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Holding the line: maintaining Indigenous sovereignty and authority in international research collaborations

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ABSTRACT

This article calls to attention the possibilities and problematics of upholding Indigenous ethics and approaches in cross-cultural international research collaborations. We describe the opportunities and challenges that present themselves and elaborate on four lessons learned during a recent education project, including (1) how the authority and mana of Indigenous stakeholders can be maintained, (2) how to ensure Indigenous concepts and worldviews are honoured, (3) how to decolonize western academic expectations about open data-sharing, and (4) how and why Indigenous rituals of encounter must be established to ensure cultural safety. Using Moana Jackson's (2016) ten Māori research ethics, this paper identifies and examines what needs to be upheld, interrogated and refused when working in cross-cultural international research collaborations. We conclude with recommendations for collaborators, including the importance of embedding regular opportunities for collective reflexivity, as a means of rebalancing or refusing the uneven power relations that affect genuine partnership.

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Introduction

Opportunities for international research collaboration hold the promise of transforming the way knowledge is generated, disseminated, and applied. Moreover, in our increasingly interconnected academic worlds, international research collaboration can potentially facilitate a rich exchange of knowledge, ideas, and expertise, leading to more innovative and impactful research outcomes. Bond et al. (2021, p. 199) define international research collaboration as involving “researchers from different countries, cooperating on research projects, which involve two or more of these activities: discussing ideas, presenting at conferences, preparing grant proposals, conducting joint research, and/or writing joint scholarly publications between team members.” Many funding organisations, including the Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, The Australian Research Council, Horizon Europe and The Spencer Foundation (US) offer grants specifically designed to support international

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collaboration. However, in the rush to establish international partnerships and apply for prestigious joint funding, a number of significant ethical and cross-cultural challenges can be overlooked or underestimated by researchers and their participating institutions. In highly competitive higher education contexts (see Antony & Nicola, 2020), research collaborations are sometimes put together in haste with little thought to what it takes to ensure cross-national integrity and a commonly understood ethics of care. Given that there is often a great deal at stake in international collaborations due to the substantial investment of funding and effort required to initiate and maintain them, careful consideration needs to be given to negotiating project protocols, timelines and mutually agreed upon outcomes. It is our contention that these considerations are made more complex when the research is predicated on a partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research collectives.

On the face of it, problems seem to arise as a result of miscommunication, cultural crosstalk or rigid funder expectations. However, our research team, comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous education researchers from Aotearoa New Zealand, propose that Indigenous researchers, particularly those working in their own iwi (tribal/first nation) contexts, need to be more alert to the fundamental onto-epistemological (beliefs about what we can know and how) and ethical rifts that can complexify international Indigenous and non-Indigenous research collaborations.

The opportunities present in the global rush to research collaboration

International research collaborations are considered one of the most important aspects of an academic career (Bond et al., 2021), accelerating access to diverse expertise, resources, and networks, as well as enhanced research impact and academic recognition. Researchers are encouraged to engage in international research collaborations because it has been shown to result in higher citations (Abramo et al., 2019), wider research networks (Yemini, 2021), and improved university quality indices (Times Higher Education, 2019). In addition, international research collaborations can open doors to funding opportunities from international agencies and foundations (Zhou & Tian, 2014). Moreover, collaboration with Indigenous researchers is increasingly recognised as crucial for advancing knowledge and ensuring ethical research practices with Indigenous communities, particularly in fields like health, education, and social sciences.

Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (see https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/policies-politiques/statements-enonces/Indigenous_research-recherche_autochtone-eng.aspx) has produced an *Indigenous Research Statement of Principles* which explicitly "value[s] collaborative and diverse relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples in Canada, and with Indigenous Peoples in other parts of the world" (np). The statement of principles also expresses respect for "Indigenous knowledge systems, including logics, epistemologies and methodologies, as important avenues for exploring the contours of Indigenous knowledge, contributing to interdisciplinary collaboration, and extending the boundaries of knowledge in western disciplines." Similarly, the Australian Research Council's "discovery Indigenous" grants (see <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/funding-schemes/discovery-program/discovery-indigenous>) are designed to enable "national and international collaboration across disciplines, between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

and non-Indigenous researchers to address complex issues and priorities.” The Australian Research Council contends that it delivers benefit to Australia by building Australia’s research capacity by supporting international collaboration as a means of building a strong and engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research workforce.

Horizon Europe, the European Union’s main research and innovation program, offers funding for a wide range of research areas, including those relevant to Indigenous communities and their knowledge (see <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/science-and-technology/science-and-innovation/international-opportunities/horizon-europe-research-fund/cluster-2-culture-creativity-and-inclusive-society>). Horizon Europe seeks to fund research and innovation that promotes cultural diversity, creativity, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly as it relates to “safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage.” In addition, Spencer’s Racial Equity Research Grants program (see https://www.spencer.org/grant_types/vision-grants) is interested in funding “studies that seek to understand the situated experiences of minoritized groups including, but not limited to, Black; Middle Eastern or Northern African; Latinx/Latino/Latina, Hispanic, or Spanish origin; Asian or Asian American; and Native/Tribal/Indigenous communities.” Spencer submissions encourage engagement with “issues of coloniality” central to scholarship focused on and with Native/Tribal/Indigenous communities. It seems that in the ever evolving landscape of international research collaboration, partnership with Indigenous researchers and communities has emerged as a key foci, promising to transform the presumed universality of scientific knowledge and methods, and the ways knowledge is generated, disseminated, and applied. International research collaborations involving Indigenous partners can foster research innovation, where fresh ideas are cultivated, where the potential for groundbreaking discoveries is magnified, and where the boundaries of conventional knowledge are pushed further. The notable growth in Indigenous/non-Indigenous research collaborations in recent years reflects a broader recognition of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems but also emphasises the need for nuanced national and international guidelines that ensures Indigenous community involvement in research design, data interpretation, knowledge mobilisation and dissemination.

Vision Mātauranga: collaborative research in the New Zealand context

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Māori involvement in research is informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), Aotearoa’s founding constitutional document, a formal social policy of biculturalism, with iwi (tribes) positioned as treaty partners with the Crown (Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019). As such, attention to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the ways Māori are impacted by all research in the Aotearoa context has been something long emphasised in government-mandated policies and official advice. For example, Vision Mātauranga is a New Zealand policy framework that encourages the integration of Mātauranga Māori (Māori traditional knowledge) with Western science and research practices (Ministry of Research Science & Technology, 2007). Vision Mātauranga was designed to “unlock the innovation potential of Māori knowledge, resources and people to assist New Zealanders to create a better future” (Ministry of Research Science & Technology 2007, p. 3). The Vision Mātauranga policy aimed to amplify the innovation potential of three dimensions of Māori research

capacity: knowledge, people and resources (Ministry of Research Science & Technology, 2007).

In terms of mobilising Māori knowledge to generate new innovations, the policy advocated dual value for Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and Western scientific knowledge, adequate resourcing of Māori research activities, the leadership and/or involvement of Māori experts who are valued for both their cultural and scientific expertise. The policy advocates growing, supporting, recognising and rewarding excellent Māori researchers, and encourages international, transdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration. However, according to Broughton et al. (2015, p. 87) “Mātauranga (Māori knowledge) is still often treated as simply information rather than a knowledge system, and Māori working with that system treated as informants rather than collaborators, colleagues or experts.” Even within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, cultural differences, including academic culture and customs, can be a barrier to genuine collaboration.

According to the lead writer of Vision Mātauranga, Dr Charles Royal (cited in Rauika Māngai, 2020), it was never envisaged that Vision Mātauranga “would capture and support all the many kinds of Māori relevant research that could be conducted within research, science and technology” sectors (p. 19). Instead, the policy spoke to “positive Māori development and growth, one that sees Māori as a ‘net national opportunity’ not a ‘net national problem’” (Royal in Rauika Māngai, 2020, p. 17). Despite 18 years since the introduction of the Vision Mātauranga policy, just 5% of researchers working in universities and Crown Research Institutes are Māori, and only 7% of PhD graduates are Māori, which when combined with “the structural barriers that impede funding for Māori-related research” (Evans in Rauika Māngai, 2020, p. 21) means that capacity for Māori engagement in international research is limited. Consequently, a 2024 report by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment contends that while over half (57%) of Strategic Science Investment Fund projects reported they were relevant to Māori, only 4% were described as kaupapa Māori research. Additionally, while 63% of Marsden Fund projects reported alignment with the Vision Mātauranga theme, only 7.5% of them were Māori led. Consequently, the need for Māori led and kaupapa Māori funded projects is urgent (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2024).

The challenges of international research collaboration

Despite the significant benefits of research collaboration, research suggests multiple cultural challenges need to be considered when initiating and conducting international research. Yao (2021, p. 108) contends that “different perspectives, rituals, and habits derived across cultures” can impede success, recommending “multi-cultural adaptation” including “keeping an open mind and being willing to consistently challenge one’s own worldview” (p. 108). Bond et al. (2021, p. 202) also allude to the cultural complexities of international collaboration, stating “Researchers from the Global South may experience or possibly be more sensitive to power play and the historical and continuing asymmetries in power in international research collaboration. In many cases Africa and the Global South have the data and fresh questions, the Global North has the funding and perceived/assumed gravitas.” These taken-for-granted power asymmetries highlight the importance of equitable relationships and participative

research design, particularly when collaborations have been initiated by the North (Asare et al., 2022).

Lewthwaite and Deckert (2020, p. 262) have suggested that because researchers from global north organisations can often be “blind to [their] own authoritative control and exploitative mechanisms, this (un)holy matrimony between Western institution and Western ways of knowledge production tends to either disallow or denigrate Indigenous ways of knowing and is prone to normalising colonialism in socio-academic relationships.” Lewthwaite and Deckert (2020, p. 262) call on Western universities to “reflect on the phenomenon of neo-colonial academic exoticising” and the “the ethical dilemma associated with inviting Indigenous knowledge makers” into research collaborations, especially when “knowledge hierarchies are [still] largely constructed around, and bolstered by, settler colonial knowledge and practice” (Burgess et al., 2021, p. 58). In cases where Indigenous knowledge is diminished, Burgess et al. (2021) recommend the sovereign act of refusal, refusing to be disciplined by those who do not necessarily have our communities’ best interests at heart. In order to critically reflect on the ethics of refusal, we invoke Māori ethics as discussed by Moana Jackson. Moana Jackson (2016) offered these ethics “not as a definitive or programmatic list of definitive ethics, but rather as something which I think as Māori and as Indigenous Peoples we might like to bear in mind whenever we begin to question ourselves or others or the lives we would like to live” (p. 61).

Māori ethics and international research collaboration

A Māori lens on the ethics of international research collaboration involving Māori is essential to ensure that the research design, implementation and dissemination practices involving Aotearoa New Zealand respect Māori rights, promote self-determination, uphold cultural practices, and avoid perpetuating harm. All research involving Māori peoples must acknowledge the historical context of colonial research, prioritise Māori knowledge systems and cultural safety, and ensure fair and equitable research practices that ultimately benefit Māori. It must draw attention to both what is visible, and what is not visible to non-Māori. Careful attention to the ways methodology and ethics are understood by the international partner is particularly important. Tsosie et al. (2022) propose an overlapping and complementary conceptual framework based on respect, relationship, representation, relevance, responsibility and reciprocity (the six Rs) to be applied in studies involving Indigenous researchers and communities. The six Rs acknowledge and validate “long-standing traditions among Indigenous communities generating scientific knowledge through processes of observation and experimentation congruent with their cultural values” (Tsosie et al., 2022, np).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Jackson (2016) proposed ten ethics for consideration – the ethics of prior thought, moral choice, imagination, change, time, power, courage, honesty, modesty, and celebration. These ethics were discussed at the 2016 Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference held in Melbourne, Australia. The *ethic of prior thought* involves acknowledging Indigenous ideas, values, frameworks, and intellectual traditions and *the ethic of moral choice* involves reflecting on who has the moral right and authority to undertake Indigenous research. The *ethic of imagination* encourages researchers to expand their

relational worlds and see beyond the realities imposed by colonialism, and the *ethic of change* proposes that research that does not seek to create positive transformation or seek solutions is unethical. Jackson (2016) further argues that research that merely perpetuates the status quo is of little value to Indigenous peoples. The *ethic of time* encourages researchers to consider Māori temporalities as an alternative to linear Western constructions of time. Māori temporalities emphasise the simultaneity and importance of past, present and future in the contemporary realities of Māori people. The *ethic of power* recognizes that research is concerned with the generation of knowledge and never divorced from power, while the *ethic of courage* suggest the importance of maintaining researcher integrity, challenging the status quo and making difficult decisions for the collective good of Indigenous people. The *ethic of honesty* involves acknowledging the painful history of research on Indigenous people and the diminishment of their identities and rights, while the *ethic of modesty* proposes that we recognize the collective efforts of others and resist practices that encourage us to claim our research findings (gathered with, and alongside, others) as novel, new, or “our intellectual property.” Finally, the *ethic of celebration* contends that we must celebrate Indigenous resilience, survival, joy in what they have managed to retain despite colonisation. Jackson’s (2016) final caution was to remind researchers that “among the many brutal, damaging things that colonization has done to Indigenous people has been to convince them that there is indeed only one way of seeing the world, only one system of knowledge,” instead reminding the audience that all people’s developed their own acute and astute intellectual traditions shaped by the land or which they live “which in turn shapes their history, their relationships, and the ways they see the world.”

Jackson’s (2016) view of ethics from a Māori standpoint highlights the potential for onto-epistemological rifts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views; rifts which are not always obvious to non-Indigenous collaborators. That onto-epistemological rift can become a chasm when an absence of care and openness to change results in a breakdown of the partnership. This article is an attempt to be transparent and reflexive about what we see as a disconnect of international partner “methods” from the underpinning values of the wider research team, resulting in translated, reified or institutionalised notions of Indigenous methods and therefore forms of partnership that were, despite good intentions, inappropriate and unsafe.

Background to the project and project team

The authors were involved in an international research collaboration involving teachers and researchers from four countries. The educational research project had received significant funding from another country and involved early childhood educators, teachers, parents/caregivers and community members from Indigenous communities in all four countries, as well as university researchers. More generally the project sought to improve Indigenous children’s educational achievement by enhancing their Indigenous language and cultural knowledge through action research with teachers. It is important to note that we replaced the original New Zealand team, which had no Indigenous researchers involved, 2 years into the project. Our replacement research team comprised three Indigenous researchers and one non-Indigenous researcher.

After a robust literature review examining key western concepts and terms used in the already established project, we aspired to work alongside Māori families and community members to ascertain what Māori language and cultural concepts were essential from their perspective. We then intended to share this information with teachers to construct curricular materials that might assist with the overall aim. The international team were working with teachers in Indigenous communities to ascertain what Indigenous students needed in terms of refined curricular materials. Four key issues arose that facilitated our mutually agreed departure from the project after two years, which will be discussed in the following section.

Drawing on four critically reflexive journal entries from our team, we sought to examine the key issues associated with our early withdrawal from the international research collaboration. Our team employed reflexive journalling to help us critique, appraise, and evaluate our own subjectivities and specific concerns. The journal entries enabled us to examine the tricky ground that we encountered (Smith, 2005), the colonising and pathologising practices we navigated, and the practice gap that emerged between our Indigenous relationalities, theories and authority to determine our own research protocols. In qualitative research, critical reflexivity has become a means of understanding knowledge production – as it is contextualised, situated and mediated by the researcher's perspectives and experiences. Therefore, the knowledge we discuss in the following section was shaped by New Zealand research teams' preconceptions, values, interests and the circumstances in which they participated and then withdrew from the international research collaboration. In addition, because positionality is closely related to reflexivity (Holmes, 2020), aside from our reflexive narrative, we also provide brief positionality statements to locate our social and cultural positions and its impact on the dissolution of our international research collaboration. We identify a slow undoing; four reflections on un-homely ethics of international cross-cultural research collaboration.

Lesson 1: establishing and maintaining Indigenous authority and the mana of Indigenous stakeholders

Rebecca. I am of Pākehā descent, a member of the majority community of Aotearoa New Zealand, with ancestral links to Western Europe and Great Britain. I am a researcher of literacy education, working in design-based research studies that prioritize equity of educational success through co-design of focus, measures and tools. I was raised in a politically active Pākehā family, with a longstanding belief in self-determination for Aotearoa as a nation based on tino-rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty) for Māori.

Colleagues and I were invited to be collaborators in a large prestigious international consortium. It was both an honour and an exciting opportunity. However, once part of the team, it became clear, things are done differently in other countries. We had become part of something big, something global, and something led by international scholars, using the tenets of Western institutional thinking. With the best of intentions, the design of the project was a Participatory Action Research approach and sought to support teachers to inquire into their teaching practice with Indigenous children across multiple contexts. Things began to feel wrong. We had started with the wrong people. We were starting in

the wrong place. We were starting part way through someone else's agenda. We were using international methodological frameworks, and we were involved in a project that was the instantiation of the system studying other people's children. We called pause.

Starting in the right place mattered to us. Walking with the right people also mattered. We needed to reset, and to decide what was right in our context. And our work needed to align with kaupapa Māori.¹ For us, a principled starting point in this context for Māori children would begin with whānau (families). Holding on to these ideals, we ensured the project purpose, research questions, data collection, analysis and knowledge translation was co-designed alongside, and met the needs of, our community/iwi partners. Our research prioritised whānau Māori and their preferred processes. The wider project positioned the research as teachers' work. And so, we entered into a tussle over research methods.

For our international colleagues, the issues seemed pragmatic. For us, the issue was an Ethic of power – to recognise that research is concerned with the generation of knowledge; and “never divorced” from power. Education research “which does not acknowledge that power ... is dangerous for Indigenous peoples” (Jackson, 2016, p. 45:19). For the lead international researchers, winning the funding had meant deciding the methods and they were in the position of being asked by us to accommodate a shift to a methodology that they did not understand or agree with.

Our international partners were asked to wait, as we developed an appropriate Māori theoretical framework, co-designed appropriate questions and methods. We decided to take the time to get it right, to do things in alignment with tikanga (correct protocols). This, we saw, as the Ethics of time. We sought to move away from Western concepts of time, where the present is the pinnacle of existence and the source of the most “relevant or up-to-date” knowledge. We highlighted the ways both colonial histories and future aspiration impact on how children experience literacy education in the present. Our component of the project prioritised whānau Māori timelines and time preferences. The broader project privileged the international team and funder's timeline. This pause was an assertion of Indigenous autonomy and authority – for our team and for the whānau Māori were we working alongside. Pushing pause was our first refusal.

Lesson 2: ensuring the integrity of Māori concepts, knowledge and tikanga are honoured

Maia. I am a descendant of Ngāti Wai, Ngāi Tahu Ngā Puhī and Tainui. I have a teaching background and am a doctor of education. I am nearing the end of my early academic career and have led and participated in multiple education research projects. I have been raised with te ao Māori values and knowledges that guide my academic work.

Being invited into a space as a Māori researcher can be an interesting place to find yourself. Especially when the space has been initiated by non-Indigenous people. There are so many layers to identify, define, question and understand before positioning yourself in/with the project. Then the process repeats as te ao Māori concepts, knowledge and tikanga are drawn into the space. There is always a sense of mataara, of alertness, a protectiveness of how Māori worldviews and knowledge will sit in the space, be acknowledged and respected. Our involvement in this project, as Indigenous researchers, was instigated by one of the original team members – all non-Indigenous researchers co-opted to form the Aotearoa New Zealand arm of this international project investigating Indigenous concepts of literacy and play. Our colleague and ally recognised that the

configuration of researchers arranged by the non-Indigenous project leads would not be acceptable or appropriate to our context in Aotearoa, and so sought to remedy that by enacting the Ethic of Moral Choice; actively addressing the inappropriateness of researching Indigenous perspectives without Indigenous involvement or research leadership. From the outset we found ourselves attempting to calibrate te ao Māori concepts and contexts within an already fully formed project.

As we got our heads around the already established project, and our role and direction in it, we had a lot of initial excitement as we conceptualised the shape of our project and the mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) we could centralise as part of our project. We were attending to the Ethic of Celebration and deep into our research alongside whānau Māori and teachers, all of whom we considered experts, when it became apparent that the Māori worldviews and research practices, which drove our investigation, were at odds with the expectations of the international project team. While this had been apparent (even expected) since our initial involvement, we decided we could not compromise the mana (authority) and mātauranga tuku iho (ancestral ways of knowing, doing and being) that were so central to our project in order to satisfy external conditions that did not understand us. In our attempt to continue our project as we had imagined it – celebrating the rich Indigenous knowledge that we had been privileged to have had shared with us – we appeared to be alienating ourselves from the wider international group.

Our intention to protect and privilege whānau Māori knowledge and experts became a point of confusion and contention in terms of our engagement with the project. From our perspective we were Indigenous and allied researchers carrying out research from an Indigenous frame. Our intention was to contribute to a global body of knowledge that would call attention to Māori ways of knowing and being in a space that has been long dominated by Western research, perceptions, convictions and assumptions. About us. While we can only speculate, it felt that from the perspective of the international project leads we were not “doing” the research in ways that aligned to their (humanitarian) vision. Ultimately, we couldn’t sacrifice our mana motuhake (ability to self-determine) or the expert knowledge of our community. Rejecting the academic equivalent of beads and blankets was our second refusal.

Lesson 3: decolonising Western expectations about open data sharing

Selena. My heritage includes Samoan, Ngāti Raukawa and Pākehā ancestors. I am an indigenous woman raised in spaces where assimilation was seen as the way to progress. Life experiences have re-framed the way I understand and operate in the world, with my background in teaching and educational research providing vocabulary for inherent ways of being.

Arriving later to the international research collaboration, we began in Aotearoa after an invite by a Pākehā academic who was assembling an Indigenous research team. We sat together with what we knew from our non-Indigenous colleagues and asked ourselves “Are we the right people to do this research?” Through wānanga and engagement with the literature, we reflected on the international research agenda and how it translated into our context. As a team we prioritised the Ethic of Change, amplifying Kaupapa Māori accountabilities by nurturing relationships and research practices that were reciprocal, enduring and relational in nature. The relational approach provided guidance for us to anchor the work in Te Tai Tokerau (Northland). This research context positioned all three Indigenous researchers as both insiders (community members) and outsiders (university researchers) – something we knew enriched the research project and processes. The

research team knew we were working with and for those woven into this study, not necessarily for a funding agency or international colleagues.

Our component of the research prioritised whānau Māori sovereignty over data. Attending to the Ethic of Prior Thought we began with kaumatua (elders) and whānau Māori voices and we were able to create a conceptual framework in order to present findings (as requested) to our international collaborators. We presented this as a living framework, one that would change and evolve with community consultation and review. We decided that before the presentation could be recorded and shared widely with the international team, our Indigenous collective needed to approve the framework. Timelines didn't allow for approval to happen prior to the presentation, so the research team opposed data-sharing.

The international research team response appeared to include the position of having a "right" to access the data as the fund holders. We then asked ourselves, "Are these the right people to share this data and worldview with?" To maintain Indigenous integrity and enact an Ethic of Courage we made two principled decisions: 1) that we should reserve any decision-making about the data for the kaumatua and whānau Māori it was designed with and belonged to, and 2) that the international team did/should bear the same responsibilities to, and ethic of care for, the Te Tai Tokerau data. We consequently withheld all permissions that would enable our international research collaborators to own, use or publish the presentation and data. Again, our worldviews collided, revealing tensions and power struggles that would need relational attention before they permeated future decisions and actions. Denying wider access to our community data and knowledge was our third refusal.

Lesson 4: prioritising Indigenous rituals of encounter

Melinda. I am a Māori woman (Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Hine, Te Paatu/Ngāti Kahu, Ngāti Whakaue) and a professor of Māori education. I have led educational, community and kaupapa Māori research projects in Aotearoa New Zealand for more than 20 years, utilising a diverse range of research methods and approaches. I am a kanohi-kitea (seen face) in Māori and education research contexts.

Our diverse research team was comprised of Indigenous researchers and teachers from four different countries. This diversity of experience and worldview required, to our minds, some negotiation of cultural protocol to ensure our rituals of encounter were culturally safe and honoring for all. Rituals of encounter are common across many first nations and Indigenous groups. They ensure that the cultural protocols of the "home" people are upheld while the same time recognising the cultural safety needs of the visiting Indigenous and non-Indigenous group members. We requested an opportunity to meet separately with the other Indigenous group members to talk through an appropriate and inclusive process for coming together – and suggested that the non-Indigenous members might also want to do the same. We wanted the agreed-upon ritual of encounter to be culturally safe and affirming for all members of the international research collaboration. To our minds this was an opportunity to employ the Ethic of Imagination, by expanding our relational worlds and creating new, innovative and inclusive cultural protocols. The opportunity to meet as separate Indigenous and non-Indigenous members was refused and it was suggested that the process we were proposing was going to cause segregation, rather than reconciliation. The project leads were offended that we had asked. Separate conversations were then held about our proposal, without our involvement, with different individuals from the wider group. Our attempts to enact the Ethic of Celebration, acknowledging and celebrating our collective Indigenous resilience, survival, joy and cultural protocols, were rejected. We were told our idea was inappropriate and unsafe and we did not get a chance to discuss the

idea with the other Indigenous collaborators. The non-Indigenous project leads were “hurt” at the inference that the current process was unsafe. But the current practices were culturally unsafe for us – and their indignation, tears and fragility made things worse.

We did not want to reproduce the colonizing, deficit and “quick” research practices that saturate many international education collaborations. We consequently adopted a final “sovereign stance of refusal” (Burgess et al., 2021) by rejecting the prospect of continuing with a project that caused us to feel culturally unsafe. Tuck and Yang (2014) describe refusal as an attempt “to place limits on conquest and the colonisation of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (p. 225). We saw our refusal as an act of *mana motuhake* – Indigenous self-determination, authority and integrity. Withdrawal was our final refusal.

Discussion

International research collaborations are built on the premise of shared benefits and are commonly formed based on a vision of building greater global understanding through working together. Collaborators agree to combine their different (i) sets of expertise and (ii) spheres of influence and (iii) communities of responsibility in learning together (Getenet, 2019). From a relational and learning perspective, partnerships offer the opportunity for mutual learning, potentially combining contextualised understandings to enhance more generalised understandings through the sharing of knowledge from different places and viewpoints (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020).

While some researchers argue that the role of collaboration is to draw on multiple bodies of knowledge to address complex global challenges (Jay & Rose, 2024), partnerships between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions are inevitably sites of coloniality, and questions of knowledge are always questions of power (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Jackson, 2016). Invariably, cross-cultural international research collaborations surface differing onto-epistemologies and ethical standpoints. As an example, we highlight the universal acceptance of Western institutional view of knowledge as “transferable” and global (Akena, 2012; Wang et al., 2021). This view denotes a view of human thinking and learning that situates knowledge as a set of finite and transferable resources that rest in the heads of individuals, for giving and receiving. Invariably this knowledge exchange plays out in ways that mean Indigenous people give and Western institutions receive. In contrast, Indigenous onto-epistemologies conceptualise knowledge and knowing as a series of complex and shifting relational networks (Jones et al., 2025). As Jones and Hoskins (2016) contend, in Indigenous ontologies, “all beings and things have particular qualities and capabilities by virtue of their taking form always and only in a relational context” (p. 80). That is, Indigenous knowledge and data cannot, and should not, be interpreted outside of its relevant context.

Honouring Indigenous authority and self-determination in research

Within our team’s relational worldview, knowledge is not conceived of as “thing” to “give” (Hetaraka, 2024a, 2024b). Using relationality as a lens, people exist and know, in and through relations, with other people, places, times, the planet and the cosmos.

Knowing, and responsibilities that come with knowing, are relationally ignited, connecting these aspects. Research, in an always changing world of dynamic interactions, is an ongoing collective negotiation of learning and enacting responsibility together, in collaboration. Our approach needed to begin and develop relationally, with people, in place.

Within a worldview where research is conceived as the gathering and transferring of the “thingness” of knowledge, there is little recognition of Indigenous, contextualised or place centred epistemologies. Despite the acknowledged good intentions, multiple levels of tension surface, including structural barriers, created by powerful institutions; blind spots created by assumed worldviews, and unexpected contextual tensions created by assumptions of universalism (Nadeau et al., 2022). For us, these blind-spots and assumed worldviews meant the project had started with the right intention but for us, it was heading in the wrong direction with an ill-fitting methodology and a press for pace that epitomised the tensions between Western and Indigenous ways of working alongside whānau and the wider community.

Educational research collaborations and their processes and methods are therefore not neutral. Research processes, designs and enactments are all historical, and tension-filled relationships between universities, administrators, officials, leaders, communities and teachers are common. Being a part of a research collaboration requires considering, for example, how one person’s statement of “knowledge” is simultaneously an enactment of the processes of their power (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Jackson, 2016). Even our initial engagements required establishing and maintaining the nature of Indigenous authority in the project and the mana of all Indigenous stakeholders.

Upholding and honouring Indigenous concepts, knowledge and tikanga

There are many examples of successful Indigenous community-university collaborations (see Hetaraka et al., 2023; McRae et al., 2010), especially as more and more research projects are being led by Indigenous peoples. Somerville and Perkins (2003) have referred to Indigenous-non-Indigenous research collaboration as “the contact zone,” and propose this framing as a useful way to theorise the site, border work (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996) and emotional and intellectual cultural double shift (Haar & Martin, 2022) for Indigenous researchers in intercultural research collaboration. This conceptualisation of intellectual and emotional work aligns to Jackson’s (2016) ethic of prior thought, which acknowledges the ways Indigenous ideas, values and frameworks are integral to the success of a project, but often come at the cultural expense and additional relational effort of the indigenous research partners. Haar and Martin (2022) argue that Māori researchers necessarily work across two or more worlds and thus operate with a double-shift (scientific *and* cultural work) which, when factored into the collaboration, can enable them to uphold Mātauranga Māori, ensuring Māori research aspirations prevail. Prior thought as an ethical consideration when working across cultural borders and norms means that the Indigenous partners, if they are to be true partners with rangatiratanga (leadership and sovereignty) in the project, must be present and have authority at every stage of the process. This is how research is transformed, and how research projects can be transformative. Matson et al. (2021) point out

that while community-based collaborative research is increasingly valued, very little has been written about how collaborative partnerships between “tribal and non-tribal entities develop or evolve” (p. 109). This article has attempted to contribute to this gap in the literature.

Decolonising Western expectations about open data sharing

Traversing cross cultural differences in understanding about data sovereignty can be challenging and is a common tension across international collaborations (Reeves et al., 2022). Collaboration and partnership can also be clouded by research funding expectations, power and control of data – both on and offline. Ruckstuhl (2023) traces the depths of these issues back to the Doctrine of Discovery and how it has shaped government policy, systems and sovereignty definitions with the “default setting” being constrained forms of power for Indigenous peoples (p. 399). Limited power is concerning in view of Kukutai and Cormack (2021) statement that data is now “the world’s most valuable resource” (p. 24). Considering the power of data in this modern age, collaborative research projects must navigate data sharing protocols with care and clear expectations.

Internationally, Indigenous nations have been advocating through organisations such as The Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) who connect Indigenous “national communities to advocate for shared rights and interests in data” (website: www.gida-global.org/history-of-Indigenous-data-sovereignty). This group “sees Indigenous data sovereignty as reinforcing the “right to engage in decision-making in accordance with Indigenous values and collective interests.” The emphasis on autonomy asserts the rights of Indigenous people to set their own agenda for information, and for using their data to achieve their own goals and build their own narrative independent of those that others have determined for them.” (Lilley et al., 2024, p. 2804). For Aotearoa, Māori data sovereignty is deeply connected to tino-rangatiratanga (self-determination) which is guaranteed in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) (Lilley et al., 2024). Sporle et al. (2021) have note that “although Māori data sovereignty considerations have yet to be integrated into information policy law, it is clear that they are more widely accepted and are being incorporated in to practice across many areas, especially in public sector agencies” (p. 75). When multiple world views are represented in international research teams, it is vital that all actions around Indigenous data and peoples give effect to self-determination.

For Māori, the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, there has been extensive work undertaken to ensure that Māori data is recognised as taonga. Ruckstuhl (2023) explains that the legal definition of taonga is “both tangible, such as mere and heitiki (greenstone weapons and ornaments), and intangible, such as language and knowledge” (p. 401). Research pertaining to Māori, with Māori and by Māori will undoubtedly contain Māori knowledge and careful consideration of who has control over the ways that knowledge is collected, stored, governed and disseminated is critical. For international collaborations, multiple groups may need to be consulted before deciding on ways to share and disseminate data.

Prioritising cultural safety and honouring Indigenous practices

In Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) pōwhiri are a common Māori ceremony of welcome or ritual of encounter (Mead, 2003; Pouwhare, 2017), enacted at the point of two new peoples encountering each other (Rameka et al., 2023). The overall purpose of the pōwhiri is to ensure both the home people and visitors come together in culturally safe ways. There are many different rituals of encounter from across the Indigenous world including Land Acknowledgements or Sage and Tobacco smudging ceremonies (Turtle Island – North America), Welcome to Country (so-called “Australia”) and Yoik song chants (Sápmi – Norway) that are usually performed by Indigenous cultural experts, knowledge holders or elders from the area (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016; Hämäläinen et al., 2018; McAdam, 2009; Shawanda, 2023). More generally, Indigenous rituals of encounter clear the air of negative influences and ensure a positive mutually respectful gathering.

In the rush to embrace the prestige of international collaboration we must be more mindful of the ways culture, and cultural ceremony, are central to working alongside Indigenous researchers – particularly those working on the lands of other Indigenous peoples. Wilson (2008) has described how maintaining spiritual balance and reciprocity are central to Indigenous research methodologies and contends that relationality and relational accountability are foundational to international collaboration involving Indigenous peoples. As a research team, our desire was to negotiate appropriate ceremony for our international research engagements – not as an afterthought, but rather as a central process for bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in research. We needed to balance Indigenous realities with accepted academic institutional policies and procedures. According to Ball and Janyst (2008), Indigenous researchers must straddle “two worlds that are often in collision” (p. 37) and opposing onto-epistemologies can prove challenging to navigate without some form of cultural ceremony or mutually agreed process.

In numerous ways, the rules of our colonial contexts have continued to interrupt and forcibly eschew Indigenous ceremony from our everyday lives. Our proposal to establish culturally sustaining rituals of encounter could have been an opportunity to work together on innovative processes that enabled us all to remember, reclaim, and reignite those teachings and ceremonies central to Indigenous ways of being doing and thinking. Steinhauer (2002) contends that before we do any type of research in Indigenous communities, we must find a way to situate ourselves in their context. Similarly, Moreton-Robinson (2000) has stated “the protocol for introducing oneself to other Indigenous peoples is to provide information about one’s cultural location, so that connections can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established” (p. 2). In the spirit of the six Rs (Tsosie et al., 2022) and enacting these key elements in ways that bring about connection on multiple levels, knowing who is in the room and what they bring with them is essential for relationship and moving forward. From Aotearoa, the idea that Indigenous “foci” research project would make space for Indigenous ceremony and connection was an assumption. When this was not the case, it became more of a sharp point of irony.

Conclusion

Establishing cultural protocols and maintaining mana motuhake (Indigenous sovereignty) in research is critical, particularly given the current emphasis on international and cross-cultural collaboration. While cross cultural research collaboration can enable the rich exchange of knowledge, ideas, and expertise, it can also be plagued with problems that arise because of uneven power relations, onto-epistemological and ethical misalignment, and methodological divergences. Moana Jackson's 10 Māori research ethics provided our research team with a robust guide for understanding and navigating the difficult social relations in our international collaboration, providing a "measure" or a tangible point of reference Māori researchers for testing our intuitive feelings when things didn't feel right in our project. Critical reflexive journaling also proved to be an important research method for getting to the heart of the problem. Both approaches were helpful tools in the process of trusting ourselves and our Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being as Māori researchers, when western research has generally taught us not to do so.

From a Māori worldview, any research that involves community (both human and non-human) has a mauri (life force) and mana (authority) that must be maintained. Maintaining relationships, mana motuhake and the tikanga (cultural protocols) of our wider community networks will always be our primary concern. In the example of this international research collaboration, things did not work out. The international research collaboration strayed from the original intentions and ended. We write about this as the end represents our final action – we held the line.

Note

1. *Tino Rangatiranga, Taonga Tuku Iho (the 'cultural aspirations principle') ako Maori (the 'culturally preferred pedagogy' principle) Kia Piki ake i nga Raruraru o te Kainga (the 'socio-economic mediation principle') 5. Whānau (the 'extended family structure' principle) 6. Kaupapa (the 'collective philosophy' principle).*

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