12. Unraveling the proverbial patchwork quilt*: Identifying and analyzing the challenges of an international, multi-site research partnership

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Abstract

Working on the Tikkun Youth Project for its entire duration, I was able to fully immerse myself in this multi-site, international, collaborative project. While it has been a very fruitful experience, working on such an expansive project comes with its challenges. Through this paper, I employ an autoethnography approach where I hone in on my experiences as the author and research assistant on this project, while exploring my own process and positionality in the project to identify the challenges that exist with this type of endeavour. I utilize three categories for this autoethnographic exploration: cultural, structural, and interpersonal/professional, as identified and outlined by Martin, Craft, and Tillema (2002). This paper aims to provide commentary about valuable lessons that were learned from this reflective process that could potentially provide perspective and recommendations to other individuals who may be working on or thinking about working on an international collaborative project in the future.

Keywords: autoethnography; international research; international partnerships; multi-site research; multi-site partnerships; international collaboration

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I have had the pleasure of being a team member of the Tikkun Youth Project

since its inception at the home site in Windsor, Ontario. Being a part of this journey, from the beginning of the project to its completion, has been an enlightening experience. Through my role, I have been able to work with the project director to help orchestrate the different facets of the project and work with the five different sites on a local, national, and international level. These experiences have been extremely insightful, meaningful, and have provided me with valuable learning experiences. Through this work, there have been successes and challenges inherent in a project with such a broad scope. Working with five different sites and people who exhibit different ways of life, different lived experiences, different cultures, and different positionalities, has provided an enlightening experience for those of us here at the main hub (Windsor site). These valuable lessons serve as the backbone for this chapter written with the intent of sharing with other individuals who are either working in or thinking about participating in an international collaborative project.

As the title of this work indicates, a reference has been made by van Swet, Armstrong, and Lloyd (2012) when comparing a collaborative international research project to that of a patchwork quilt:

> It requires adequate preparation and sufficient time for engagement. The process cannot be rushed and, as in quilting, it works best if the participants in the project are inspired and motivated to engage. In both quilting and research, it is important to be aware of the context and to invest in the relationships, to ensure that all participants' voices are heard, and that concerns can be expressed openly. (p. 649)

In this paper, I will use this reference as a sense of imagery and metaphor to deconstruct this important topic. With this comparison in mind, this chapter aims to deconstruct this proverbial patchwork quilt with the purpose of identifying the intricacies and lessons that ensue from an engagement of this nature.

In this chapter, I seek to explore the challenges that exist in a multi-site, international, and collaborative project, such as the Tikkun Youth Project. In this chapter, I engage in an autoethnography approach (discussed further in the next section) where I, as the author and research assistant, explore my experiences and challenges that exist when navigating such an intensive project that spans multiple continents.

I draw from the literature, such as Martin, Craft, and Tillema (2002) that

identifies three categories relating to international collaborations: cultural, structural, and interpersonal/professional. I will utilize these domains to explore the Tikkun Youth Project and to determine how each of these categories has been experienced and what recommendations could be suggested for future practice. Furthermore, I acknowledge my limitations in this writing in terms of my own privilege, proximity, and positionality in contrast to other members of the project team in different locales.

The Use of Autoethnography

When considering the best approach to explore the challenges of this specific international, multi-site partnership, it became evident that the qualitative research method of autoethnography would be appropriate. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explain how researchers utilize this method:

> they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences. (p. 276)

This definition provides a few different elements to unpack. There is the element of an introspective reflection about one's experience, then there is an element about being involved in a culture, and then finally, there is a critical analysis element. These three elements will be interwoven throughout this written piece. Furthermore, it is important to note that involvement in a "culture" refers to the broad sense of the term "culture" (i.e., social group). Therefore, this will be the culture of a team of researchers from across the globe united through the Tikkun Youth Project.

The use of autoethnography proves to be useful in this analysis because of my own lived experience and positionality within this project. As a team member of the project since its inception at the host site, I have been able to participate in every segment of the project from inception to dissemination, including communicating and working with all of the sites from across the globe. I have been working directly for the project director and, as such, I

have been working through all of the different elements and challenges of the project. Because of my experience and position, I am in a position to meaningfully reflect on my own introspective reflections I had while I was involved with the culture of this research team. In turn, I will be able to critically analyze this information and compare it to themes about privilege and context in the literature.

Cultural Considerations for International Collaboration

In the first domain that Martin et al. (2002) have identified, one of the most prominent and salient aspects of cultural considerations is that of cultural norms. It is important to dissect and understand these norms and how they, "affect researchers' working relationships and mutual expectations" (p. 366). In particular, Martin et al. (2002) also identify the challenge of relating to the pace of work and how this varies across cultures.

Reflecting on this consideration, this is definitely something that became salient throughout our work on this project. Expanding on the idea of pace of work that was aforementioned, this was a key issue within our project. As the host site, we were responsible for facilitating and organizing five different sites from different locales within Canada and across the globe. Each of these sites is unique because of the diverse experiences of the research teams. However, as the host site, situated in a city in southwestern Ontario, we generally encompassed "traditional" North American values about work pace and timelines. We set out clear timelines and working schedules for all of our partners. However, oftentimes we found that these deadlines and schedules were frequently missed by some of our sites and partners.

This begs an important question about the cultural constructions of work, pacing, and scheduling. Again, being so intertwined in my locale and North American academic values, we adhered to strict deadlines and scheduling that is fast–paced and time sensitive. Nevertheless, we needed to stop and think about how we were working with a diverse set of partners that had different cultural considerations relating to the concept of time and different cultural values surrounding work. This is a result of their own values and cultural norms, but also can be intertwined with structural issues, which will be explored further in the next segment. Therefore, while it may have caused

a sense of frustration and confusion in the immediate moments, it became clear that we needed to check our own positionality and reflect on how it influences the ways in which we view and operate the project.

To showcase another relevant example, at the end of our project we held a five-day international symposium in Windsor, Ontario. Part of my duties as a research assistant were to help organize some of the activities and dinners. Prior to participants' arrival they were asked to inform us of any particular dietary restrictions, and we received just one request which we accommodated to the best of our abilities given the location and the circumstances. The first evening of the symposium when everyone came together, we held a group dinner at a local Vietnamese restaurant that was nearby the hotel where everyone was staying. Since Windsor is one of the most multicultural cities in Ontario outside of Toronto, we thought it would be important to showcase this aspect through a diverse cuisine. However, after the dinner engagement, it came to our attention that many individuals did not particularly appreciate our choice of restaurant. Furthermore, the issue of cuisine choice was a recurring theme throughout the five days, despite the fact that we had intentionally chosen different menus so that participants could experience food that was different from their norm, as part of the learning and cultural experience. When we received comments that were not supportive, it was important for us to step back and take a minute to consider the different factors at play.

Reflecting on this after the fact, and considering Martin et al. (2002), it becomes evident that during our initial surprise about these comments, we needed to be mindful of the different cultural norms and arrangements surrounding food that these partners bring with them from different countries and even within Canada. This cultural consideration is a perfect illustration of how important it is to be mindful and reflective. In the moment we can get upset thinking just about our own perspective. However, taking the time to appreciate the perspective of the other individuals is incredibly important, especially when considering the different cultural norms and customs of our partners. Food is such a critical part of culture and customs, so it should play a factor in the decision making.

If we had to plan such an event again, we would take different measures. Instead of merely asking about dietary restrictions, to which there were few responses, we would send participants a list of food items they expect to be served during their stay and ask for their feedback. In this way, the expectations of all participants would be taken into consideration and this

procedure ensures that the preferences of all participants would be met to a greater degree of satisfaction. It would also give ownership to participants so that they accept responsibility for the success of an important component of the symposium week.

Martin et al. (2002) identified that the ability to learn the other partners' terminology (with respect to education) is essential for the partnership and collaboration to be successful. This is something that we believe to be extremely important when working on an international partnership. When considering the different cultural constructions of terminology, we were proactive with this in mind when working on the project. For example, our Windsor site designed a training manual to be given to all five project sites. Within this training manual, a great amount of detail was provided about the project including research questions and most importantly, clearly defined important terms relating to the project. Therefore, this training guide allowed us to clarify the terminology we were using so all the sites had a clear and consistent understanding of the project. Examples of such terms included "youth researcher," and "university researcher," among others. However, if we push the critical lens further on this concept, it does appear that we provided our own specific North American terminology in a one-way "exchange" with site partners. Obviously, certain stipulations such as proposals, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) applications, and research ethics may influence what language/terminology we use. However, having an open discourse about the different terminologies we all may use may be a beneficial technique to employ in the future to have a mutual understanding and collaborative approach in selecting and defining terms used on a project.

Therefore, cultural considerations are paramount and become the baseline of what we need to constantly keep in mind and reflect upon. These serve as the backbone that relate to the next two considerations. Therefore, it is extremely important to be mindful of this within practice moving forward.

Structural Considerations for International Collaboration

Another layer that Martin et al. (2002) identified for consideration are

structural factors. Generally, the authors spoke of structural differences in terms of the macro organization of school systems and how culturally they may differ with respect to age/grade levels and curriculum. They also spoke broadly about the ways that decisions are made and the different layers of decision makers that need to be consulted to receive approval for research (Martin et al., 2002).

What can come from this conversation as a whole is the possibility of looking at the larger, more macro level of the structural issues that are in place that can help expedite the process or, alternatively, produce "roadblocks" to the desired effects/timelines set about by the North American home site in Windsor, Ontario. This is something crucial to talk about because the individuals at all five sites have different lived experiences where their structure is organized differently with unique operational issues to consider.

A truly salient issue for an international partnership with five sites across the globe is in regards to time zones and scheduling. When you have individuals in multiple time zones with busy schedules, trying to coordinate and schedule meetings can prove challenging. Phelps and Hohlfeld (2011) identified time zones as something to consider when collaborating, specifically citing how time differences can alter the timeline of a project, so this must be considered when developing a project timeline.

The Tikkun Youth Project was a massive undertaking. Coordinating a meeting with just the Windsor site was a challenge. Therefore, when trying to schedule whole site meetings, many structural issues need to be considered. Firstly, finding a time that would work for individuals in Windsor, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Kosovo, and South Africa. Arranging schedules for this many sites can prove to be difficult. Then, when this is actually confirmed, there are issues with technology. It can be hard to conduct meetings through technology (albeit it is also a blessing, as this project would be hard to conduct without this type of technology) due to glitches, and lack of in-person body language and social cues. It generally can be a harder form of communication. Then to add on to this, there are issues with having a stable Wi-Fi connection, connectivity issues, Skype issues, and other technical glitches. Upon reflecting on this, continuous reflection on this experience is important. When pre-planning an internationally collaborative project, keeping these factors in mind and trying to finesse them will be an important consideration that proves to be a continuous challenge.

One item to consider is the structural inequities that may exist among sites. One particular example that came up in practice was an issue of the digital divide. One of the sites did not have easily accessible computer/Internet access. This resulted in having our site members stop to reflect and recognize our advantages where most of our youth had immediate access to computers and the Internet. The less advantaged site required careful, advanced planning where it was necessary to make a long journey to a location where they could access these resources. Since we required Internet access and computer access for parts of the project, it was necessary to find solutions to this problem. One activity we wanted to foster was creating a quick video on a cellphone or web camera from the researchers. What we learned was that while maybe our researchers in Windsor could quickly use their cell phone or have access to their laptop with a web camera, it was not such a quick fix to organize one of these videos for other participants in different locales. Rather, again, it took careful, advanced planning. Therefore, it made us mindful of timelines and what would be reasonable considering this digital divide.

Additionally, there are structural issues that no one can account for in the research process. Sometimes we can predict potential roadblocks, but sometimes things will happen that participants and researchers cannot predict or plan for, and will be required to respond appropriately. For instance, one of our specific sites has unfortunately been through some challenges that have caused delays in their ability to perform certain tasks. One of the most salient was an instance where the partnering community organization on the project was robbed and crucial resources were taken from them. Furthermore, one site recently experienced some severe drought issues. Therefore, it becomes obvious that these pressing issues of sustenance take precedence. When reflecting on these particular instances, it demonstrates that there are sometimes systemic injustices on a structural scale that you cannot predict that will come into play. This requires flexibility and compassion towards partners in the project, as it truly is heartbreaking to hear of these challenges.

Finally, a structural issue to consider when looking at a project that spans multiple years such as this is the issue of attrition. In particular, the attrition of our youth researchers is something that needed to be considered. Since this project spanned three years (with a fourth year focusing on dissemination), it can be difficult to ask our youth researcher participants to remain committed for all three years. Most of our youth researchers at

the home site, for example, were University of Windsor students. Many were in their third or fourth year of study. As the project progressed, some of these students moved on, moved to different cities, took on full-time jobs, etc. which had displaced them away from the project with other pressing priorities. This is definitely a structural issue to consider when planning a project, specifically one that spans multiple years. With our Windsor site, in particular, this became a frustrating challenge, as we would be left with uncertainty of not knowing who is still involved or committed to the project. This required us to be innovative and flexible, which resulted in recruiting a second generation of youth researchers that would blend within our first generation. This may have been something we did not anticipate, but it is important to step back and reflect upon this. Some of the participants would report on issues of opportunity (and lack thereof), precarious work, etc. in their research contributions to the project. As such, these are things they are dealing with in their own life. This required us to be open minded, understanding, and sensitive to their need to move along from the project to address these issues and achieve their goals. It is the whole nature of the project and research. Keeping this in mind for future projects, it is important to measure and get a sense of understanding of how long someone may be involved, what their expectations are, and what that may look like.

Interpersonal/Professional Considerations for International Collaboration

The third consideration that Martin et al. (2002) identified relates to the interpersonal and professional considerations that one must keep in mind during international partnerships and collaborations. They identified that there must be attention paid to establishing mutual trust and a careful balancing act of assigning responsibilities. They identified that the foundation of any successful relationship is trust and mutual respect, so this is the foundation a project must be guided upon (Martin et al., 2002). Furthermore, when looking at the professional considerations, things such as methodological preferences as well as past experiences and theoretical orientations may come up and may potentially conflict or clash between researchers. Additionally, there may be different work styles present, which

can occur anywhere, but especially if there may be different cultural norms of considerations interwoven within that as well (Martin et al., 2002).

One salient example of this within the Tikkun Youth Project was the added element of ethics approval and collaboration with our Thunder Bay site. Our Thunder Bay site focused on working with Indigenous youth. When working with the Indigenous population, there are further considerations to keep in mind in terms of approval, research ethics, and customs/norms. For instance, this particular site had an added stipulation that an elder must participate in the research, as per their cultural norms. As such, Indigenous Elders were incorporated through a partnership with Nishnawbe Aski Nation. This required us to make these considerations within the project budget (to ensure we had budget allotment to compensate the elder for their contributions) and to keep this in mind with the structure of Thunder Bay's research process and timeline. This may have been something we would not consider in the Windsor site, for instance. However, the interpersonal and professional consideration of working with Indigenous populations has extra layers to incorporate that we need to be mindful of when moving forward. Therefore, future projects should conduct intensive formal or informal interviews with potential partners to learn about their professional, cultural, and interpersonal needs, and what that may look like.

Referring back to what Martin et al. (2002) identified as being important considerations, the concept of work style comes up again. This was something alluded to in an earlier discussion, but nonetheless, it has an important piece to discuss when we look at it through a framework of interpersonal/professional considerations. Additionally, Phelps and Hohlfeld (2011) identified work ethics (and the variance amongst partners) as a pitfall in international partnership to avoid. They identified that work ethics and values can differ from culture to culture, but at the end of the day it is the consumer that needs to be respected in getting the product done in a timely manner. This was interesting to ponder considering the different agencies and stakeholders that we needed to report to (e.g., SSHRC). The work styles and preferences of researchers can be vastly different depending on what locale we are from. Generally in North America, we tend to be fast-paced, quickly work on things, and do things in an individualistic manner. However, other locales may have a slower pace, may be more collectivist in terms of consultation, and may need more time to work on things. General cultural differences and norms aside, there may even just be a difference in personal work cultural preferences. For instance, as the host site in Windsor, we

would be adamantly working on the project continuously throughout the three plus years. However, for other sites, this project may not be as much of a priority. Whether it be because someone is just collaborating on the project, or perhaps they have their own principal projects to work on, or simply have larger structural issues to deal with (as aforementioned) – there may be a clash in terms of priority and importance from other sites. This can cause frustration, especially when one's own values in terms of work preference or priority clashes with another site. As we continue to recommend, reflection is key. This in conjunction with communication is paramount in order to establish clear and mutually agreed upon deadlines and work schedules. This will be extrapolated on in the recommendations section.

Finally, one last element that Martin et al. (2002) identified was that of communication. This can be understood in terms of techniques, patterns, and styles. In addition to Martin et al.'s (2002) contributions on this matter, Hildebrand, Lindsell-Roberts, and Settle-Murphy (2007) emphasized the importance of communication, specifically in regards to building a sense of trust in a partnership. They believed that the "heart" of a partnership is established through this building of trust. They further identified that in order to build this trust, there is a heavy reliance on communication, both verbal and nonverbal, specifically citing the need to be able to "read" people through different cues (e.g., physical, verbal, and social). Our main method of communication in this project was digitally – through technology and electronic communication – which may be missing some of these critical cues. Mainly this would consist of e-mail, but also additionally Skype video teleconferencing/calling, as well as phone calls. We have previously discussed the difference of time zones and the challenge that can pose. However, since the project is scattered across the globe, the level of accountability can sometimes be different. What this looked like would be that sometimes e-mails would be ignored for long periods of time, or sometimes receiving no response at all. This was something very frustrating from the home team, as our only way to stay in communication for the project is through this means.

Upon reflecting through this autoethnographic piece, there are obvious explanations for some of this behaviour. For instance, we previously talked about the digital divide, and the lack of stable Wi-Fi and Internet access for one site in particular. Additionally, we talked about the competing and differentiation of interests and priorities amongst sites and researchers,

which would allow e-mails to be on the back burner. Also, there may be a cultural or personal preference for communication style to be done via phone or other means.

Future Recommendations

Part of autoethnography consists of having a critical reflection on one's participation in a cultural experience. These critical considerations have been interwoven throughout this chapter. However, this critical lens should be pushed further when considering future recommendations to make for individuals who are engaged in or are considering working on an international research project.

Martin et al. (2002) provided some important considerations that I believe are critical to keep in mind moving forward when working on international collaborations and partnerships. They identified that culturally speaking, there are two essential aspects to consider: 1) knowledge of the traditions of the other culture, and 2) a commitment to ongoing understanding and sensitivity of the other culture's cultural norms (Martin et al., 2002). With this in mind, it becomes pivotal that researchers doing international research allot time to familiarize themselves on the traditions and cultural norms of the different cultures they will be working with in the partnership. It should not solely just be up to that culture or that site to inform you of these differences. As a researcher, you should be proactive to research these things, start dialogues to ask questions if time permits, and continue to be open-minded and sensitive to the different needs and styles that you come across.

In addition to this, I believe it to be extremely important to have a transparent and open dialogue amongst potential partners before forming a partnership in which a discussion surrounding work styles, expectations, needs, abilities, work schedules, and timelines are discussed. This could perhaps be incorporated into a Memorandum of Understanding or Terms of Reference document between partners. Oftentimes the source of frustration may stem from the different expectations we all have and how these conflict with one another. This is a matter of not knowing these pertinent things before entering a partnership. However, if everyone takes the time to talk about their needs, their abilities, and their desires, and they work

collaboratively to negotiate and find a delicate balance, then it will be better for everyone involved in the project. Phelps and Hohlfeld (2011) provide a suggestion that could be utilized in these instances. Their suggestion was to discuss and then put in writing all of the agreements that partners make in order to ensure accountability for all collaborators and partners.

Martin et al. (2002) sum it up perfectly when they say that, "international research is a constant learning process for such researchers" (p. 367) and I agree completely with this. My participation in the Tikkun Youth Project was so enlightening and informing about important considerations about the world, about my own privilege, and how to be more mindful about reconciling differences. Anyone that is entering or continues to work within international research should be aware and commit themselves to the continuous learning cycle and process that occurs in this research. Coming in with an open mind and a thirst for knowledge and understanding will serve not only that individual well, but all of the partners on that project and the future research that would be produced. Almansour (2015) drew upon claims from Simonin (1997) that collaborative partnerships tend to not always achieve the original goals that they set out, and oftentimes, they actually end up failing. While this may seem rather pessimistic upon first glance, there is a sense of innovation within this statement. When we engage in the research process anyway, we oftentimes will find our research taking different twists and turns depending on the data. We remain open to where our research and our experience takes us. As such, we need to keep this mentality in mind when we are working on collaborative projects – sometimes these detours bring about rich and meaningful contributions that we should embrace.

Limitations

As one final attempt to provide the essential critical consideration that comes with autoethnography, it is important to consider the limitations of my chapter. The inherent nature of autoethnography provides some crucial potential limitations to discuss.

For instance, the concept of reliability is something Ellis et al. (2011) highlight as a potential limitation. When working with this concept, they identify it as an assessment of the writer's credibility. This begs important questions such as are the experiences of the author true? Could they have

actually happened? Did the author take liberties with their storytelling or reflection for the purpose of enticing writers? Due to the very nature of this work, it is highly personal and reflective. My life and lived experience is entwined within this work. Therefore, I definitely welcome and expect people to ask these critical questions to wonder about reliability.

Additionally, the concept of generalizability was identified by Ellis et al. (2011) as well. Specifically, they finessed the term to look at what generalizability would look like in this domain with autoethnography, and it turns its focus on to the readers of this text and how much it resonates with them: is their own lived experience reflected here? Does this information resonate with their own experience or experiences from their colleagues, friends, etc.? Therefore, when reading this piece, consider if any of these concepts or challenges have resonated with you if you have worked on international research or partnerships, or perhaps you have heard stories from your colleagues, friends, and others about their experiences. This is one way that Ellis et al. (2011) have identified as being a way to gauge the generalizability of this style of research work.

With autoethnography, it is imperative for the author to be able to identify their positionality and check their privilege as needed. Therefore, my view and construction of these experiences in the project are coming from someone who is working with the project director at the host site. More specifically, identifying myself as a white, able−bodied male who comes from a middle−class upbringing. These parts of my identity will influence how I view and experience these interactions in the project, therefore this must be noted because someone from another site writing on the same topic may have a completely different outlook and experience. However, that is also the beauty of autoethnography and is also a built-in area of limitation.

Writing this chapter has been a continuous journey to reflect on my four years working on this project and the different "challenges" we experienced. Even that language "challenge" can be contested. We perceive these as "challenges" because they differentiate from our own expectations that stem from our lived experience in our positionality. What I have continued to learn from this project experience (in conjunction to my own life experiences and schooling) is that it is important to step back and identify the intersectional experiences of others and how this can create a differentiation to what I may expect or be used to. I truly believe this to be the core of what this chapter has discussed and what we aim to have others do when working on such projects.

Through this chapter, I have been able to unravel the proverbial patchwork quilt, which van Swet et al. (2012) use as an image to represent international collaborative projects being similar to that of a patchwork quilt: "Both in quilting and research it is important to be aware of the context and to invest in the relationships, to ensure that all participants' voices are heard and that concerns can be expressed openly" (p. 649). What becomes evident from this unraveling process is that at the end of the day, all of our contributions as partners on this international project are patches of this proverbial quilt. They can be vastly different in appearance, texture, design, etc., but in the end, when they are all sewn together, it creates a masterpiece. Through the journey of constructing this quilt, we have been able to recognize just how meaningful and enriching it can be to bring together these different patches and positionalities to create something for the better good. As you continue to read through this book and learn about our project, I hope you see just how magnificent our patchwork quilt has become.

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