



International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies

Volume 9, Number 2, 2016

Mapping the journey of an Aboriginal research academic: An autoethnographic study

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Abstract

Most universities implement academic, professional development opportunities to enhance knowledge, practice appropriately to their environments and support the career progression of staff. These opportunities, however, do not cater for the specific professional development needs of Aboriginal research academics. The aim of this paper is to map the professional journey of an Aboriginal research academic during the time of her participation in the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) 2012 to 2016. The author uses an autoethnographic approach to examine what worked for her, under what conditions, through what strategies and with what consequences in her development as an Aboriginal research leader. The author suggests that the unique 'Indigenous space' and Aboriginal mentorship provided by NIRAKN was critical in her successful transition to a research leadership position.

Keywords

Aboriginal, capacity development, mentorship, professional development, research.

Introduction

Most Australian universities implement academic, professional development opportunities to enhance knowledge, practice appropriately to their environments and support the career progression of research staff. These opportunities, however, provide for early career researcher needs and do not cater for the specific professional development needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (respectfully, hereafter, Indigenous) research academics. The aim of this paper is to map the individual, cultural and institutional factors as being enabling facilitators in the professional journey of an Aboriginal research academic and identify what role the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) played in her development as a competent, independent research leader.

In recent years, several reviews that have implications for Indigenous researcher participation and development in Australian universities have been conducted. Key documents include the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelley 2012), the National Science and Innovation Agenda, the Watt Review and the Australian Council of Learned Academies. Despite ongoing review and commitment to raising participation rates for Indigenous students, Indigenous undergraduate students have completion rates well below benchmark populations. For instance, the 2006 cohort of Indigenous undergraduate students had a completion rate of 47.3% compared to 73.9% of non-Indigenous students from the same cohort (Universities Australia 2017). Subsequently, the uptake of postgraduate study at masters and doctorate levels are very low (Universities Australia 2017). These figures further translate to Indigenous staffing across the university sector, with minimal representation in the area of research (Behrendt 2012; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council 2006; Trudgett 2014). These trends also mean that there are low levels of Indigenous participation in university governance and management roles.

Context

In their report, Behrendt et al. (2012) advocated that “the Australian Research Council (ARC) examine the adoption of a strategic approach to building capacity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers across its funding programs, building on the experiences of the National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC]” (Recommendation 27). I was previously involved with one of these NHMRC collaboratives, Building Indigenous Researcher Capacity (Elston, Saunders, Hayes, Bainbridge & McCoy 2013). In 2012, the ARC funded the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) to strengthen the capacity of Indigenous researchers through its Special Initiative Scheme; I am a chief investigator for the grant. The establishment of NIRAKN parallels the NHMRC’s previous contributions to increasing the number of highly skilled, Indigenous researchers through their population health capacity building grants (Thomas, Bainbridge & Tsey 2014).

NIRAKN is Australia’s only multidisciplinary, Indigenous-led and constituted research network (Bainbridge et al. 2017; Fredericks et al. 2015). It is a collaborative of 44 Indigenous researchers from 21 Australian universities and five partner organisations, including significant international associates (Fredericks et al. 2015). Through its hub and spokes model, NIRAKN aims to ensure cultural safety, inclusivity and belonging for all affiliated groups, and Indigenous ownership and leadership of activities, research, methodologies and knowledge (Bainbridge et al. 2017). Its specific purpose is “to provide a platform for new Indigenous multi-disciplinary research and the establishment of a critical mass of multi-disciplinary, qualified Indigenous researchers to meet the compelling research needs of our communities” (NIRAKN 2012). Four spokes or nodes constitute the structure: 1) Indigenous Health and Wellbeing; 2) Indigenous Sociology and Knowledges; 3) Indigenous Law; and 4) Yuraki: History, Politics and Culture. The nodes take carriage of the development and implementation of researcher capacity building and programs of research (Bainbridge et al. 2017; Fredericks et al. 2015; NIRAKN 2012).

Methods

Positioning self

Simultaneously, I am both an insider and outsider in this study. I am situated within an Australian higher education system. I have mastered and attained Western degrees and gained a leadership position as researcher. I am also an outsider. Aboriginal women participating as part of the culture of the academy are situated at the confluence of a complex interplay of Western-sanctioned and governed institutional contexts, a male-dominated university culture and a class system that does not often align with our social realities. In my role in the academy, I position myself within the interconnecting systems of oppression (Hill Collins 1998) of class (cultural and social capital), ethnicity and gender. In terms of my NIRAKN participation, I also position myself as both a mentor and mentee. As such, I bring a dual positioning as an outsider-within in these contexts.

Autoethnography as method

Autoethnography integrates ethnography, biography and self-analysis (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang 2010). Reed-Danahay (1997) succinctly defines autoethnography as being both a process and a product; “a method and a text” (p. 9). Ellis and Bochner (2000) interpret autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739) and, thus, the researcher to the researched. It is part of the upsurge of narrative inquiry, “narrative referring to the stories people tell – the way they organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Ellis 2004, p. 195). Narrative inquiry has proliferated in many disciplines as part of the challenge to Western and androcentric perspectives and practice of research (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). Autoethnography emphasises knowing through participation and enables the specifics of research production to be embedded in our inner ways of knowing and being, and our subjectivities to saturate the research product. As a method, it opens possibilities for innovative ways in which ‘insider’ researchers can represent realities and themselves in their texts (Bainbridge 2007). In this sense, autoethnography responds to issues of representation and power by offering a means to counter the previous textual authority of dominant discourses by promoting self-representation (Bainbridge 2007; hooks 1989).

For my research purposes, an Aboriginal woman’s standpoint as a vantage point from which discoveries could be made was paramount. There is very little information about Aboriginal women’s agency in academia. Using autoethnographic methods was a way of surfacing my tacit knowledge by offering myself as both researcher and subject to evoke understanding of my lived academic journey and career, my learnings, my mentoring experiences in and beyond NIRAKN, and the influence these had on my professional development as a researcher. This process also brought unintended insights that led to an enhancement of personal and practical knowledge, and facilitated change in the way I viewed myself, others and the environment. Importantly, it provided greater insights into my current role and directions; founding and operationalising an Indigenous research centre.

Data generation and analysis

Data were initially generated from my first act of self-reflection, writing an introspective account of my personal academic journey; a narrative history that related my journey through academia, firstly, as a student, researcher and then, finally, as senior research

academic. Further data were generated through reflective, analytical journalled entries specifically drawing out critical events from my time at NIRAKN and working from sensitising concepts and knowledge developed from the findings of Bainbridge et al. (2017) in the same edition of this journal. The reflections were in response to two key writing prompts: 1) What facilitated my progression into a senior research leadership position? And, what did NIRAKN offer in terms of research leadership development?

Thematic analysis was conducted and used to identify key concepts in the reflective narratives. Data segments reflecting the key concepts were clustered together. Clusters were then organised in terms of their relevance to the research questions. These concentrated on four main concepts named: 1) *Showing me the way*; 2) *Having someone to walk beside me*; 3) *Pioneering a pathway for change in Indigenous researcher capacity development*; and 4) *From little things, big things grow*. Narratives were re-presented in a coherent way to capture the important stories and issues.

Findings

In this section, I reflect on the experiences that enabled me to identify and understand my career goals, created the foundation for and accelerated my leadership progression in research and positioned me for promotional research opportunities in academia. In my story, I considered the critical insights at the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender. I then direct attention to the role that NIRAKN played in developing my leadership capability and leveraging further opportunities to advance my career.

Overview of my academic journey

I am an Aboriginal woman of the Gungarri/Kunja nations in south western Queensland. Like many Aboriginal people, I came to academia as a mature age student. I had not studied since I left high school at the end of year 12. At university, I studied the disciplines of anthropology and Indigenous Australian studies in my undergraduate years. I went on to complete my honours degree and then a Doctor of Philosophy. My PhD was conferred in 2010. After its completion, I was employed by my PhD supervisor and mentor in a research-only position in academia. Between 2010 and 2016, I moved from being a senior research fellow to a research leadership position as the foundational director of a centre for Indigenous health research.

Showing me the way

I cannot narrate my academic journey without telling the story of my academic foundations and research development. In my undergraduate years, I was very fortunate to have career-defining relationships with strong Indigenous women with high levels of integrity *showing me the way* to develop my skill-sets in research and managing academic success. The Indigenous unit at my university was both a faculty school in its own right and support unit. That is, it had a strong culture of researching, teaching and learning, as well as providing academic support and pastoral care for students. During my undergraduate study, I had a particularly close association with Indigenous staff at the school. There was an observably high representation of Indigenous women academics at the school; indeed there were no men working there during this time. The gendered constitution of the school aligned with the broader institutional profile, which revealed a high representation of Indigenous women (11) compared to Indigenous men (two) in teaching and research (Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) 2003). In contrast, statistics for the non-Indigenous, institutional population at that time indicated that

non-Indigenous men in academia participated at twice the rate of non-Indigenous women academics in Australian universities (DEST 2003).

The school had high expectations of staff and students, and simultaneously maintained an ethics of care and responsibility for all. Long before I fully understood what a PhD was, my head of school mapped out a research academic pathway for me. She became a long-time mentor for me going forward and has imparted great wisdom, both culturally and academically. Her standards of academic excellence were noteworthy and translated across the school. The school's modelling and expectations taught me how to be academically competent and ethically astute. In terms of the latter, the school's support in just 'being there' for me, providing understanding and modelling appropriate responsiveness to culturally incongruent concepts and analysis encountered while undertaking an anthropological degree was critical for my wellbeing and cultural safety.

The nature of that support was also demonstrated academically. During my undergraduate degree studies, I had opportunities to tutor students in my disciplines. I was the first student to complete my honours degree at the school. I recall my, then, supervisor only too well, understanding its value and adamantly proclaiming from the outset that "we are only interested in getting a first class honours!" However, my greatest advantage in my honours year was being involved in the school's postgraduate research blocks, where I undertook three research subjects. It was here that I acquired strong foundations in research at a level beyond the expectations of an honours degree. I was awarded a first class honours and, combined with my undergraduate degree, received the university's medal. This achievement laid the foundations for a postgraduate award to undertake my PhD.

Having someone to walk beside me

After completing my PhD, my supervisor immediately employed me as part of his research team working in Indigenous health and wellbeing. He became my mentor and confidante. *Having someone to walk beside me*, as I forged my career pathways in research, was as critical then as it is now; he continues to mentor me until this day. My mentor is a Ghanaian man who has lived and worked in Australia for some 30 years. He works in Indigenous health and wellness and holds a professorial research position at the academy. I hold him in very high regard, both personally and intellectually. He modelled academic life with integrity and embraced difference; a rarity in academia. The hundreds of stories narrated by him showed me how to make a difference through research. He demonstrated confidence in my abilities and potential to become a future leader, gave me time to develop professionally and provided pastoral care when needed. He opened doors to opportunities, knowing that I would take responsibility and ensure that I made the most of them. Importantly, he introduced me to his professional networks. Significantly, I also had the support of a cohesive feminised team environment and part of that team was my Aboriginal mentor. However, while we had Indigenous junior team members, I did not have any Indigenous peers in that team. Having stated that, having a male mentor made me more courageous in many ways; there were no unacknowledged impediments to advancement—we pre-empted barriers and just got on with our work. Importantly, he provided institutional protection to enable my early career development.

Careful consideration has always been accorded to my career aspirations, as well as research and leadership development. However, please note that I have never been of the opinion that I should walk out of my PhD directly into a leadership role, as many Indigenous people before me have done. I am of the opinion that one should earn their position. However, I was not always certain about where I was going and, at times, I

certainly had a lesser idea about how to get there. My mentor, nevertheless, was constantly walking beside me and guiding me, but always allowing me to define my own path. There were no boundaries; he let me make mistakes and let me fix them.

My mentor undoubtedly expedited my research leadership journey. He encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and remained confident in my ability to excel at times when I was uncertain. In an era of increasing funding competition, he supported me in successfully applying for three consecutive research fellowship awards from the ARC and the NHMRC, and to continue in a research-only position for the last six years. I have also been encouraged to continuously develop teaching, service and leadership aspects of my career with a strong future focus.

Pioneering a pathway for change in Indigenous researcher capacity development

For the past five years, I have been involved at NIRAKN as a chief investigator and as part of the Health and Wellbeing node. The establishment of NIRAKN *pioneered a pathway for change in Indigenous researcher capacity development*. NIRAKN participation is not my first experience of being involved in a network that aims to build a competent Indigenous research workforce. I was previously part of the NHMRC-funded Building Indigenous Researcher Capacity (Elston, Saunders, Hayes, Bainbridge & McCoy 2013) as a post-doctoral researcher. Prior to that, I was part of a cohort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous research students at my institution, as an undergraduate and postgraduate. The former completed just as NIRAKN was founded. Being part of NIRAKN was a career-defining moment for me. It filled a large void that enabled and maintained very important connections and relationships with other Indigenous researchers, which produced an enhanced sense of belonging and assurance.

The exclusive Indigenous space provided by NIRAKN gave rise to a number of opportunities. For me, being in such a safe and supportive environment, it meant that I was relieved of some of the socio-cultural alienation of academia and it filled the gap in my team environment. Through NIRAKN participation, I built safe and diverse networks through which I experienced a certain intellectual freedom, as well as clarity and confidence. I did not feel the weight of Eurocentric systemic influence and oppression; wherein I might have consistently needed to explain the position from whence I came. In NIRAKN, this tacit knowledge is inherent and ubiquitous.

Relationships and capacity development occurred organically in the NIRAKN space. I had not worked closely with NIRAKN researchers previously. The health node of NIRAKN was heavily, but not entirely, feminised. There was also the wisdom of Elders present. Thus, reciprocity and the strong sense of responsibility and care for each other that is innate for Indigenous people (Bainbridge 2011) was prominent and firmly demonstrated. My professional networks expanded and informal mentoring occurred. Across NIRAKN, the range of cross-disciplinary expertise enabled positive cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches to researching. Mentoring relationships developed naturally by including a mix of membership—community organisations; research students; early, midcareer and senior researchers; and some who held esteemed positions in academia, such as pro vice chancellors and distinguished professors. I am both a recipient of and contributor to these mentoring relationships. Peer-support, however, was absolutely critical to progressing and expanding our research work, while maintaining connectedness to our cultural selves. Regular monthly contact via teleconferences and annual week-long face-to-face time supported these relationships and maintained our connectedness to each other.

From little things, big things grow

NIRAKN participation opened up a world of possibilities and opportunities. I transitioned from a late, early-career researcher to a competent, mid-career researcher. With guidance from Elders and senior academic leadership, my confidence in contributing grew and validated my position in academia, unlike anything I had previously experienced. During what should have been the final year of NIRAKN, the director established and personally mentored a small leadership group of which I am part. Again, this opportunity brought further higher level, developmental prospects.

Being privy to the development of NIRAKN and the experiences of my expanded professional networks germinated new notions of how Indigenous futures could look. Increased capabilities and confidence, bestowed through my participation in NIRAKN, together with new knowledge and awareness of what national and international universities were doing to support Indigenous research staff and students, provided the self-confidence for me to transition to a new university. Quite unexpectedly, I was offered and took up a promotion in a research leadership role at another higher education institution. Critically, the knowledge, learnings and support provided by NIRAKN provided the aspirational impetus for me to establish and grow a research centre for Indigenous health equity at my new institution.

Discussion and conclusion

I have had privileged foundations upon which to build my research career from an undergraduate student, through postgraduate and post-doctoral positions and currently through NIRAKN membership. I highly regard and value the support, connections and opportunities these foundations have brought to my professional development as a researcher. At critical stages of my development, I received specialised support, development opportunities and mentoring to achieve my professional ambitions. Significant individuals at each development stage played a part in shaping who I am today and continue to influence my professional and personal decisions and directions. Yet, it is important to note that nothing was initiated by the higher education institutions. The greatest and most influential people in my leadership progression gave of themselves freely, and opportunities created by those people were extraneous to university support systems.

Funding that enables the self-determination of Indigenous researchers to act in their own best interests clearly has its place in growing Indigenous researcher capacity for social change. People who support funding from the NHMRC and ARC have played an important role in supporting the self-determination of Indigenous researchers to facilitate programs that sustain others. Critically, mentoring and development was well-facilitated over the longer term because of the funding extensions for the continuation of the NIRAKN work. As an imperative in higher education, Behrendt et al. (2012) identified “growing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people completing higher degrees by research, and ensuring that there is adequate government support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and researchers”.

Early learnings and NIRAKN participation culminated in numerous experiences that endowed me with philosophies and a suite of methods through which to consider what worked well, what did not work so well and what we could do better in these spaces to maximise potential in strengthening the capacity of Indigenous researchers in higher education. While little is understood about how this kind of support translates into practice

(Hutchings, Bainbridge, Miller & Bodle in review), some discerning prerequisites to success have been identified in my autoethnographic writing.

As an undergraduate, I was situated at a research-active Indigenous school vis-à-vis a support unit, enjoyed Indigenous and female solidarity, had high expectations and standards of excellence and models of academic success. As a postgraduate and postdoctoral student, I was granted career-defining, mentoring relationships with significant others, a cohesive team environment, expanded professional networks and discrete Indigenous spaces for development were prominent. The latter was really only provided through NIRAKN participation, where I developed very specific leadership skill-sets and confidence through which I could leverage opportunities to progress my career aspirations.

Indigenous researchers are important to developing Australia's socio-economic fabric and knowledge economy, and to raising the health, wellbeing and socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians. We need the freedom of self-determination, fitting spaces in which develop, and resourcing to develop in line with our unique epistemological and ontological positioning. In this article, I expanded the broader discussion about what conditions and mechanisms work best to support Indigenous researcher leadership development in higher education institutions. To ensure that such strategies are appropriately implemented, higher education institutions must acknowledge the Eurocentrism within which they operate and provide open spaces in which Indigenous people can flourish. The idealised pathways to higher education research leadership for Indigenous people lie in initiatives like NIRAKN, which successfully laid out its own agenda for research development.

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