which I carry forward for use in the future.

I conclude this afterword with the whakatauki,

"He aha mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata"

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people!.

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