University of Arizona

From the SelectedWorks of Nolan L. Cabrera

2016

Sharing Circles: An Indigenous methodological approach for researching with groups of Indigenous peoples.

Nolan L Cabrera

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/nolan_l_cabrera/32/

Sharing Circles

An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching With Groups of Indigenous Peoples

Amanda R. Tachine, Eliza Yellow Bird, and Nolan L. Cabrera

Abstract We employed sharing circles as an Indigenous research methodology approach to understand the stories of Native American students as they transitioned into college. We found recognition, responsibility, and relationships as anchors in incorporating Tribal cultural protocol in research. Through trust and vulnerability, Native students shared in-depth personal stories. Attempting to decolonize methodological space is complex, and we provide an accounting of how we maneuvered through this process while offering examples of the rich stories that students shared. As Native scholars, we conclude by considering our cultural and ethical responsibilities as well as the complex tensions that surface as an "insider" and "outsider" when researching and using sharing circles as an Indigenous methodological approach.

Keywords: *sharing circles, focus groups, Indigenous methodology, qualitative inquiry, decolonizing methodologies*

The 2013 He Manawa Whenua Indigenous Research Conference, held within the ancestral lands of the Māori people of New Zealand, addressed the importance of using Indigenous research methods. We were at the early phase of this research project and looked forward to attending a conference to strengthen our familiarity with and understanding of Indigenous methods. While presenting our work, we generated a critical response from a member of the audience because we were not consistent with the description of our study's methods. For example, we would state that we had used "focus groups" and then switched back to saying "sharing circles." At the end of our presentation, a Māori woman in the audience asked, "What methods will you be using? Focus groups or sharing circles?" We looked at each other, paused, and then answered, "Sharing circles." She responded with, "Well, say 'sharing circles' and stick with it. Be confident in our Indigenous ways of research."

International Review of Qualitative Research, Vol. 9, No. 3, Fall 2016, pp. 277–295.
ISSN 1940-8447, eISSN 1940-8455. © 2016 International Institute for Qualitative Research, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: 10.1525/irqr.2016.9.3.277.

Her statement resonated with our team and challenged us to think more critically of not only asserting the term but also developing what we mean when talking about sharing circles as an Indigenous research methodology. To honor what we discovered at that conference and throughout our research process, we share with others what we have learned.

Sharing circles is an open-structured, conversational style methodology that respects story sharing within a Tribal cultural protocol context (Kovach, 2009). Sharing circles have been practiced within Indigenous communities and by Indigenous people for generations but are scarcely detailed in scholarly, peer-reviewed outlets. They have been conceptually described (Kovach, 2009), but detailing the specifics of the process has largely been neglected by academics. We acknowledge that culturally compatible modes of inquiry from fields such as alternative dispute resolution (Mnookin, 1998) and group dynamics research (Forsyth, 2010) have helped to strengthen sharing circles methodological approaches. However, those approaches are not rooted in Indigenous epistemologies.

By recognizing and incorporating tribal cultural protocol and storytelling, we applied sharing circles in this project as an Indigenous methodology. Therefore, we share our adaption and development of employing an Indigenous-based sharing circle methodology. We do this by first describing the background of our overall study and the complicated positionality tension that we face as Indigenous researchers. Secondly, we explore the definition, benefits, and limitations of mainstream focus group approaches to educational research. Third, we address the need for Indigenous methodologies when conducting research with Native peoples and then highlight sharing circles as the type of Indigenous methodology we employed. Last, we conclude by considering our cultural and ethical responsibilities as researchers in applying this methodology.

Background and Positionality Tension

The purpose of our overall research project was to acquire an increased understanding of the experiences that Native American students face as they access and transition into college. A group of us, largely made up of Native graduate students, felt the need to advance knowledge on this topic because in most social science research, Native peoples are frequently ignored because of small sample sizes (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Thus, Shotton et al. (2013) call to move "beyond the asterisk" toward an empirical reality where Native students can be appropriately represented in contemporary scholarship.

As Native researchers, we wanted to incorporate an Indigenous methodology throughout our investigation to avoid some of the known pitfalls of applying conventional research paradigms to research issues pertinent to Native communities. From the perspective of critical sociology, Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) labeled mainstream approaches to social science research as *White Logic, White Methods*. They argue that seemingly race-neutral research methods are actually embedded with the racist (largely unconscious) assumptions of White sociologists and these analyses in turn serve to blame underserved minority communities for their marginalized status (i.e., "blame the victim analysis," Ryan, 1976). It is within this perspective that there have been numerous calls to "decolonize methodologies" (Smith, 1999) so that social science can actually serve the needs of Native communities. By decolonizing methodologies, we mean to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies in educational research. Moreover, we knew the value of Native ways of knowing in our own lives and thought that it was essential to approach this study by asserting our perspectives and practices. Although our primary research project was focused on Native college students, we wanted to also develop and apply this methodological approach and the powerful role that this process had in collecting their experiences. Therefore, this paper highlights our methodological journey.

Our position as both Native people and scholars was complex and tensional. We were considered insiders because of our Native identity, but possibly more so because of our prior and established connections and relationships with the Native student community. Yet we were also considered outsiders because of our differences in tribal affiliations, gender, age (older generation), and positions (graduate students, administrators, and faculty) and as facilitators in observing and analyzing Native students' experiences. The dichotomy of insider versus outsider does not grasp the complexity and tension of being an Indigenous researcher. Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) explore the benefits of Native American researchers' familiarity when working with Indigenous populations and the conflicts they also face in regards to Western methodology. They state:

> Studying and researching issues in American Indian communities from either the "inside" or "outside" are always framed from an ethnohistorical set of relations between and among Indians and Whites—relationships that are politicized and cannot be viewed in a distant manner. (p. 166)

When Native scholars explore their communities, it is not simply an issue of being inside or outside of the process but the knowledge and awareness the researchers bring to their study. For us it was a delicate balance of conducting and analyzing

research in a culturally appropriate way that we will elaborate on throughout this paper.

There is debate over the benefits and drawbacks of being in an insider position because of researchers' close proximity to the participants, putting the objectivity of the researchers in question. Mannay (2010) discusses the insider versus outsider complexities that academia holds in regards to qualitative interviewers, noting that "insiders are often charged with the tendency to present their group in an unrealistically favourable light, and their work is often considered to be overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding" (p. 91). This idea disregards the benefits of having rapport with the participants during the interview process and how it allows for greater facilitation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) state that "Indigenous people, both as researchers and participants, hold the keys to getting, analyzing, and reporting 'good data' in qualitative and ethnographic studies examining their lived experiences" (p. 168). In essence, Indigenous peoples are the experts of their stories, and we as Native researchers are frequently able to recognize the valuable contribution that Native participants offer.

Focus Groups: Origins and Distinctions

When we began this research process, we considered applying a standard, mainstream focus group approach because that was what we were trained and accustomed to using when researching groups of people. We were eager to explore alternative methods for group discussion that incorporated storytelling and the cultural nuances of Native peoples. While focus groups are a valuable methodological approach, we explored what a focus group would entail as well as the benefits and their potential cultural liabilities when researching a group of Native college students.

Focus groups are group discussions that are established to examine a specific set of topics (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus groups were established in the 1940s through the work of Merton and Kendall (1946) and their "focused interviews." These interviews were "rooted in positivist or post-positivist epistemologies, which assume that the truth is 'out there' to be efficiently excavated, reported, and used" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 3). The original goal of these focused interviews was to study the effects of media on America, especially post–World War II propaganda. It was not until the 1980s that the social sciences began to use this methodology.

Although social science researchers adjusted aspects of focus group methodologies, the standard format originally created by market research often remains as the accepted norm (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Morgan, 1993). There are three main

components of a focus group: data collection, the core goal of the focus group; the discussion within the focus group; and the pivotal role of the facilitator (Morgan, 1996). Through outlined discussion questions, researchers hope to learn from the conversation the "conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious psychological and sociological characteristics and processes among various groups" (Berg, 2004, p. 128). Typically, focus groups are small groups consisting of no more than 10 people; Krueger (1994) advises six individuals in a focus group setting, which allows for easier management for the facilitator as well as prompting group-based discussion for the participants.

The role of the facilitator is an important factor to the success of focus groups (Morgan, 1996). A facilitator guides and directs the discussion, encouraging the participants to speak freely on the subject matter, all while taking account of the overall group dynamics. A body of research delves in on a facilitator's role in establishing group norms, leading the structure of the session, and taking necessary steps toward a productive session (Berg, 2004; Edmunds, 1999; Morgan, 1996). We recognize the pivotal role of facilitators but also recognize the essential roles of the entire research team, the participants, and the Tribal communities that they represent. Lacking in the literature is the consideration of the relationships and roles that all these individuals have in creating a group discussion.

There are advantages in using focus groups, such as time and efficiency. Focus groups are largely viewed as a means to gather results quickly because they are generally short in time, most often ranging from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, and thereby efficient because of an immediacy of obtaining complex information (Kroll, Barbour, & Harris, 2007). With this understanding, researchers are able to investigate a group discussion that includes varying experiences and opinions on similar topics in one focus group session (Edmunds, 1999). From that perspective, some view focus groups as a useful, flexible research tool, particularly when the researcher does not have a solid knowledge about the participants (Conradson, 2005; Liamputtong, 2011). However, we will discuss how these "advantages" may serve to meet the needs for certain topics and people yet may also signal a cultural liability for others.

In considering the use of focus groups, we recognized that there were disadvantages, including the silencing of individual voices. The problem of one person dominating the conversation means that there is a potential for more introverted students to be silenced, especially in the absence of highly skilled facilitators (Ho, 2006). Moreover, if a participant has an alternative opinion compared with the majority of the group, they may not feel comfortable to talk (Babbie, 2007). Research has also

found that focus groups restrict individuals from disclosing personal information, especially if they feel that they may not be understood (Berg, 2004; Edmunds, 1999; Liamputtong, 2011). Jones et al. (2006) argue that building rapport is essential to qualitative forms, including focus groups, of social science inquiry because it helps establish trust between participants and interviewer, thereby allowing for a more free flow of ideas from the participants. While Jones et al. emphasize that establishing rapport with minoritized participants is critically important to increase their representation in scholarship, they offer little specific guidance on how to accomplish this with Native students. This is particularly important because when working with Native communities, there are frequently a number of cultural protocols one should follow. In the absence of this understanding, conflated with constrained time, even skilled facilitators can have difficulty building rapport with Native participants.

Connected to individual voices and time is the risk of limiting opportunities for storytelling. Focus groups may not be adequate for in-depth experiences of participants. Liamputtong (2011) contends that "if the objective of the research is to generate in-depth personal narratives . . . focus groups may not be appropriate" (p. 8). A critique of focus groups is that they may offer a basic understanding of an issue because participants tend to limit personal information and experiences (Hopkins, 2007; Kitzinger, 1995). Given the limitations of focus group methodology, we searched elsewhere and found sharing circles as a more culturally appropriate approach that allowed for storytelling and recognized cultural Tribal protocol.

The Need for Indigenous Methodological Approaches: Storytelling, Sharing, and Survival

Indigenous methodologies are not new and novel simply because they are absent in the peer-reviewed scholarship. As Emerson (2014) describes, Indigenous methodologies are "new ways of knowing and being that [are] so old that [they] look new" (p. 58). Indigenous methodologies have been employed for generations, but because of colonization efforts to eradicate Native ways of knowing, they lost value in mainstream research. Indigenous methods are being viewed as "new" approaches in the social sciences. An important way Indigenous peoples have skillfully developed methodology is through storytelling. Since time immemorial, the fluidity of storytelling and stories within Native societies has been a vital and legitimate source of understanding and navigating through the multifaceted dimensions of life (Archibald, 2008; Denetdale, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). There are creation stories that detail how life was formed and how we are all connected,

trickster stories that are funny yet convey important life lessons, and experiential family and personal stories that describe struggles and acts of resistance.

Story and knowing/meaning is an inseparable relationship because "stories are vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective" (Kovach, 2009, p. 95). A collective "we" concept is what centers Indigenous methodology because stories are often conveyed for the betterment of those listening (Archibald, 2008; Meyer, 2001). Contemporarily, Tribal stories have lost social and educational value by the hegemonic pressures of mainstream White society because they struggle to fit in the rigidness of narrative form and much is lost when translating Native language to English (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). With that critical understanding, Reissman (2008) asserts that "establishing a climate that allows for storytelling in all its forms requires substantial changes in practice" (p. 22). And for many Indigenous scholars, those changes require the inclusion and resurgence of past traditions (Lee, 2014).

Linking stories to the collective is the bridge that holds those two together – the sharing aspect. Our use of "sharing" differs from colloquial use, which begins from a sense of individualized ownership where one party allows another access to his or her property. Whereas, sharing from an Indigenous knowledge system is often understood from an interdependent perspective, meaning the interrelatedness to all things. Indigenous peoples often view life as being connected to past and future generations of family, community, Tribe, and nation (Archibald, 2008).

Tied to sharing (from an interdependent perspective) and storytelling is the belief in a responsibility for the communal survival and progress of others and their future (Guillory, 2008). In cultures with oral traditions, stories have a compelling utility as a way to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. Muscogee scholar Joy Harjo expressed the concepts of responsibility and community progress by stating:

> I have a home in the world. I feel there is a root community that I have a responsibility to nurture and help move in a good direction. It's very, very precious. It is the central source of meaning, the root, the template. (as cited in Mankiller, 2004, p. 146)

These deeply embedded intentions, or roots as Harjo articulated, are what Indigenous methodologies are centered upon – acquiring and sharing knowledge to advance and support Native communities. Within this philosophical context, we assert sharing circles as an Indigenous methodology that emphasizes tribal cultural approaches and storytelling in conducting research with Indigenous peoples.

Sharing Circles

By incorporating sharing circles as a method in our research with Native college students, cultural tribal protocol was vital for recognizing the relationships and responsibility of conducting research with Native peoples. We also found that storytelling was engendered, allowing for a deeper awareness of their experiences to be elucidated.

Cultural Tribal Protocol: Recognition, Responsibility, and Relationships

We were more attuned to the cultural nuances that guided us in employing sharing circles; key characteristics or "anchors" surfaced, including the profound interconnected significance of recognition, responsibility, and relationships. We found these three interconnected anchors guided us as we maneuvered through the methodological process.

In our experience living and working with Native peoples, we understood the importance of recognizing and respecting the value of cultural protocol. Cultural protocol is defined as the cultural actions, petitions, and statements that an individual completes to create a relationship with another person from whom the individual makes a request (Archibald, 2008, p. 37). Cultural protocols are situation specific that vary depending upon the Tribal community, nature of the request, and sometimes the individuals who are making a request. When seeking approval to conduct research with Native people in our region, as Native people we understood the importance of recognizing and acknowledging cultural protocol. Therefore, we sought Tribal approval and input from the four nations in our area (Hopi, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, and Pascua Yaqui) because these Tribal nations represented the largest Tribal groups on campus.

The University of Arizona sits on traditional O'odham land, and in following Tribal cultural protocol, it was crucial that we work with those Tribes. We reached out to Tribal education directors, Tribal human research review board members or designees, and Tribal chairs (only when specific Tribal protocols deemed it necessary). In our outreach, we shared the purpose of the study and sought support to conduct interviews with their Tribal members and also garnered their feedback on whether the study would be useful to their communities. We recognized that "giving back" knowledge is an ingrained value of Native people grounded in reciprocity (Grande, 2004; Smith, 1999); thus seeking their input on the utility of our research

was critically important. As sovereign nations, many Tribes have their own research review process. Because we were conducting sharing circles off Tribal jurisdiction lands, Tribal leaders said that we did not have to go through their Tribal research review process but that they appreciated our forthrightness in reaching out before beginning. As researchers from the university, we had a responsibility to conduct ourselves in ethical standards and practices above and beyond adhering to the university's responsible conduct of research policies. We took our work a step further by including Tribal communities in this process as a way to honor responsibility and maintain a mutual, respectful relationship with our Native communities. In so doing, Tribal partners saw our research as beneficial to their members and supported our collective efforts.

Another aspect of recognizing cultural protocols occurred in our student recruitment efforts because we understood the value in establishing relationships. In many Native societies, an introduction of self entails stating who you are, including your relatives or clans and where you are from, usually in one's tribal language. Therefore during initial contact, our introductions followed that culturally appropriate format, which was tailored to the Tribal affiliations of the research team and the tribal affiliations in our geographic region. An e-mail was sent from two of our research team members, one an upper level Native American administrator who served as an assistant vice president of tribal relations and another, a faculty member who had extensive experience working with Indigenous populations. In the recruitment e-mail we introduced ourselves by stating where we were from and our experience working with Native communities. We also expressed our gratitude to the students for choosing college as a pathway in their life and then emphasized how their experiences would be a valuable asset to the success of future Native students at the university. Furthermore, throughout the recruitment phase, we also worked closely with the university's Native American Student Affairs (NASA) and the Native American Living Learning community housed within residence life. NASA is the Native student center on campus that helped us by disseminating announcements of our study through its student listserv, social network sites, and word of mouth.

Much of the focus group methodology literature asserts that it is best that no participants have a prior relationship with each other and the facilitator because it allows for a more open dialogue (Parker & Tritter, 2006). However with sharing circles, we learned that prior relationships mattered. It helped immensely if students knew and even had a prior relationship with either a staff member from the Native-centered areas or a member of the research team, particularly the facilitator of the sharing circle. We think that because a prior relationship was already established

with some students, they felt more comfortable participating because there was a familiarity (interpersonally and culturally) that was a foundation for building trust. However, we wondered if there was not a prior relationship established with students or the Native-centered areas, would the same participation rate occur? We debriefed upon this question further and could not make decisive conclusions, but we did emphasize the importance of relationships in the discussion portion of this paper. Conceptually, we consider that relationships in the sense of sharing circles are different than rapport in mainstream focus groups. Relationships are much larger and expansive than the dynamics between the facilitator and participants. By including Tribal cultural protocol, relationships were extended to also include the research team, the students, and the Tribal communities they represent.

In the development of the sharing circle questions, we continued to be guided by a responsibility to ensure cultural appropriateness. We invited key administrators and faculty who have worked with Native students to assist us with the development of the constructs. We then met with students to seek their insights on our questions. With their collective feedback, we adjusted several questions. For example, an original question was "Describe the importance of spirituality in your life. If spirituality is not a part of your life, that's okay." Students said the question was poorly stated because it may make some feel uncomfortable because it implicitly assumed spirituality was important to Native students. With their guidance, we changed the wording to:

> Many people consider spirituality/religion a part of their lifestyle and likewise many people do not consider spirituality a part of their lifestyle. I'm curious to hear from you whether spirituality/religion is a part of your life in college and how spirituality does or does not influence your life. I want to ensure you that there is no judgment here on whether you practice spirituality in your life or not as this is an open, safe place to discuss this topic. In your experience, describe how spirituality/religion is or is not a part of your life.

Students not only made us more aware of being sensitive to how we may unintentionally exclude voices, they also helped us to create questions that would illicit more personal stories.

Extended time, the size of the circles, and food were also important components of the sharing circle process. The sharing circles were initially set to be a two-hour time period, but as students' stories emerged, the sharing circles sometimes lasted up to four hours. At the two-hour time frame, the facilitators announced the specified time was almost over and presented the option of ending the circle or finishing the

questions. A majority of the time the students wanted to continue and finish the sharing circle. Our sessions had up to five students at a time. We also had a couple with no more than two students. We had initially considered canceling those sessions because we thought that they would not be as rich in dialogue as the larger groups. We were glad that we did not because those smaller sessions also contained many rich stories.

Consistent with Tribal cultural protocol, we offered food and drinks to sharing circle participants. While this can be a common practice in focus groups, it was a critically important component of our methodological approach. Offering food is customary practice in many Native cultures, especially if they are visiting for some time and sharing stories (Marsiglia, Cross, & Mitchell-Enos, 1999). Thus, the offering of food continued our demonstrated commitment to cultural protocols guiding the research process.

We also established and recognized cultural protocol when students introduced themselves at the beginning of the sharing circles. A total of 23 students from the Hopi, Navajo, and Pascua Yaqui nations participated in one of seven sharing circles. They were undergraduate college students ranging in age (18–26) and included 14 female and 9 male students. In each sharing circle, the flow followed a similar pattern. First, the facilitators welcomed the students and thanked them for dedicating time to share their experiences. They also introduced themselves by stating their tribal affiliation and connection to the study. Second, students introduced themselves to the group. This process of introducing self was multidimensional as students tended to introduce themselves by presenting where they were from and their clan(s) and familial ties, and sometimes they introduced themselves in their Native language. We did not require that students introduce themselves in such a matter. Rather, most did so on their own because it was part of their way of life. For example, Sophia McCray (pseudonym) introduced herself in the following manner.

> Yá'át'ééh, shi eí, Sophia McCray yinishyé, [state's maternal clan in Navajo] nishłį, aadoo, [state's paternal clan in Navajo] báshishchíín. [State's maternal grandfather's clan] ei dashicheii. [state's paternal grandfather's name] ei dashinálí. As a young Navajo woman I was taught to always introduce myself with my native language, so that's how I start out. My name is Sophia McCray and I'm a freshmen here and I reside at [state's town] Arizona.

These identity markers provided an opportunity for Sophia to not only acknowledge her connection to her family and tribe but also allowed her to learn how she may be related to others, thereby reinforcing traditional communal relationships.

We recognized that this cultural protocol is a disjuncture from dominant research processes that often safeguard individuality and anonymity. While we acknowledge that other forms of data collection allow for participants to not be anonymous and that confidentiality within sharing circles is still an important concern, we allowed the students to share what they felt was appropriate. By using sharing circles as a methodology, we respected that the students' acknowledgement of self in relation to others is an example of interrelatedness and even a responsibility to recognize their kinship. The sharing circle format allowed us to give sufficient time and respect to cultural protocol and the establishment of kinship.

Storytelling: Fluidity, Trust, and Vulnerability

There was a sense of respect for individual storytelling as we were all drawn into each student's story. After we stated each question, many students spoke up to 15 minutes each per question, which granted space for the fluidity of storytelling. The students' body language, other nonverbal cues, and quiet words of affirmation indicated that they were engaged in each other's stories as they unfolded. Rarely did students glance at their cell phones, watches, or the clock, and interruptions were almost nonexistent. In one sharing circle, one participant, Sabrina, patiently waited for her turn to speak but asked before proceeding, "Did everyone go? I don't want to interrupt anyone." After the other students nodded indicating that it was her turn to speak, she began her story. Throughout all the sharing circles, students spoke in a similar pattern, respecting and validating the stories their peers shared and ensuring a story was completely offered before speaking.

With that shared recognition for individual story sharing, students' stories exemplified fluidity. We attempt to illustrate the fluidity of their story form. However, we acknowledge that there is a limited amount of space in this paper to accurately convey the intricacies of the entire story. Therefore, in the description below we share Chelsea's words, and then we summarize her sentiments as a way to highlight the contours of her story. We focus attention on the fluidity of story form offered through a sharing circle format. Chelsea shared a story on how influential her family was in supporting her in education: "My family is really supportive of me. They really, they're really, really supportive, spiritually and mentally." Chelsea shared how her siblings did not go to college, but her family encouraged her to be the first to go to college.

> They really, they didn't go to college. They went to small colleges, dropped out; my older sister dropped out. My sister went to a technical school for like six months to a year or something. My brother did the same thing.

Chelsea then described the type of student she was throughout primary to high school. She illustrated that she was in school to help her family: "I want to help them, be like hey I did this and you should do this." She then shifted her story and talked about her high school graduation. She discussed how she wanted to hold a Native American Church meeting to celebrate graduating from high school in a traditional cultural way. During that gathering, many of her family came to help.

> My uncles got the wood. I got peyote from a friend. My uncle, I just had to ask him, "Can you run my meeting?" He said, "Sure, you don't have to ask." He put it in his notebook. He took leave, everything. My brothers came from Oklahoma. It was just a huge family thing. My auntie came back and brought food. My grandma, my late grandma, she gave me a sheep to butcher. She just gave it to me.

This was not just a celebration of Chelsea graduating from high school but a demonstration, rooted in her Tribal cultural traditions, of the collective importance of this accomplishment for the entire family.

Chelsea then moved her story to talk about how her grandparents (both attended school up to fourth grade), who have always supported her educational endeavors by connecting her to her Tribal heritage. They would remind Chelsea of her role to help the Navajo people.

> They tell me, "Yeah I don't know, I don't understand what you are learning, but you know you need to go further and then come home and help your nation and help your people prosper. When you go out, don't forget who you are, where you come from, and really keep that, that is how you were raised, a basis of who you are."

Chelsea's story highlights a critical component of the sharing circle methodology: recognition of the importance of fluidity in the formation of stories, which allows for a deeper understanding of experiences. In Chelsea's story, she moved in various directions, highlighting the full extent family had on her. She weaved in challenges, motivation, spirituality, and generational teachings, all demonstrating the interconnectedness of concepts that ensue with story sharing. Through storytelling and sharing circles, Chelsea was able to offer the rich and complex contours of her experiences, thereby highlighting a deeper awareness and thought of interrelatedness and a responsibility to help others.

Closely connected to the openness and fluidity of story sharing, a trusting space formed between students and facilitators. We (students and facilitators) exposed vulnerability by either revealing personal, sensitive matters and/or supporting each other. For example, in one sharing circle, Valerie confided that her grandma and grandpa were in a car accident, and being away from them and her family was difficult. In tears, Valerie shared:

> Whenever bad things like this would happen, you were always there with your family. But this time, I'm not even that far, but they're calling me and telling me to stay and focus on education and stuff. And I really wanted to go this weekend, but I couldn't because I'm not financially fit to go home right now. But my grandma lost her significant other, and you don't know how it breaks my heart because I just want to be there and comfort her. I don't know how that feels, but just to hear my grandma crying on the phone just breaks me. But yet they [her family] still enforce education over that. And you're like, "Why? Why don't you want my presence? Why don't you want my comfort?" But they only want to see you succeed.

After Valerie was able to expose the hurt she was feeling from being separated from family during a traumatic time, it was difficult to not offer words of support. Tachine (facilitator) stated:

> Know that you have people here. . . . Even though I don't know you, know that I'm here for you. I'll pray for you, and you can call and you know that I'll be here if you need someone to cry on. . . . And I just want the best for you and all of you.

Mutual respect and trust was established, thereby a space was created where students such as Valerie were able to share private and sensitive experiences with others. Valerie acknowledged that she found strength with prayer. Therefore Tachine recognized that prayer was a source of strength for Valerie. For Tachine, being silent or moving to a new subject after Valerie's emotional outpouring would have misaligned with Native philosophies. Facilitators saw providing support to students as an important aspect of recognition, relationships, and reciprocity, anchors of cultural protocol. This was only possible by being insiders/outsiders as previously discussed and blurring the lines of separation between facilitators and participants; both areas are discouraged in most focus group methods. As facilitators, we felt connected to their story because we recognized and shared similar experiences with them and/or we had a prior relationship with them and therefore knew a little more about their lives.

Cultural and Ethnical Considerations and Reflections

Sharing circles offered a unique, culturally relevant and culturally sensitive approach to Indigenous-based educational research. The engagement with tribal cultural protocol and the anchors of recognition, responsibility, and relationships facilitated a greater openness for storytelling of those contributing to the sharing circles. Establishing this connection (Jones et al., 2006) and story-sharing outcome required the facilitators to step out of standard roles of focus group interviews. For example, offering personal information and proactively offering words of support for students during difficult moments are not usually part of focus groups. In sharing circles it became essential to foster both a supportive and trusting environment where students were able to open up and share their stories.

While conducting sharing circles, we found Eurocentric research norms continued to conflict with our work. For example, the term *facilitator* did not accurately describe our role within the sharing circles. In writing this paper, we fumbled with how to name our position. We had conversations where we disclosed that we felt more like an older relative to these students, and after introductions, we discovered that through clan relationships we were related to some of the students. Therefore, providing support for students, especially during moments of struggle, felt like a responsibility. This nuanced experience explains the positionality tension of the "insider-outsider" in Indigenous research. To mitigate these challenges, we advocate for more research that offers ways of framing Indigenous methodology.

Through these accounts, we gained a deeper understanding of Native students' experiences and established the influential role of sharing circles. The students shared many more in-depth stories about their experiences with racism on campus and their sense of belonging. These stories included critiques of the institutionalized barriers that restricted family and marginalized Native students. Students also shared intimate family stories, humorous reflections of their college transition, and spiritual teachings that guided them. Throughout many of the stories, interconnectedness of family and giving back emerged as critically important values of the students. With sharing circles employed as a methodology, we were able to gather a holistic, in-depth view of their experiences.

Interestingly, it was only through our discussions of the sharing circle findings that it became apparent how unique it was to have students open up like they did. For two of the authors who are connected to their Native communities (Tachine and Yellow Bird), there was nothing remarkable about having students offer their stories in the way the students did. Through their extensive work with Native students, these

were normal responses. For the author who does not have a similar connection to his Indigenous roots (Cabrera) but has a greater familiarity with mainstream educational research, it was immediately apparent that it is not common for students to be so vulnerable during focus groups. Thus, through dialogue based on the diversity within our research group, we were able to tease out the novelty of this approach.

While this approach offers a great deal of promise in terms of a collaborative study for understanding the Native student experience, we offer some words of caution. There is an incredible heterogeneity within the umbrella "Native students," and much of our success was largely context-specific. For example, the two facilitators (Tachine and Yellow Bird) are not only Native people, but they also have cultural ties to their communities. The third author (Cabrera) also has a great deal of Native American ancestry in his family, but he is disconnected from this culture. Thus, it is unlikely that he would have been as successful facilitating sharing circles, using local cultural protocols and language, despite his Native heritage. Along the same lines, the students who participated in the sharing circles tended to have cultural connections to their Tribes, and several grew up on reservations. We are unsure if the sharing circles would have yielded similar findings if they were conducted with Native students who had less connection to their cultural heritage. Our point here is that researchers employing this methodological approach need to do so with caution, care, and time. While it is incredibly important to employ culturally relevant approaches to educational scholarship, this should not become a new form of essentialism (e.g., "I now know how to study all Native students"). Rather we encourage that significant steps be taken into account when implementing sharing circles, including recognizing the relationships and responsibility of the Tribal cultural protocol of your study.

Finally, our approach is incomplete. There was an implied agreement that we, as scholars, would take the findings of this research and use it to support the increased access and success of Native students at the University of Arizona. We are still in the process of writing up the empirical findings of the student stories and the value of asserting Indigenous methodology such as sharing circles when researching Native peoples. We understand, however, that publication in peer-reviewed outlets cannot be the end result of this research. Instead, we are obliged to creatively and collectively strategize to disseminate the lessons we learned into the hands of those administrators, staff, and professors who have power within the institutional structure to improve support for Native students. We no longer have the excuse that Native students are simply an asterisk in the research we are conducting (Shotton et al., 2013), and we need to take advantage of this rare opportunity to use these meaningful

stories to support the increased access and success of Native students at our institution. We promised it to the students and Tribes, and culturally as well as ethically, it is our only appropriate course of action given how much they gave us.

Acknowledgments

Part of this research was funded through the University of Arizona's Student Affairs and Enrollment Management office and the executive office of the president. We would like to thank Dr. Rainey Gaywish and Dr. Raymond Neckoway for their comments and critiques of an earlier version of this draft.

References

Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press.

Babbie, E. R. (2007). *The practice of social research* (11th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thompson Wadsworth.

Barbour, R. S., & Kitzinger, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Brayboy, B. M., & Deyhle, D. (2000). Insider-outsider: Researchers in American Indian communities. *Theory Into Practice*, *39*, 163–169.

Conradson, D. (2005). Focus groups. In R. Flowerdew & D. Martin (Eds.), *Methods in human geography: A guide for students doing a research project* (pp. 128–143). New York, NY: Routledge.

Denetdale, J. N. (2014). The value of oral history on the path to Diné/Navajo sovereignty. In L. L. Lee (Ed.), *Diné perspectives: Revitalizing and reclaiming Navajo thought* (2nd ed.; pp. 68–82). Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Edmunds, H. (1999). *The focus group research handbook*. Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association.

Emerson, L. (2014). Diné culture, decolonization, and the politics of Hozho. In L. L. Lee (Ed.), *Diné perspectives: Revitalizing and reclaiming Navajo thought* (2nd ed.; pp. 49–67). Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Forsyth, D. R. (2010). *Group dynamics* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadworth Cengage Learning.

Grande, S. (2004). *Red pedagogy: Native American social and political thought.* Lantham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Guillory, J. (2008). *Diverse pathways of "giving back" to tribal community: Perceptions of Native American college graduates* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Washington State University, Pullman.

Ho, D. (2006). The focus group interview: Rising to the challenge in qualitative research methodology. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 29*(1), 05.1–05.19. doi:10.2104/aral0605

Hopkins, P. E. (2007). Thinking critically and creatively about focus groups. *Area*, *39*(4), 528–535. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4762.2007.00766.x

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Kamberelis, G., & Dimitriadis, G. (2013). *Focus groups: From structured interviews to collective conversations.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, *311*, 299–302. doi:10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Kroll, T., Barbour, R., & Harris, J. (2007). Using focus groups in disability research. *Qualitative Health Research*, *17*, 690–698. doi:10.1177/1049732307301488

Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lee, L. L. (Ed.). (2014). *Diné perspectives: Revitalizing and reclaiming Navajo thought* (2nd ed.). Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mankiller, W. (2004). *Every day is a good day: Reflections by contemporary Indigenous women*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.

Mannay, D. (2010). Making the familiar strange: Can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible? *Qualitative Research*, *10*, 91–111. doi:10.1177/1468794109348684

Marsiglia, F. F., Cross, S., & Mitchell-Enos, V. (1999). Culturally grounded group work with adolescent American Indian students. *Social Work With Groups*, *21*(1–2), 89–102. doi:10.1300/J009v21n01_08

Merton, R. K., & Kendall, P. L. (1946). The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology*, *51*, 541–557.

Meyer, M. A. (2001). Our own liberation: Reflection on Hawaiian epistemology. *The Contemporary Pacific*, *13*(1), 124–148.

Mnookin, R. H. (1998). *Alternative dispute resolution* (Discussion Paper No. 232). Cambridge, MA: Center for Law, Economics, and Business, Harvard Law School.

Morgan, D. L. (Ed.). (1993). *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *22*, 129–152. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129

Parker, A., & Tritter, J. (2006). Focus group method and methodology: Current practice and recent debate. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, *29*, 23–37. doi:10.1080/01406720500537304

Reissman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ryan, W. (1976). *Blaming the victim* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Shotton, H. J., Lowe, S. C., & Waterman, S. J. (Eds.). (2013). *Beyond the asterisk: Understanding Native students in higher education.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples.* London, England: Zed Books.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Black Point, Canada: Fernwood.

Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

About the Authors

Amanda R. Tachine (Navajo) is a postdoctoral scholar in the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University where she studies Native college student access and persistence.

Eliza Yellow Bird (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara) is a doctoral student in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona.

Nolan L. Cabrera is an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona where he studies racism, whiteness, and college campus racial dynamics.