

# Collaborative Methodology with Indigenous Communities: A Framework for Addressing Power Inequalities

Mneesha Gellman, *Emerson College*

In 2016, when I first proposed partnering with a Native American tribe in Northern California to explore questions about youth identity and heritage language access in nearby public high schools, the skepticism from tribal leaders was both palpable and understandable. Why would they spend their limited time dealing with me, an academic, like so many before who wanted to collect data and write a book? How would my publications or career trajectory address their needs or goals? As I navigated a complex set of relationships to develop a research framework that would transcend my own scholarly desires and be useful to the community, the sociohistorical implications of positionality felt too heavy to ignore. At the same time, my disciplinary training in political science offered few answers to questions about researcher responsibility to perform impactful community-based work and how to equitably share the gains of research.

It is no surprise that much research has been conducted at the expense rather than the benefit of people whose lives are documented (MacLean et al. 2018; US Department of Health and Human Services 1979; Wilson 2008, 48–49). The creation of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) emerged in response to ethical violations of vulnerable populations. Among Indigenous communities, information extraction by self-glorifying scholars has given academia a rightfully earned bad name (Deloria Jr. [1969] 1988, 78–100). Whereas my doctoral work and first book (Gellman 2017) held an uncomfortable line between extraction and trying to make space for subaltern voices, my more recent work explicitly addresses issues of power in research design and blends positivist and interpretive approaches (Gellman forthcoming).

Through collaborative methodological practices that join interpretive and positivist approaches, I argue that researchers should engage people as actors with agency rather than as objects or subjects of research. How this looks may play out differently across research designs and cases, but it is especially vital for research in marginalized communities. At the meta level, collaborative methodology means that stakeholders—that is, people affected by the research puzzle—are invited to participate in multiple levels of the research rather

than exclusively as sources of data. This article describes my empirical puzzle and cases and then identifies ways in which I engaged collaboratively with stakeholders. I present the mixed-methods design of the study to highlight the collaborative elements of each, as well as challenges posed in such collaboration. I conclude with a call to continue decolonizing political science research in Indigenous and other historically and contemporarily marginalized communities.

## COLLABORATIVELY FORMING A RESEARCH PUZZLE

My research initially centered on two questions: (1) How does youth identity formation translate into civic, cultural, and political participation?; and (2) What role does public school curricula have in this process? As I spoke with Yurok Tribe Education Department staff, a third and more specific question evolved based on their interests: How does Indigenous language access in public high school curricula affect Indigenous heritage-speaking students as well as students from other backgrounds? Yurok Tribe staff, educators, and academic administrators also were interested in how Indigenous language access impacts school success for Indigenous students, which became the fourth research question.

These inquiries, explored through multiyear engagement with the Yurok Tribe of California and a Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico, evolved through iterative collaboration with stakeholders and included significant interpretive and empirical work. The addition of Yurok to public high school curricula in Humboldt, Del Norte, and Trinity counties in California (Onishi 2014) and the availability of Zapotec through one public system in Oaxaca (*Secretaría de Educación Media Superior* 2014) yielded little scholarship. Ultimately, both my own interests and those of stakeholders centered on common themes of cultural-content availability in schools, identity affirmation or negation for youth, and how these identities are wielded for success or struggle in various aspects of student life. These themes led me to the examination of curricula and the development of intercultural competency in relation to different arenas of participation and success.

I established elsewhere that classrooms serve as major interfaces between state agendas for citizen development

and youth identity formation (Gellman and Bellino 2019). Intercultural competency refers to the skills needed to navigate multicultural engagement with people, systems, and institutions operating on norms and principles different than one's own. Education policy can facilitate or inhibit these skills (National Education Association 2017).

*As I navigated a complex set of relationships to develop a research framework that would transcend my own scholarly desires and be useful to the community, the sociohistorical implications of positionality felt too heavy to ignore.*

After collaboratively finalizing the research questions, I tested two hypotheses formulated based on conversations with stakeholders, especially teachers. The following hypotheses rest on vignettes that many language teachers thought were true but did not have systematic proof of, and we wanted to see if the vignettes played out more generally across student groups:

*Hypothesis 1:* For heritage-speaking students, Indigenous language class access facilitates greater civic, cultural, and political participation. Language access brings with it a host of unintended but beneficial side effects, such as increasing student success, raising self-esteem, and empowering students to participate more broadly in a range of projects.

*Hypothesis 2:* For non-heritage-speaking students—specifically white students in California and mestizo students in Oaxaca, as well as other minority students from outside the heritage language group—learning another language will help them to develop intercultural competence.

Indicators of developing intercultural competency may include the ability to recognize the validity of multiple perspectives and customs and increased interest in engaging cross culturally. I do not argue that Indigenous language access alone holds the power to foster intercultural skills. Other variables such as how much cultural content language teachers choose to bring in and how effectively it is incorporated into classes as well as school, community, and family environments all play a role. To address these other variables, I included several other classes in the study in addition to Yurok and Zapotec language classes: civics, US history, and Spanish in California, and art history, English, and French in Oaxaca. These additional classes served as both controls and a way to obtain a more complete picture of curricula at play in youth identity formation and participation.

Civic participation refers to any type of collective action that addresses concerns at the community level—for example, picking up trash in a public area or volunteering as a tutor. Cultural participation may be showing up for or taking an active role in religious, linguistic, artistic, or other culturally meaningful activities. Political participation entails a range of institutional and contentious claim-making activities, from voting to protesting at the local, regional, national, or international level, as well as online political actions. There frequently is overlap across concepts, with cultural processes

being political and political assertions situated in culture (Lara-Cooper and Lara, Sr. 2019; Risling Baldy 2018).

I argue that grounded self-identity and the ability to recognize the validity of others' identities informs youth participation choices across demographic backgrounds. Culturally relevant and sensitive curricula create the space in schooling to

help Indigenous students and those from other historically marginalized backgrounds whose identities are omitted from official curricula feel connected to their education and, more broadly, to their community. The most significant finding is that access to Indigenous language classes as part of official high school curricula serves as a means to resist culturecide, in which Indigenous students are able to assert their contemporary existence.

#### COMPARATIVE CASES CONTEXTS

This project involved two stays in Oaxaca totaling nine months and more than eight trips to California, ranging from two to five weeks each. Conceptually and logistically, I also build on extensive previous time spent in each place. This includes fieldwork in Oaxaca in 2002, 2008, and 2012, where I am entirely an outsider, and a lifetime growing up in or visiting Northern California, where I am both an insider as a white person from the area and an outsider as a non-Native person. As a cisgender female, forty-ish, white professor, I navigated a slew of power dynamics throughout this project as both power holder (as perceived by some students and many people in Oaxaca) and supplicant (with the Yurok Tribe and Eureka-based administrators). I tried to maintain awareness of my own epistemologies and ontologies throughout the research (Wilson 2008, 44) to address the structural implications of my identity as it intersected with the research process.

In 2016, I first sought permission from the Yurok Tribal Council in California to conduct research in Yurok language classrooms at the majority Native American Hoopa Valley High School on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation and at the coastal, predominantly white Eureka High School, which I attended in the mid- to late-1990s. Racism and discrimination pervade the state but are particularly salient behind the “Redwood Curtain” (i.e., the extreme northwest of California including Humboldt, Del Norte, and Mendocino counties). In this area, the history of the Gold Rush, logging industry, Indian massacres (Norton 1979; Risling Baldy and Begay 2019), and marijuana cultivation (Reed 2019), among other themes, form the backdrop to a “leave-me-alone” attitude among settler descendants.

In 2016, the Yurok Tribal Council approved the project, with the condition that it had the right to review any material produced about the study prior to publication. Between 2018 and 2020, I collected data in California and also in Oaxaca,

where I spent five months on pre-tenure leave, plus three months during a COVID-interrupted Fulbright Fellowship in 2020. These trips resulted in 186 interviews, 267 surveys, and 13 focus groups, with more than 100 classroom observations and dozens of meetings with community officials, school administrators, and other stakeholders to informally discuss project themes.

For comparativists, it is worth noting that I was able to be highly collaborative in California, where I began working first, but less so in Oaxaca, where I was implementing research instruments that were translated from English to Spanish. For comparability, the research instruments needed to be the basically the same and therefore not open to stakeholder input in the same way as in California. Because the interests of the Yurok Tribe centered on school success for Native students, and because Zapotec community leaders shared these interests, the study was useful to parties across both sites. However, Zapotec leaders did not have the opportunity to collaboratively shape the study in the same way that the Yurok Tribe did, and my own ability to connect as a semi-local with school administrators was notably stronger in California than in Oaxaca. Such lopsidedness is a limitation of comparativism for collaborative methodology that future scholars may find better ways to address.

#### MIXED-METHODS COLLABORATION

After finalizing the core research questions with the Yurok Tribe, I began developing the instruments for qualitative interviews, focus groups, and surveys. In doing so, I met with various stakeholders from the Yurok Tribe and school administrators in multiple districts. Whereas school administrators concentrated their feedback on the permission forms necessary for student participation (their main thrust: shorten the text, make it less jargon filled!), Yurok language teachers helped to edit survey questions to make them more comprehensible to young people.

The IRB, the gateway to any human-involved research, is not set up with collaborative methodology in mind, but it is possible to both complete IRB requirements and research collaboratively. This requires addressing the ethical protection of research participants as subjects with rights to be protected and simultaneously as equals to be collaborated with as they so choose. I think of the IRB as a floor rather than a ceiling in ethical protection and updated my IRB application as needed to keep it in line with the evolving study details.

*Although it is no easy task, decolonizing research methods is an ethical imperative.*

My collaboration throughout the project included but was more extensive than member-checking, in which researchers take their own self-designed studies to members to “check” them for accuracy, sometimes by submitting prepublication drafts for review (Schwartz-Shea 2020, 40). Member-checking was useful for working with Yurok teachers to revise the survey instrument and ensuring that all project-related publications were reviewed and approved first (including this article) by the Yurok Tribal Council and Yurok Education Department.

However, collaborative methodology opens up the possibility that the instrument might be questioned and revised iteratively to meet the needs of all stakeholders—a process that may be cumbersome, messy, and slow (Schwartz-Shea 2020, 43–44).

After the iterative process of reaching consensus with stakeholders on the interview, focus-group, and survey instruments, I conducted the data collection alone. Then, using almost 200 interviews, research assistants in Oaxaca, California, and Boston transcribed more than 1,500 single-spaced pages. The research assistants and I analyzed these transcripts, without software, for key themes and concept indicators. The 13 focus groups of three to five students each at the five schools addressed three units of analysis: the individual level, the group level, and the interaction level (Cyr 2016, 232). The Yurok Tribe Education Department also requested baseline quantitative data from a larger number of student respondents than my initially proposed qualitative methods could reach. To address this request, I taught myself survey methods and was able to establish baseline data in 2018 that show student profiles from Yurok and Zapotec classes, along with a range of control classes, on themes of identity, inclusion, and participation.

At the conclusion of fieldwork, I sent drafts of preliminary analysis reports to each school and district administrator, as well as teachers in whose classes I had worked and other administrative-level stakeholders. Responses from stakeholders to the preliminary analysis were not always forthcoming—they have day jobs ranging from teaching language classes across multiple schools located hours apart to running schools and departments. However, I kept reaching out and, in one example, nearly a year after I sent preliminary analyses to both California schools, I was invited to facilitate workshops with faculty and district administrators to discuss recommendations that followed from the data in the preliminary report.

I also participated in a lengthy review process on all drafts (including this one) with the Yurok Tribe, both at the Education Department level and the Office of the Tribal Attorney and the Yurok Council. This review process required patience on my part and the humility to recognize that my research and publication schedule was not a priority for the Yurok Tribe. Although it is not what every researcher can do, as part of decolonizing political science research, such collaborative processes may be necessary to account for generations of harm done by previous extractive researchers.

#### CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZING POLITICAL SCIENCE ONE PROJECT AT A TIME

Education policy that encourages the inclusion and success of diverse students has significant room for improvement. Students across all schools in both Mexico and the United States show interest in learning Yurok, Zapotec, English, or Spanish in ways that demonstrate an appreciation for exposure to heritage culture or the culture of others. Many administrators, teachers, and community members, meanwhile, are still

determining how to reconcile cultural legacies of genocide with contemporary realities of coexistence.

The stakes are high for research on education policy in relation to democratic coexistence. Indigenous students in all case-study schools recounted numerous instances of being insulted, name-called, and discriminated against based on stereotypes about their racial and ethnic background. Building a robust democratic future means engaging education policy so that young people from historically marginalized backgrounds feel included in the policy—and the curricula is a good place to start.

Although it is no easy task, decolonizing research methods is an ethical imperative. Collaborative methodology identifies best practices in collaboration that can help researchers desist from neocolonial practices and move toward researching with rather than on Indigenous peoples and other historically marginalized communities. Collaborative methodology puts the resources of academia to work for people in ways that they have deemed of interest. As such, it moves away from information extraction and toward techniques that address structural injustice.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the Yurok Tribal Council, the Yurok Language Program, and the Yurok Education Department for their permission for and engagement with this research. I also thank Joshua Dankoff and two anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback. I am grateful to the Sociological Initiatives Foundation for partial fieldwork funding. Any errors are my own. ■

#### REFERENCES

- Cyr, Jennifer. 2016. "The Pitfalls and Promise of Focus Groups as a Data-Collection Method." *Sociological Methods & Research* 45 (2): 231–59.
- Deloria, Jr. Vine. [1969] 1988. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Gellman, Mneesha. 2017. *Democratization and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey, and El Salvador, Global Cooperation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gellman, Mneesha. Forthcoming. *Culture Kids: Culturecide and Indigenous Language Politics in Mexico and the United States*. Unpublished book manuscript.
- Gellman, Mneesha, and Michelle Bellino. 2019. "Fighting Invisibility: Indigenous Citizens and History Education in El Salvador and Guatemala." *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 14 (1): 1–23. DOI: 10.1080/17442222.2018.1457006.
- Lara-Cooper, Kishan, and Walter J. Lara, Sr. (eds.). 2019. *Ka'm-t'em: A Journey Toward Healing*. Pechanga, CA: Great Oak Press.
- MacLean, Lauren M., Elliot Posner, Susan Thomson, and Elisabeth Jean Wood. 2018. "Research Ethics and Human Subjects: A Reflexive Openness Approach." Final Report of Qualitative Transparency Deliberation Working Group I.2, August. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3332887](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3332887).
- National Education Association. 2017. "What Is Cultural Competence?" Accessed October 1, 2017. [www.nea.org/home/39783.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/39783.htm).
- Norton, Jack. 1979. *Genocide of Northwestern California: When Our Worlds Cried*. San Francisco: Indian Historian Press.
- Onishi, Norimitsu. 2014. "In California, Saving a Language That Predates Spanish and English." *New York Times*, April 12. <https://nyti.ms/1X1SRn>.
- Reed, Kaitlin. 2019. *The Environmental & Cultural Impacts of Cannabis Cultivation on Yurok Tribal Lands*. University of California, Davis: PhD dissertation.
- Risling Baldy, Cutcha. 2018. *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Risling Baldy, Cutcha, and Kayla Begay. 2019. "Xo'ch Na:nahsde'tl-te Survivance, Resilience and Unbroken Traditions in Northwest California." In *Ka'm-t'em: A Journey Toward Healing*, ed. Kishan Lara-Cooper and Walter J. Lara, Sr., 39–61. Pechanga, CA: Great Oak Press.
- Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine. 2020. "Member-Checking: Not a Panacea, Sometimes a Quagmire." *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 17–18 (1): 39–46.
- Secretaría de Educación Media Superior. 2014. *Plan de Estudios 2014: Modelo Educativo Integral Indígena (MEII). Colegio Superior para la Educación Integral Intercultural de Oaxaca (CSEIIIO)*. [www.academia.edu/34542328\\_Funciones\\_de\\_las\\_lenguas\\_en\\_el\\_Modelo\\_Integral\\_Ind%C3%ADgena\\_2015\\_CSEIIIO](http://www.academia.edu/34542328_Funciones_de_las_lenguas_en_el_Modelo_Integral_Ind%C3%ADgena_2015_CSEIIIO): Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca.
- US Department of Health and Human Services. 1979. "The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research." National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, April 18. [www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html).
- Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax and Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.