Indigenous Knowledge Construction and Experiential Learning

of Taiwanese Aborigines

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples in Taiwan belong to the Austronesian racial group. Confined to their oral language tradition, knowledge about Taiwan aborigines based on written documents reflected the positionality of dominant ethnic groups. This qualitative study employed participatory research approach to explore the process of producing their own knowledge through collective investigation of problems and issues among Taiwan aborigine tribal members in the Nantou region. Nantou is located in the central mountain range of Taiwan. The data were collected through participatory observation and interviewing 6 key research participants about their experiences of participating in this project. Two main findings are revealed from the analysis of these data. The first finding is the participants' expectation of adult educators' role as an information provider. They also expect adult educator as a facilitator for promoting the project to move towards a more empowering praxis and as a mediator for attracting external attention on indigenous voices.   The second finding is that minority's experiences are always a site of struggle and central to this struggle is the reconfiguration of 'ethnicity' which is rooted in socio-cultural context. Taking account of context, experience might be distorted while experiential learning can be stigmatizing, in that learners can become un-reflective prisoners of their experience. However, experience certainly has the potential of liberating marginalized learners. The findings implied the importance of the socio-cultural context of situated 'experience'. This insight suggests that 'power' can be renegotiated to challenge and eventually change the structure of the socio-cultural context.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Experiential learning, Ethnicity, Taiwan aborigines

1. Introduction

Taiwan is a multi-ethnic society and around two percent of the population is aborigines who belong to the Austronesian racial group. Confined to their oral language tradition, knowledge about Taiwan aborigines based on written documents reflected the positionality of dominant ethnic groups, such as the Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and Han (Chinese from mainland China). For a long period of time, indigenous peoples were stigmatized as 'savage' or 'backward'. Education of the aborigines was implemented by their assimilation into dominant culture. The profile of Taiwan aborigines was depicted as 'inferior others'. Recently, the Canon debate of knowledge construction offers more space for the indigenous voices. This study employed participatory research approach to explore the process of producing indigenous knowledge through collective investigation of problems and issues among Taiwan aborigine tribal members in the Nantou region. The aim of the study is to understand communal features that emerged through a process of group inquiry into the nature of personal experiential learning.

2. Theoretical framework

Based on Jurgen Habermas' framework of knowledge theory, Merriam (1991) discussed the relationship of research to the production of knowledge in terms of three paradigms for the purpose of unveiling the underlying particular worldview and assumptions: the positivist or empirical-analytic; the interpretive; and the critical. The positivist view of knowledge assumes the notion of a single, objective reality—the world out there—that we can observe, know, and measure. Thus, the aim of the research within this paradigm is to uncover laws that will explain aspects of this reality. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, interpretive paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities constructed by the human mind. Therefore, the context and the meaning of that context of the people in it are of utmost importance. The critical paradigm accepts multiple realities constructed by people's interpretations in their particular contexts. This paradigm recognizes that people's interpretations of the world may be ideologically distorted because the existing social structure may be as partly, if not totally, coercive and oppressive. This paradigm also assumes that the existing social structure can be challenged, constantly open to negotiation and renegotiation, and transformed by human agency.

Additionally, the critical paradigm is engaged in a 'war of position' in all spheres of social life, so that different sites of

social practice can be transformed into sites of adult learning as expounded by critical adult educators like Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Henry A. Giroux. Mayo (1999) describes 'war of position' as a challenge and a transformation of social structures and social relations in order to prevent the oppressed people from remaining at the periphery of social life. Positionality indicates the important aspects of individual and collective identity such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, etc. The validity of knowledge comes from an acknowledgement of the knowledge producer's specific position in any context defined by gender, race/ethnicity, class and other variables (Banks, 1996).

Although research into the practice of adult education does not always so neatly conform to a particular paradigm, certain paradigm might still be more powerful in specific context and for the purpose of the research/practice. From the researcher's point of view, the worldwide racial/ethnic conflicts are becoming more serious, and the responsive solutions based on the knowledge produced by the positivist paradigm do not seem to be effective enough. Shift of paradigm seems necessarily to explore the marginalized situation of the indigenous peoples. Thus, this study employed the critical paradigm to explore the nature of marginalized people's experiential learning through collective investigation of problems and issues among Taiwan aborigine tribal members.

3. Description of the setting

Nantou, located in the central mountain range, is the only county without a coastline in Taiwan. It has many important pre-historic archaeological sites, which have revealed many cultural encountered among various ethnic groups, such as the Bunon, Atayal, Sedeq, Thao, Pinpu, Han, and others. The mountains and rivers create an obstacle for outsiders and help to preserve the traditional rituals and lifestyles. Its long cultural-diversity results in its art inheritance. Most mansions at Nantou keep their traditional ornamentation, sculpture, calligraphy and other culture properties. Also, pieces of ceramics and bamboo/wood handcraft work produce the same outstanding craftsmanship. The life style and economic pattern of this rural region is based on traditional agriculture system. The main products consist of vegetables, flowers, sugar cane, etc. According to a national demographic investigation in 2008, the population of Nantou was 531 753, among which were 27 627 aborigines. Compared to other local regions, the density of the population in Nantou has been quite low. In fact, recently, the total population in Nantou has gradually decreased, but the amount of aborigines has increased contradictorily (Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan, 2009). The shift of the population ratio is probably due to: a) a gradual decline of agricultural development in Taiwan has caused the habitants of Nantou to immigrate to other places for better job opportunities; b) a more flexible policy for Taiwan aborigine's recognition attracts them to go back to their hometown.

From a historical perspective, Taiwan has been inhabited for around 15 000 years. The precise connection between these earliest people and the present aborigines is unclear, but archaeological evidences support the supposition that the ancestors of the aborigines were already living in Taiwan around 6 000 years ago. The aborigines belong to the Austronesian racial group, and prior to 1620, they were the main residents of Taiwan. The arrival of the Dutch and Spaniards brought the aborigines into contact with other people, but foreign influences were relatively minor and they still occupied a dominant position on the island. The establishment of the Ch'ing Dynasty in China led to greater numbers of Chinese immigrants to Taiwan. The island became an official province of China in 1887, and the assimilation of the indigenous people by a thorough alteration of their customs was one of the main policies. The aborigines gradually lost their prominent position through Chinese institutional involvement.

In 1895 Taiwan was ceded to Japan. Under Japanese rule, the tribes were differentiated, thus giving the aborigines a pan-tribal consciousness. There came simultaneously the realization that aborigines were a people living in a society conquered, controlled and colonized where they occupied the most disadvantaged position. When China regained sovereignty over Taiwan in 1945, the aborigines were recognized as 'citizens' according to the 'Minority Peoples' Article' of the Constitution. However, the widely implemented policies reflected the idea that aborigines were a backward people to be exterminated by assimilating them into mainstream society. Institutional discrimination against aborigines hastened the destruction of their traditional societies and deepened cultural stigmatization. However, the emergence of the social movement of 'localization' and political reform in the 1970s and 1980s has provided certain possibility for indigenous revival claims. The 'Association of Taiwan Indigenous Rights Promotion' founded in 1984 revealed a new milestone of reconstruction of ethnic relationships. Indigenous peoples were unified by a pan-tribal consciousness, but it differed from the 'imposed' and 'stigmatized' pan-tribal ethnicity under the Japanese regime. Taiwan aborigines endeavored to challenge the existing power hegemony over them through their collective action of 'Land Claim', 'Name Claim' and other political protests. Gradually, governmental policies of assimilation moved toward multiculturalism, and a new ethnic partnership dawned in the 1990s (Lee, 2001).

Besides the Pingpu Tribe (plains aborigines) virtually merged with the Han population, Taiwan now still has fourteen culturally distinct aboriginal tribes: the Amis, the Puyuma, the Atayal, the Saisiat, the Bunun, the Tsou, the Paiwan, the Rukai, the Yami, the Thao, the Kavalan, the Truku, the Sakizaya, and the Sedeq. They exhibit great diversity in terms of their language, material culture, social organization, and rituals (Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan in Taiwan, 2009).

4. Method

This qualitative study employed participatory research approach to explore the process of producing their own knowledge through collective investigation of problems and issues, and collective action to change the conditions among Taiwan aborigine tribal members at Nantou. Participatory research is a system for producing knowledge "of ordinary people, those who are deprived, oppressed and under-privileged" (Tandon, 1988; Merriam, 1991). This type of research questions the origins of the production of knowledge, access to knowledge, and interests and ends knowledge serves.

4.1 Researcher and participants

The researcher obtained her Ph. D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States (major in Adult and Vocational Education). She is a Han Taiwanese and has been working with Taiwan aborigines since 1995. During the years of 2001-2005, she was assigned as Chair of the Graduate Institute of Adult and Continuing Education in an University located at Nantou, and started to conduct a long-term participatory research project. Firstly, the researcher invited the tribal leaders and members in the Nantou region to attain a reception for the introduction to the project. Based on the researcher's previous relationship with the indigenous peoples, around 20 tribesmen participated in this reception. Actually, 8 tribal leaders were recommended as the representatives by the participants and they were willing to join in this project. However, two of them were extremely occupied and dropped out of the project two months later. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the other 6 key participants. Their tribal background reflected the characteristics of the population in the Nantou region. The Atayal, Sedeq and Bunun are mountain peoples and they are the main aboriginal tribes at Nantou which is located in the central mountain range of Taiwan. Therefore, two of the key participants are Bunun, two Sedeq and one Atayal.

According to a national demographic statistics in 2007, the population of Bunun in Taiwan was around 48 000. Many of them are scattered widely in the central mountain range. Their society is maintained mainly by patriarchal social structure. Bunun traditional family is pretty large in size, because non-blood relatives are accepted as normal family members. Ceremonies are scheduled according to millet planting, weeding and harvest. 'Pasibutbut' (praying for a millet harvest), being famous with the outstanding eight parts harmony is sung by Bunun people after weeding. 'Manah Tainga' (hunting animal's ears) is considered as an important life ceremony for manhood. (Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2009)

Atayal is traditionally located in the mid-northern mountain areas of Taiwan. At present, the population is approximately 76 000. Hunting and farming are their traditional life style. Their fabric weaving skill feature sophisticated patterns and designs. Red color symbolizes blood, which is vital and can keep them away from the evils. Therefore, Atayal people prefer to dress in red. Face tattoos are their long standing customs. Ancestral worship groups constitute the major social organization. Ancestor worship rituals are the prominent religious ceremony. (Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2009)

Sedeq was previously recognized as a subgroup of Atayal. Recently, they claimed to be recognized as a new tribe and is accepted by the Council of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan. The population of Sedeq is around 10 000 in total. Their traditional ritual of adoring 'Utux' (the spirit of ancestors) has extended to conscientious living rules called gaya/waya and has developed different culture, such as tattoo, hunting, weaving, music, songs and dance. Traditionally, Sedeq people make decisions in accordance with Sisin's cry. For the Sedeq tribe, sisin is seen as a sacred bird. (Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2009)

Besides the main tribesmen such as Bunun, Atayal and Sedeq, there are still few other tribesmen scattering elsewhere in the Nantou region. Among them two groups (Thao tribe and the descendants of Pinpu) are distinctive. 'Pingpu Tribe' is a pan-tribal name for Taiwanese aborigines virtually merged with the Han population. There were various sub-groups within the Pingpu tribe. In recent years, their ethnic consciousness has become strong. One of the key participants of this project belongs to 'Kahabu' which is one of sub- group of the Pingpu tribe.

Thao tribesmen about 600 people mainly live together around Sun Moon Lake which is the land mark of Nautou. The legend about the tribe said that their ancestors found Sun Moon Lake while they were hunting a white deer. Therefore, they moved there and settled down. They were deeply influenced by Han culture, yet they still kept some of their own culture well. Ancestors bags are hung in the corner of each family house. The chief is the decision maker of the social business. The position is usually inherited by the eldest son. The eight tribal leaders originally recommended to participate in this project included two tribesmen of Thao, whereas they dropped out of the project two months later.

4.2 Conducting participatory research project

Group discussions between the researcher and the key participants were held regularly using the following steps: First, to investigate their common problems and issues collectively. Several crucial issues were identified: a) economic deterioration--traditional agricultural products have lost competitive power in the free-market system; b) hard access to information because of its geographically remote location; c) disappearance of their traditional culture and language.

Secondly, to share their innovations experimented in different tribes, such as value-adding traditional tribal arts and crafts, combination of agricultural promotion with creative leisure, representing and spreading tribal oral history and legends through in-depth tourism etc. Thirdly, generate collective action for the improvement of their conditions. In this part, the participants decided to create a digital platform through electronic network which consisted of at least three functions: a) transmitting, spreading and promoting tribal culture, language, and other cultural/economic products; b) gaining access to various information and resources; c) strengthening the solidarity of the different tribes through communicating and sharing experiences among them.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

For the purpose of the project evaluation, data collection was carried out through: a) participant observation on how the tribal leaders investigated and solved their problems collectively; b) group and individual interviews which consisted of open-ended questions regarding issues, concerns, and personal learning experiences of their participation in the project.

A set of coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) guided the analysis to develop meaningful interpretations of the data. Data analysis progressed through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding. From this process, a set of themes was inductively derived to characterize the nature of knowledge construction, experiential learning, and the roles of adult educators from the participants' perspectives. These themes were theoretically informed by the researcher's understanding of the previous literature review. To enhance the validity of the findings, the researcher arranged to have fellow university researchers to play the role of 'devil's advocate' in reviewing the data analysis and the interpretation of the findings.

5. Findings and Discussion

Based on the data analyses, three essential thematic categories emerged: knowledge construction, experiential learning, and the roles of adult educators.

5.1 Knowledge construction

Knowledge is socially constructed. The personal experiences and positions within society influence the knowledge they produce. Similar to Harbermas' typology of knowledge, three types of knowledge－instrumental knowledge, communicative knowledge, and emancipatory knowledge－were identified from the perspectives of the tribal members. For them, emancipatory knowledge must play the directive role and instrumental knowledge would become the base. Communicative knowledge, however, was less emphasized.

5.1.1 Emancipatory knowledge

Confined to the oral language tradition, all written documents concerning Taiwan aborigines reflected the positionality of dominant ethnic groups, such as Dutch, Spaniard, Japanese, and Han. For a long period of time, indigenous peoples were stigmatized as 'savage' or 'backward'. As a consequence, they intentionally abandoned their traditional heritage and hid/distorted their identity. It becomes crucial for the indigenous people to construct 'the knowledge about who I am' through their own voices, which imply the expression of individual identity, as well as reflect 'empowerment' to challenge the oppression collectively. Some participants expressed their view of emancipatory knowledge in the following statements:

… Alcoholism, ... a lot of problems ... due to people abandoning their Ancestors' tradition ... We don't know who we are. Our tribal history, language, rituals, and legends must be transmitted to our children ... We have the responsibility to construct the knowledge of our tribe…(Temi)

As mentioned before, the critical paradigm assumes that knowledge is not neutral but is influenced by human interests. All knowledge reflects the power and social relationships within society, and that an important purpose of knowledge construction is to help people improve society. However, what is the linkage between knowledge construction and societal improvement? For Foucault (1977), knowledge construction as a counter-memory, is a practice which "transforms history from a judgment on the past in the name of the present truth to a 'counter-memory' that combats the current modes of truth and justice, helping us to understand and change the present by placing it in a new relation to the past."

… Prior to the dominance of national education programs, each aboriginal tribe had its own educational system. Since the establishment of the Japanese regime until the present republic, schooling via the mainstream culture has facilitated 'cultural invasion' ... and constituted a process of 'cultural alienation' (from the tribal tradition) ... I still agree with the importance of schooling for our children, however, the tribal values and rituals provide our people an opportunity to challenge the myth of the orthodoxy of dominant culture and to retell various narratives which may expand the depth and horizon of Taiwanese history …(Tien)

5.1.2 Instrumental knowledge

The increasing regression of the traditional agriculture and artistry, as well as the abrupt promotion of technological

innovation have negatively affected the economic condition and threatened the development of aboriginal tribes. As some participants have pointed out:

Cultural transmission would become a luxurious pursuit without sustaining basic living conditions … (*excerpt of the interviews of Taku, Temi, Tien, and Behow*)

Therefore, the instrumental knowledge (*such as digital and network technologies, agricultural techniques, business administration and marketing, etc*.) must be introduced to the indigenous tribes in participatory projects (*excerpt of the interviews of Pan, Takun, and Behow*).

From the late 1980s, the emergence of Taiwan aborigines' protests against injustice was unified. Gradually, aborigines became conscious that 'anti-power domination' protests and 'central/marginal' dualistic struggles are not enough. They tried to invent a new form of 'cultural existence' through 'subjective discourses' between aboriginal traditions and modernity.

5.1.3 Communicative knowledge

Mutual understanding and reciprocal dialogue based on inter-subjectivity are essential to Habermas' communicative act. However, indigenous people emphasized less communicative knowledge. Some of the participants have pointed out:

… the marginal ethnic groups, mainstream culture are always imposed; as a consequence, indigenous cultures involuntarily become silent … (*excerpt of the interviews of Taku, and Tien*)

Indeed, as Brooks (2000) mentioned "the experience and direction of learning transformation may vary according to one's positionality". For example, someone situated in the center of the mainstream may experience transformation as a growth toward recognizing multiple systems, or towards increasingly complex and inclusive structures. However, for someone more marginally situated, like our participants' experience, the transformation may be toward a stronger and more consolidated identity. Power differentials and authority are important here. Power implies competitive access to and control over resources, while authority is only effective when it is legitimate (Jenkins, 1997; Lee, 2001). Toward a more consolidated identity of minority might be an effective strategy of striving for access to and control over resources.

5.2 Ethnicity and experiential learning

The ethnicity was a central part of the experiential learning narrated by the interviewees. Ethnic group is defined as a group that shares a common ancestry, culture, history, tradition and sense of peoplehood, whereas ethnicity is rooted in culture based on shared meanings. As a social identity, ethnicity is both collective and individual. On the one hand, it is externalized for sustaining communal boundary and solidarity, and on the other hand, it is internalized as an integral part of the individually embodied point of view of selfhood. Ideally, either individual or collective boundary is permeable, and ethnicity as transactional process is rooted in reciprocation, exchange and relatively equitable negotiation of social relations. However, ethnicity is, to some extent, manipulable by external categorization ranking, and it is institutionally produced and reproduced in the course of transactions of different ethnic groups (Jenkins, 1997; Lee, 2001), as expressed by one participant:

… Three generations, three different languages spoken in my family … My grandfather was only educated in the tribe and he could only speak Sedeq dialect; but he was proud of the tribal tradition and language. On the other hand, my father was educated in the Japanese education system and he frequently spoke Japanese because indigenous dialects were openly discriminated against. I was educated in the public schooling of Taiwan. Most of the time we spoke in Mandarin for the purpose of disguising ourselves. We would be recognized and called 'savage', if we spoke our own language. Those experiences were stigmatizing. Actually, we have very strong consciousness of Sedeq ethnicity; however, the failure of fighting against Japanese invasion blurred our collective identity. From that time on, we immersed ourselves in the pursuit of modernity and involuntarily abandoned our tradition … Since the 1990s the mainstream society gradually modified the attitude towards the indigenous people. And the unexpected disappearance of our tribal tradition and language in the past hundred years raised our collective consciousness again. … If the extinction of the aborigine's languages has really happened, it would be a great loss of the world heritage. … (Takun)

The above quotation (the other participants also had the similar experiences) shows the minority's experience is always a site of struggle and central to this struggle is the reconfiguration of 'ethnicity' which is rooted in socio-cultural context.

5.2.1 Power, socio-cultural context and human agency

Taking account of the context, experience cannot be unproblematic while experiential learning can be stigmatizing, in that individuals can become un-reflective prisoners of their experience.

Most indigenous residents in tribal communities are undereducated. The worse economic condition of the tribe impelled them to look for opportunities to survive in the mainstream society. However, the indigenous people very seldom

succeeded in the mainstream society. In the schools and elsewhere, native people have been framed as 'otherness' and have been treated through a lens that places 'the other' in a deficit position. ... Those experiences confined their development and embedded them in a marginal condition. Drunkenness, self-denial, and withdrawal distort their identities. ... Such phenomena became the reproduction of poverty. (Takun).

The experiences of the indigenous people have addressed not only the categorization ranking between ethnic groups, but also highlighted how power is exercised in favor of one group and to the detriment of another. However, experience certainly has the potential of liberating marginalized learners. As Paulo Freire (1973) points out, adult education is an important source of agency, and the task of the adult educators through 'pedagogy of problematization' enables the learners to reflect on the codified versions of their 'reality' (Mayo, 1999). This is confirmed by the following:

As a part of the whole society, the indigenous tribes cannot be segregated. We need to collaborate with the outside experts and academic researchers in order to provide reciprocal learning context within which tribal development initiatives can be more effectively generated and carried out. (Behow).

5.3 Roles of Adult Educators

Although the indigenous schooling experience in the past had certain negative impact on their development, they still hold the belief that learning and education have the potential to transform social structures and social relations. The crucial elements are the roles of education and educators. Their expectations on the roles of adult educators were summarized as follows: 1) as an access for gaining information, 2) as a facilitator for promoting the project to move towards a more empowering praxis, 3) as a mediator for attracting external attention on indigenous voices.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Usher, Bryant, & Johnston (1997) mentioned, in all the traditions of adult learning, experience has been accorded a privileged place as the source of learning in a learner-centered pedagogy and at the very center of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition. A possible limitation is that experience comes to be taken as foundational and resourceful and hence we might neglect to question the distorted experience. They also suggested, adult educators might help learners to problematise and interrogate experience as much as to access and validate it and to see their experience more as 'text' than as 'raw material'. Thus, the learners might leave open the possibility of a variety of interpretations and assessments of their experience.

The findings of this study revealed that minority's experiences are always a site of struggle and central to this struggle is the reconfiguration of 'ethnicity' which is rooted in socio-cultural context. This study further revealed the subtle, implicit sides of the experiential learning as noted by Usher, Bryant and Johnston. The findings implied the importance of the socio-cultural context of situated 'experience'. This insight suggests that 'power' can be renegotiated to challenge and eventually change the structure of the socio-cultural context, and adult education can act as an important source of agency.

In fact, the efforts of the indigenous people have provoked the consideration of ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism in the pursuit of political democracy and economic development of Taiwan. However, the historical, cultural and situational contexts are crucial for their experiential learning. Indeed, the future development of the indigenous peoples, situated on a disadvantageous position in society, cannot be ameliorated only through individual merit. There is a need to consider structural defects and to create a more humane, just and multicultural society in which the indigenous peoples have greater opportunities for further development through reciprocal respect and dialogue.

Lastly, although the findings of the research are revelatory, the study bears some limitations. As we noted above, the participants were highly educated tribal leaders who were able to articulate their experience in terms of ethnicity and identity. Whether the participants' experience could represent that of the majority (most were undereducated) would be further explored by a field study and detail observation of the tribesmen.

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Table 1. Demographic profile of the key participants

Name	Sex	Age	Tribe	Education	Occupation
Behow	male	40	Atayal	B. A.	Community program organizer
Takun	male	51	Sedeq	B. A.	Governmental official, community leader
Pan	male	61	Kahabu (one of sub-group of Pingpu Tribe)	B. A.	Retired teacher, community leader
Temi	female	64	Sedeq	Doctorate candidate	College lecturer, Community educator
Tien	male	48	Bunun	M. A.	Retired teacher, Journal editor
Miaw	female	47	Bunun	College graduate	Governmental official