Original Research

CONNECTING THROUGH RESEARCH: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A POSITIVE CULTURE IN AN INTER-INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

The LUCARA (Lincoln University, University of Canterbury, and Ara Te Pūkenga) group is a thriving research group based in Ōtautahi Christchurch, New Zealand. The group consists of nine academics in sport and exercise science, health, and nutrition at the three tertiary institutions. The majority of the group members had previously been involved in collaborative research for over 10 years. Initially, the relationships during this time were largely transactional, for example, editorial feedback, funding support, data collection, and statistical support. However, in the last two-and-half years, the group has matured, and relationships have deepened with weekly meetings, connections, and partnerships, which has produced a large increase in the number of collaborations between researchers, sharing of resources, and hence increased research outputs. This narrative explores the organic researcher-led growth in the group, and uses the theme of connections to gain an understanding of how this culture has blossomed over a relatively short time in a sport and allied health research setting.

Canti et al. (2021) proposed that research culture can reflect the organisational culture in which research is undertaken or how people perform research. Within institutions such as universities or polytechnics, research culture can be developed in several ways at different levels (Marchant, 2009). At the government level and in a tertiary organisation, a high-level focus can achieve an alignment between research strategy and goals within an institution and in academic roles (Marchant, 2009). Some tertiary institutions may also have specialist research leadership and administration units, which proactively promote research with support to develop a research culture and ensure compliance with institutional and governmental goals (Marchant, 2009). Additionally, local or sub-units such as departments, schools, or faculties can have strong research leadership, management, and funding. A research institute can also reward researchers, promote a positive atmosphere and collegiality, and provide funding and mentoring to facilitate a research culture (Marchant, 2009). The LUCARA group involves academics from three different tertiary organisations with their own specific research organisational cultures. This auto-ethnography will go beyond the organisational research culture of the respective institutions of the individual researchers, and investigate the environment at the level of the research team and individuals. Therefore, the focus of this exploration is to examine the way or how we do research and the importance of connections in the group.

Brené Brown (as cited in Schawbel, 2017) proposed that true belonging means maintaining a belief in the inextricable human connection. Moreover, Brown suggests that belonging is not only joining or being part of a group but also being authentic and challenging oneself and others within the group. However, considerable barriers exist when developing and maintaining these connections and relationships within a research group

due to the competing demands of an academic position. Borkowski et al. (2016) indicated these barriers include other work roles taking priority, a lack of time, insufficient research skills, and a desire for work–life balance. In contrast, enablers to develop a positive research culture at an individual level included the desire to develop skills, to increase job satisfaction, and continued intellectual stimulation (Borkowski et al., 2016). There is ample research on how strategies can be used to develop research cultures within an institute (Ajjawi et al., 2018; Borkowski et al., 2016). However, there is a dearth of research on connections and relationships within research groups, particularly where teams of individuals are actually undertaking research. For example, in their review of research environments literature, Ajjawi et al. (2018) indicated that a realist approach was needed, as previous reviews focussed largely on what works and ignored the context of the research culture itself and how outcomes are achieved in small teams. In their review, Ajjawi et al. (2018) suggested that individuals should reflect on how they identify as researchers, including their conceptions of research, and work towards developing an identity where research and connections are internally motivated within teams rather than externally driven.

An ethnography would enable the real-world context of the LUCARA research culture to be discovered, analysed, and shared (Jones & Smith, 2017). Traditionally, ethnography involves an immersion into a culture to enable in-depth observations that result in a better understanding of the activities and practices of groups of individuals (Jones & Smith, 2017). Consequently, an ethnography would be ideal for the purpose of this narrative, which is to explore factors including connectedness to elucidate their influence in developing a positive research culture within the LUCARA research group.

PROCESS

The research used an ethnography process where LUCARA group members met, reflected, and drew on past experiences to discuss the research culture. The purpose of this approach was to provide members with an opportunity to offer personal recollections, so an articulation of the members' knowledge and experiences of the research culture could occur (Adams et al., 2017). This process was utilised as there has been minimal research on researchers' experiences within research cultures, and an ethnography method enables the description of everyday experiences which cannot typically be encapsulated through more traditional research designs (Adams et al., 2017).

Two meetings were conducted as not all the members could meet at the same time. The first meeting consisted of four members where one person acted as a scribe and facilitator. The second meeting had another two members and the scribe/facilitator from the first meeting. Three members were not available for the meetings due to annual leave, overseas travel, and secondment to a management role. Nevertheless, all members were provided with a draft copy of the manuscript to give them the opportunity to contribute, provide feedback, and verify the authenticity of the findings. Consequently, all members of the group were participant observers (Jones & Smith, 2017), fully immersed in the research setting and overtly aware of the study.

To provide a preliminary structure for the LUCARA members, the submissions information provided by the Scope Journal Theme for 2023: 'Connection' Submissions for Scope (Health & Wellbeing) by Ross (2022) was paraphrased into the following points to start the conversation.

1. Connection is about a relationship between two or more things, or groups, or people.
2. Connection between self and concepts, ideas, and theory is fundamental to learning.
3. Connection underpins collaboration, and it is through collaborative work that boundaries expand, and new understandings emerge.
4. Connection is defined by Brené Brown as "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued" (http://brenebrown. com/art/tgoi-connection).
5. Connection between people and within communities is fundamental to collective and individual wellbeing.

6. Whakapapa helps us understand that there is connection between now and the past, between all people, and between people and the rest of the natural world.

During the meetings, notes for each prompting point were recorded to enable academics to verify the validity of the notes in situ. Two academics then reviewed the notes from each meeting and identified key themes independently. A comparison of the identified themes was then undertaken to agree on the themes, which were circulated to the wider group for feedback. The meetings were also recorded using Microsoft Teams to enable a review of the discussion if needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following three key themes with sub themes were identified in the reflections amongst our members:

1. Benefits of interdisciplinary research

    i.   Building on strengths
    ii.   Continuous learning and enjoyment
    iii. Benefiting from each other's talents
    iv.   Inspiring each other
    v.   New understanding emerging through collaboration.

2. Kaupapa Māori approach

    i.   Connecting with stakeholders
    ii.   Relationship driven
    iii. Giving back to the community
    iv.   Connection between people and the natural world.

3. Importance of the space to connect

    i.   Management support – research time allocation
    ii.   Connections and relationships can be informal and formal
    iii. Sharing of resources.

Benefits of interdisciplinary research

A strong sense of teamwork, connection and collegiality was expressed by the group. Members indicated that in the past they had been in other research environments where they were part of a group but had worked independently:

> In past research groups it was quite independent, only one doing it by myself (Reflection Member #1)

The perceived difference for the LUCARA members is the multidisciplinary, social, enjoyable, open, and collaborative nature of the research collaboration. For example, members indicated the group is inspiring and uplifting, energising, and academically stimulating. There was also a strong sense of being valued, supported, equal, and accepted professionally and culturally, which facilitated connections and the sharing of research opportunities:

> I feel people feel they have a space within the team, valuing each other's opinions and being able to be vulnerable. (Reflection Member #2)

Overall, researchers valued the different strengths and perspectives of the academics in the multidisciplinary group. This approach created a positive, supportive, collaborative, and stimulating research environment, where

researchers felt valued and seen, and could connect and contribute to group discussions of research projects or ideas. Consequently, more opportunities for research were identified and discussed, thereby increasing research collaborations, which ultimately increased the understanding of different areas in subject specialities, and also increased the number and depth of research outputs. This development was internally driven and was similar to the process suggested by Ajjawi et al. (2018), whereby researchers should work towards developing an identity and be internally motivated rather than externally driven within teams. For example:

> We created some team norms, to the point we are producing and performing well. We had different roles and were all able to lead in different aspects of the group'' (Reflection Member #2).

Members of the LUCARA group also expressed elements of a positive research culture such as enjoyment, the desire to develop skills, and to keep the brain stimulated, as described in previous research (Borkowski et al., 2016). Our findings were also similar to the outcomes from a 2020 Wellcome survey of over 4000 researchers, which indicated that the characteristics of a positive research culture included feeling supported, safe, valued, and a culture where collaboration and diversity is encouraged (Moran et al., 2020). The acceptance of diversity and a Kaupapa Māori approach were central themes identified for the LUCARA members.

Kaupapa Māori

A strong theme of Kaupapa Māori research was expressed both directly and indirectly by the members. Kaupapa Māori research is undertaken by Māori, with Māori and for Māori, and is informed by tikanga Māori, or Māori ways of doing things (Smith, 1999). As in other aspects of the research culture, the development of a Kaupapa Māori approach to research occurred informally and organically. The group included a researcher who was a Kaiārahi Kaupapa Māori leader and due to the positive research culture described above, they could facilitate a change in the group to a Kaupapa Māori approach to research, as one member noted there:

> Was a massive change in the group and the relationships towards a Kaupapa Māori approach to research. (Reflection Member #2)

This change was due to the connections and relationships formed within the group, which represent the Kaupapa Māori approach to research and the positive research culture within the group, for example:

> I'm relationship driven, relationships are first and foremost, create rapport before doing any work. This is quite different in terms of western approach, developing relationships first and seeing if I can work with people. (Reflection Member #2)

> The connection to the Māori community – opened up more opportunities, perspective and made research meaningful. (Reflection Member #4)

> We engage more in Kaupapa and the Māori world view… (Reflection Member #5)

Relationships were further strengthened through a two-day writing retreat at Lincoln University that included the LUCARA academics and also postgraduate students. As a result of the writing retreat, four LUCARA academics and a postgraduate student went on a noho marae research retreat. This emphasized the group's approach of learning through experience, the Māori leader's influence and a Kaupapa Māori approach, where connections are built on mutual trust, respect, reciprocity, and whanaungatanga (Hudson et al., 2010). The marae retreat also enhanced the group's connection and understanding of the Māori worldview and culture, for example, the connection between people and the natural world, and also well-being. A key aspect in developing these relationships was the time and space for the researchers to connect.

Importance of the space to connect

Academics indicated that connecting as a research group was very important. The first formal meeting for the LUCARA group occurred on 3 December, 2020. Prior to December 2020, researchers contacted each other via email or phone, or had the occasional meeting to discuss collaboration for specific projects. The relationships and exchanges were largely transactional, for example, funding, editorial and statistical analysis support. As a result of a discussion between management and academic staff, teaching was not scheduled for Ara Sport and Health staff on Friday mornings in 2021 to enable research to be undertaken by academics. Consequently, regular weekly meetings were scheduled for Fridays in 2021, where academics in Sport, Nutrition and Health from Lincoln University and Ara Institute of Technology were invited to attend. Membership of the group was extended informally and based on pre-existing relationships of the academics. For example, a University of Canterbury academic was invited to later meetings based on prior relationships with members of the group. The regular weekly meetings were seen as an important space to connect with colleagues and research, which also implied that "research is valued" (Reflection Member #1). This was a deliberate decision by the group, as other work roles taking priority and a lack of time have been found to be a barrier to undertaking research (Borkowski et al., 2016). To underscore the value attached to research, notes with actions were also taken in the meetings, which were reviewed at subsequent meetings to ensure that research received a similar priority as other academic work.

The connections within the group were both formal and informal. For example, a formal memorandum of understanding was signed between Lincoln University and Ara Institute of Technology of Canterbury at the executive management level of the tertiary organisations, which enabled the sharing of resources such as equipment, teaching, and a collaborative approach to funding. Informal connections were facilitated through the social nature of the weekly meetings and also the end-of-year social events. For example, at the initial regular meetings, there was also shared kai (food) to underpin the Kaupapa Māori approach to research, including a literal "breaking of bread" (Reflection Member #2) between onsite Ara members, which also occurred during LUCARA research away days. The informal connections also extended beyond the group and into the community. The social capital of the LUCARA researchers was used to connect other group members to external organisations or specialists who could help with research projects, for example, nursing staff to take blood, potential student research assistants, and links to external groups in the community. An example of the informal social connections within the group is that recently a member's partner has started a home brew, which the group has named Prof. Pilsner and the partner has been invited to attend a future external social event. The social, informal and relationship building nature of the group is seen as a strength of LUCARA, where group members see meetings as *uplifting and energizing*, and research as being a supportive team activity that is not undertaken in separate silos.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH APPROACH

A strength of the study is that researchers were participant observers (Jones & Smith, 2017) and information could be collected directly about the culture. However, the authors cannot discount that the insider approach may have led to biases. For example, information was collected during two group discussions. Members may have changed their behaviour or responses based on the presence of other members in the group, that is, an observer effect or observer expectancy effect (Jones & Smith, 2017). To mitigate this possibility, all members were provided with a draft copy of the manuscript to provide feedback and verify the authenticity of the findings. The authors also acknowledge that using a preliminary structure based on the theme of 'Connections' for the group meetings may have biased members responses. Nevertheless, rich, varied, in-depth information about the research culture resulted from this semi-structured approach, and identified themes, such as collaboration, diversity, and being valued and supported, which have been found in similar studies (Moran et al., 2020).

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

A key aspect of the group is that members believe research is valued, important and meaningful. A positive research culture was created by members being open and accepting of diversity, which created a supportive research environment that built on the academic and personal strengths of the members. For example, the collaboration matured into the use of a Kaupapa Māori approach to research under the influence of the Māori leader in the group, where connections were built on mutual trust, respect, reciprocity, and whanaungatanga. A key practice of the group was researcher-led weekly meetings, which created the opportunity for connections and ensured shared responsibility and action points for achieving research goals and objectives. As a consequence of these behaviours and practices, the research group became more connected, supportive and academically productive.

CONCLUSION

Our exploration of the connections within our multidisciplinary inter-institutional research group showed the benefits of cooperation far exceeded external measures such as increased research outputs. Research connections were internally motivated and transformed our group into a highly functional positive research culture, with a Kaupapa Māori approach as a basis for research relationships that are mana enhancing to members and research participants alike. The resulting culture was stimulating, social and supportive of diverse points of views, which led to uplifting collaborative teamwork compared to siloed transactional-based research by individuals.

Peter Olsen, PhD (Otago), is a Principal Lecturer in Sport Science at Ara-Te Pūkenga. He is a thought leader in sport science in Aotearoa and his research has an applied focus that investigates sport performance in real world settings, with a specific interest in equity issues in the provision of sport science support and research.
 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7815-215X

Helen Marshall, PhD Exercise Physiology, has worked in New Zealand tertiary education since 2006, when she moved from the United Kingdom. She is a senior lecturer at Ara – Te Pūkenga and the coordinator for the Health Promotion (BAppSci) degree. Helen has been involved in a range of research projects, however, her main interest lies within physical activity for health, particularly relating to the prevention and management of chronic disease.
 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8271-8969

Maria Choukri, PhD (Otago), MA (Comenius), BSc (Hons), BBiomedSc, is the Human Nutrition Coordinator and Senior Lecturer at Ara-Te Pūkenga. She is also a Registered Nutritionist and a member of the Reviewer Board of the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. Her research interests include nutrition and mental health, psychological factors in nutrition and lifestyle, health psychology, health behaviours, and dietary patterns and health.
 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2517-8668

Catherine Elliot, BS, MA, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Health at Lincoln University, New Zealand and an Associate Fellow of Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand. Dr Elliot has published over 30 peer-reviewed journal articles in the areas of physical and mental health, sport and exercise science.
 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5594-4699

Heperi Harris (Master of Māori and Indigenous Studies (MMaor)) has spent 16 years in education, as a tutor, kaiako, manager, and now Kaupapa Māori Lead at Ara-Te Pūkenga. Heperi has developed a deep passion for Te Reo Māori, Indigenous Education, language revitalisation, giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and Te Ao Māori pedagogical practice. He has also spent 11 years advocating for taonga tākaro, Māori games, and pastimes.

Claudia Leong, BFoodTech, PhD, is a lecturer at Ara-Te Pūkenga, Christchurch, New Zealand and a registered nutritionist (NZ). She has been in the field of nutrition research for more than 10 years, starting from a research assistant at the Clinical Nutrition Research Centre (Singapore), to her PhD and research fellowship at the University of Otago, to being a research active lecturer at Ara-Te Pūkenga. Claudia has numerous journal publications in the field of nutrition.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6388-4646

Nick Draper is a practitioner-researcher with a focus on finding solutions to real-world problems in sports performance and health contexts. Nick is a Professor at the University of Canterbury, where he specialises in exercise physiology. He has over 100 publications with his main research interests in rugby and concussion, rock climbing, judo, recovery strategies and physical activity and health.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4466-3792

Catherine Lizamore, PhD Exercise Science, has been changing learners' lives through tertiary education for around 15 years in New Zealand. Catherine is the programme manager of the BAppSci programme at Ara-Te Pūkenga. She has been involved in research for over 10 years with a strong interest in the impact of altitude training on health, heart rate variability, physical activity, chronic disease and exercise performance.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4555-7211

Michael Hamlin, BPhEd, MHMS, PhD, is Professor at Lincoln University, a Fellow of the European College of Sports Science, American College of Sport Medicine and Sport, and Exercise Science NZ. He is an editor of Frontiers in Sports and Active Living-Elite Sports and Performance Enhancement, and Journal of Sport and Exercise Science and Archives of Allied Health Sciences. He has over 100 journal articles, many book chapters and an edited book.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7941-8554

Correspondence to: Peter Olsen, Peter.Olsen@ara.ac.nz

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