

## Reclaiming the “Native” in Organizational Communication Research

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*In this essay, we reconsider the traditionally pejorative notion of “going native” and alternatively define the role of a native engaged scholar as distinctly valuable to the study and practice of organizational communication. We envision this role as constituted in three interconnected qualities that we describe as (a) intimacy with the subject matter, setting, or people that stems from one’s insider status or firsthand experience, (b) partnership with natives to craft the nature and aims of the research, and (c) commitment to a contribution that proves meaningful for participants over time. In articulating the researcher role of a native engaged scholar, we seek to coalesce disparate practices embraced within engaged scholarship, participatory action research, autoethnography, feminist inquiry, as well as established field researcher roles. Using case illustrations based on colleagues’ and our own research, we illustrate this role in action and its benefits. Notwithstanding its merits, we close by acknowledging the inherent tensions of empathy, commitment, and identity that arise when taking on this role in scholarly research.*

### Introduction

The phrase “going native” has long since held a depreciatory standing in scholarly inquiry. By most accounts, anthropologists first devised the term when cautioning scholars against becoming overly enmeshed with the tribal natives they studied, as doing so was deemed a considerable threat to quality academic research (see Kanuha, 2000; Malinowski, 1922). Hence, the persistent warning against going native has besieged many researchers who work as complete participants in their areas of research (Gold, 1958). As recently as 2011, Lindlof and Taylor described the propensity and signs of going native in this way:

...complete participants who are deprived of the opportunity for extensive and collaborative reflection may lose their analytic detachment. The extreme form of this condition is famously known as “going native.” Its symptoms include over identifying with a group’s ideology; participating unreflectively in its rituals; uncritically advocating its interests; failing to document what is happening; and (in some rare cases) choosing not to return “home.” (p. 146)

As young scholars, we were trained to view complete immersion as “natives” as risky and potentially compromising the production of scholarly knowledge. Certainly, we did not want to become field researchers who lost our capacity or willingness to “question everything” and abdicated our responsibility to critically analyze phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 81). Thus, we initially avoided nativeness to our participants and research settings, or in the very least concealed it from our peers for fear of scholarly derision.

Over the past decade, some sub-disciplines of the field of communication have seen shifts in our collective attitude toward being embedded in one’s research site. Indeed, “going native” is no longer universally the “dreaded accusation [it was] in the ‘old days’” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. vii). Scholars working under the banners of engaged scholarship (e.g., Barbour & Gill, 2014; Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, & Townsend, 2008; Lewis, 2012), participatory action research (e.g., see Ellingson, 2017), autoethnography (e.g., Miller, 2002), and feminist inquiry (e.g., Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008) no longer eschew the integration of researcher with context but, rather, embrace it for its many benefits. Moreover, several scholarly texts on qualitative research methods have argued for

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attending to the researcher's (embodied) role (native or not) as a co-creator of knowledge throughout the research process (e.g., Ellingson, 2009; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Tracy, 2013). Even so, pockets of the discipline continue to embrace an objectivity bias that views nativeness with some wary skepticism.

This wariness is not without cause as the phrase "going native" has a complicated history, and scholars have interrogated the modern applicability and ethicality of the phrase (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffins, 1998; Tracy, 2013). Likewise, as we considered our scholarly experiences as individuals embedded in our research sites, we too began to ponder and reimagine the definition and implications of nativeness. Namely, we questioned the coupling of the words "going" and "native"—as together they suggest a state of becoming instead of being. Together, these words were historically employed to describe perceivably unacceptable scholarly (in)actions—where over time a researcher failed to practice self-reflexivity—and consequently lost sight of their researcher identity. Interestingly, the juxtaposition of the words, going and native, suggested a rogue scholar might experience a *shift into a native role* throughout the research process. In contrast, we envision natives as those individuals who are *already* deeply embedded in the communities and contexts under study.

Thus, we position nativeness as sincere identity embraced *prior* to engaging in scholarly pursuits, rather than a becoming that occurs during data collection. This construction of nativeness affords scholars a language with which to talk about their role as they study *their own* cultures, organizations, hometowns, churches, community clubs or groups, etc. In other words, one does not go native nor become native, rather, one simply *is* native. Nativeness, then is part of a scholar's identity—an embodiment that is often rife with contradiction. Our goal in this essay is three-fold. First, we seek to advance a new researcher role known as a *native engaged scholar* (referred to as NES or engaged native)—and in doing so underscore the utility of recasting the notion of nativeness within communication scholarship.

In defining this researcher role, we coalesce practices drawn from varied methodologies employed, and roles adopted, within the discipline of communication. Second, we aim to highlight the utility of the NES role in action by examining three case illustrations, one of which features our own research. By drawing on cases with which we have unique familiarity, we are able to delineate the particularities associated with nativeness that are omitted in these published studies. Third, we illuminate the lived tensions inherent when scholars embrace an NES role. Given the complexity of being an engaged native, we offer suggestions navigating the tension-imbued reality of this researcher role. Together, these three aims support NES as a distinct researcher role and positionality that we envision as suited to various methodologies and approaches implemented throughout organizational communication scholarship. Next, we delineate the three main qualities of the engaged native role.

### Defining the Engaged Native

The native engaged scholar is a researcher role that necessarily embodies three qualities that we refer to as *intimacy*, *partnership*, and *contribution*. Intimacy entails a closeness to the site and a personal investment that marks the researcher as an insider. Partnership denotes co-creation of the research aims and scope with those in the community under study, and contribution requires that the researcher strive to create meaningful and lasting value for the spaces in which he or she is embedded. Though these qualities are not entirely novel within the vast landscape of communication research methodologies, to date, scholars have not directly woven together these qualities, nor have they named a distinct researcher role for individuals embodying all three qualities. We propose that as a constitutive whole these three qualities of intimacy, partnership, and contribution represent a distinct researcher positionality that can enhance numerous lines of organizational research.

Herein, we expound on the engaged native's enactment of partnership, intimacy, and contribution and cite some ways that it aligns with the practices of engaged scholarship (see Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005), participatory action research (see Frey & Carragee, 2007), autoethnography or narrative ethnography (see Goodall, 2004; Tillmann, 2009), and feminist inquiry (see Buzzanell, 2000). In other words, in crafting the researcher role of an engaged native, we draw on these disparate but related methods and epistemologies to identify three

meaningful qualities or touchstones of this new positionality. Notably, scholars working within each of these approaches or traditions resonate with aspects of the engaged native researcher role, yet no one of them fundamentally necessitates this researcher positionality.

### **Intimacy**

The first quality of the NES role is intimacy, which we summarize as the pursuit of research that “hits close to home.” Intimacy refers to a deep or familiar relationship between the researcher and the site, the members, and/or the topics and issues under study. That is, the engaged native’s scholarship is infused with their personal history, inclinations, and experiences. Research questions are not pursued simply as a matter of scholarly curiosity. There is a more profound connection and meaningfulness that pours over into multiple aspects of one’s identity (e.g., as coworker, friend, family member, volunteer, neighbor, or citizen).

Intimacy clearly aligns with the values of autoethnographic inquiry and narrative ethnography. In Goodall’s (2004) words, “What is personal is at the heart of what it means to be a communication professional. Our lived experiences and scholarly reflections about them are the work, and the creative expressions, of applied communication researchers” (p. 193; see also Tillmann, 2009). Perhaps nowhere is this quality of intimacy more exemplified than in Miller’s (2002) autoethnographic account of her emotional labor as a professor in the wake of a fatal campus accident. More recently, it also manifests in Kramer’s (2018) analysis of role incompatibility, which is based on his own seemingly incommensurate struggle with professional, spiritual, and other life identities.

Beyond autoethnography, intimacy further resonates with an array of organizational studies broadly linked with feminist inquiry. Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) provides one such exemplar and testament to the benefits of intimacy with their study of the occupational socialization and identification of miners. As a daughter from a long lineage of miners, Lucas argued that, “as an *insider* she not only had access to stories but also was familiar with research participants’ values and language” (p. 279, emphasis added).

### **Partnership**

Engaged natives not only enter the research setting as intimate insiders or empathizers, they also join forces with those they study. This second quality of partnership entails actively involving members throughout the research process. Together, the engaged native and other natives consciously and collaboratively observe, discuss, analyze, and/or intervene in the lived experiences of the organization, group, or team under study. This partnership dimension resonates foremost with the values of engaged scholarship, which require that researchers exhibit respect for participants by inviting them to participate in the formation of project goals and methods of inquiry. In fact, the emphasis on collaboration with non-academic voices throughout the research process is perhaps the most distinctive value of engaged scholarship (Dempsey & Barge, 2014). Deetz’s (2008) commentary on this bedrock value of engaged scholarship speaks to the benefits of partnership. He claims that when academics and practitioners examine issues together as equals, “a world of possibilities that was not seen before opens in front of the parties” (p. 290). Additionally, though participatory action research does not wholly dictate that scholars must collaboratively design and implement their research with participants, such partnership often organically emerges from this interventional approach, as many prior efforts have demonstrated (e.g., Campo & Frazer, 2007).

The NES’s pursuit of partnership also complements the feminist value of co-equal status between researcher and researched, which is fostered by giving primacy to participant voices in reporting and writing (Gergen, 1988). For example, in their multi-year study of Passion Works collaborative art studio, Harter and colleagues (2008) embedded themselves in the staff’s routines and created art alongside client artists so that they could better represent their perspectives and experiences. Thus, in addition to exemplifying the engaged scholarship and action research commitments to collaborative research, the engaged native’s stance as partner also upholds the feminist ideal of participant empowerment.

### Contribution

The final quality of the NES role is contribution, which we define as producing locally meaningful knowledge or change alongside the traditional contribution of scholarly knowledge. Certainly, scholarly insight is an important part of the contribution that engaged natives offer by being immersed in organizational practice. For as Boyer (1990) argued, theory and practice are co-occurring and mutually informing. Additionally, though, the NES role facilitates contribution in the sense of giving something useful that matters to the organization or group at hand.

Contribution is vital to participatory action research and engaged scholarship, both of which seek to “make a difference *through* research...by researchers intervening into discourses to affect them and documenting their practices, processes, and products” throughout the research project (Frey, 2009, pp. 209-210). Whether it be committing to telling more authentic stories of cancer survival (Ellingson, 2017), offering coping strategies for working within the ever-present risks in nuclear power plants (Barbour & Gill, 2014), or facilitating the organizational messaging of a victim’s recovery center (Crabtree & Ford, 2007), activist and engaged communication researchers clearly embody the engaged native’s role as contributor. Together these qualities of intimacy, partnership, and contribution distinguish the engaged native role from other field researcher roles—an argument which we elucidate next.

### Distinguishing the Engaged Native Role

Scholars have formed multiple typologies and designations for field researcher roles often conceptualized in terms of the researcher’s degree of immersion in site under study. At one end of this “continuum of enmeshment” (Tracy, 2013, p. 106) is the researcher who becomes deeply embedded as an active participant (i.e., complete participant, Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980; Tracy, 2013; complete member researcher, Adler & Adler, 1987). Thus, both NES and complete participants are fully immersed in the scene. However, the engaged native is distinct in terms of its preexisting relationship with the scene even prior to the study’s inception. As such, though complete participants may be local to the site or even claim membership, they do not necessarily encounter the same manner of intimacy that anchors engaged natives to the sites under study.

Further along the continuum are roles that more detectably engage the participant *and* researcher positionalities. Some of these roles wear the participant hat more prominently and frequently (participant as observer, Gold, 1958; active participant, Spradley, 1980; and play participant, Tracy, 2013). For Tracy (2013), this type of role is “improvisational and unbounded,” and the flexibility inherent allows the field researcher to pivot and flex alongside the study participants (p. 109). Other roles elevate the researcher stance as more primary over the participant role (focused participant observers, Tracy, 2013; observers as participants, Gold, 1958). These “moderate participation” field researchers stay more on the periphery (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). Rather than establish a primacy or hierarchy of positionality as researchers in these roles do, native engaged scholars strive to *concurrently* and fully embrace the dual identities of participant and scholar. The distinct intimacy of engaged natives spurs this striving, but also obligates them to face tensions that those who separate and oscillate between participant and researcher do not face.

Finally, at the other end of the continuum are researchers who function as removed observers who attempt to watch carefully yet not intervene in the scene (i.e., complete observer, Gold, 1958, Tracy, 2013; passive observer, Spradley, 1980, peripheral member researcher, Adler & Adler, 1987). Engaged natives would not adopt a complete observer (Gold, 1958) role given their pre-existing relationships to the site and/or participants. Irrespective of an engaged native’s desires, the partnership dimension of the NES role would prevent them from disengaging from a community to the extent required of a complete observer. Moreover, engaged natives would struggle to leave the scene without intervening and/or suggesting improvements for those who remained (i.e., contribution dimension). Ultimately, although the role of a native engaged scholar is certainly enmeshed, as Tracy (2013) suggests of other field researcher roles, the engaged native role challenges the tacit assumption that the enmeshment process begins at project inception. Rather, engaged natives enter into their researcher role as already, or perhaps always, enmeshed. In turn, we explore the unique value of the native engaged scholar role, and of the qualities of

intimacy, partnership, and contribution in confluence, through the telling of three scholars' stories who have already charted out as engaged natives.

### **The Organizational and Scholarly Value of Engaged Natives**

The following narratives are based on the scholars' respective publications as well as direct correspondence with the authors. Beginning with Lacy's own experience, we illustrate each scholar's embodiment of the interconnected qualities of intimacy, partnership, and contribution and underscore the meaningful messiness of this role. We chose these three cases—each of which features a scholar who meets the criteria of an engaged native—because we were given access to the untold, unpublished threads of the stories behind the scholarship. It is our goal to use each of these cases to highlight to unique and complicated role of an engaged native as lived out in the research scene and beyond.

#### **Volunteering with Child Watchdogs**

While pursuing my doctorate, I volunteered with Child Watchdogs or CW (pseudonym), an advocacy organization that supports children in foster care. I became quickly entrenched in not just the world of the children but the staff and the organization as a whole. Notably, I observed staff supervisors struggle to empower volunteers toward self-sufficiency yet also provide oversight and boundaries to ensure their effectiveness. During this time, my research interests turned toward the negotiation of roles and relationships between supervisors and subordinates. Thus, after two years at CW, my scholarly and volunteer roles began to converge. I was nominated for the Volunteer of the Year, marking my shift to an insider who was intimately engrained in the organizational lifeblood. As a trusted member, I gained a platform to speak with the CW director about the volunteer-staff role relationships and the possibility of a research study to shed light into these dynamics (see McNamee & Peterson, 2014, 2016; Peterson & McNamee, 2015).

The director was excited to pursue the study. Thus, my intimate positionality gave rise to the partnership aspect of the engaged native's role. Together, we discussed opportunities for growth and insight and how the study might be designed to facilitate these discoveries. The director collaborated with me to craft the interview guide and also actively facilitated and encouraged staff and volunteers' participation. Unfortunately, she unexpectedly departed the organization shortly after data collection and preliminary analysis was complete (due to unrelated factors). Amidst this departure and other organizational changes, the findings from this study remained unshared for some time and the promise of a contribution hung in the balance. For example, critical findings regarding volunteers' frustrations with their supervisors and desires for different forms of support and recognition went months without being voiced and acted upon.

Eventually, however, my organizational role shifted from volunteer to board member where I gained a broader understanding of the implications of my study findings and a renewed desire to explore their potential applications. As the board grappled with reports of lagging volunteer retention, I found the organization's governing body a willing and consequential audience for sharing the research and, therefore, a newfound opportunity arose to make a meaningful contribution in the end. For example, I now conduct staff training sessions focused on enhancing their task and relational communication with CW volunteers. Because I had intimately lived the life of a volunteer yet also partnered in the research from the vantage point of a trusted high-level insider, I was able to yield unique scholarly insight into volunteer-staff role dynamics and offer a meaningful contribution to the organization that carried forth well beyond the life of the study.

#### **Wilmington Raised**

As a native of the area, Anna Wiederhold's (now Wiederhold-Wolfe) relationship with the Wilmington, Ohio residents she studied was quintessentially intimate (see Wiederhold, 2015; Wiederhold Wolfe, 2016). She grew up just outside of town and participated in athletics at the local high school where her father taught for decades. Thus, a common place-based history and shared social connections fostered

a natural intimacy with the participants, or mutual familiarity as Anna referred to it (Wiederhold, 2015). Embeddedness within the community forged her connection to Wilmington as a site for studying public narratives and community change. It also facilitated access to two key informants, former classmates, who were working toward economic revitalization in the area. Because of her history with these classmates and the small-town goodwill that came with “being a Wiederhold,” Anna was invited into conversations and spaces that eclipsed the access typically afforded to a non-native (A. Wolfe, personal communication, May 21, 2018). Such intimacy enabled her to coproduce the research at play in partnership with the community. Anna reimagined the community with her former classmates and shaped her data collection methods accordingly. She invited participants to choose interview sites they deemed illustrative of the economic dynamics in the community, and in these settings, “interviewees became tour guides and storytellers, positioned as local experts” (Wiederhold, 2015, p. 608). Participants also traced their connections to the community, thereby identifying others who Anna should interview.

These ongoing partnerships paved the way for widespread buy in and lasting change. Ultimately, Anna presented her findings to the city council, and within a month, they approved a program that incentivized individuals to reside in the area. This case highlights the engaged native’s distinct advantage when attempting to foster trust and access. For Anna, the seed of trust sprung forth from birth and was rooted in her family name: as one city council member intimated when invited for an interview, the connection to the Wiederhold dynasty, as he referred to it, afforded her the access of a researcher and the goodwill of a neighbor. Their conversation flowed as the councilperson shared insights that he knew she would understand as a native. Participants trusted her investment and collaborated with her to the idyllic end: a lasting contribution for the community itself.

### **Facilitation at Freedom Church**

Ryan Hartwig’s relationship to Freedom Church began in the typical way: he attended services, participated in its ministries, and became a member. In the years that followed, Ryan embedded himself deeply into the church while also pursuing his doctorate. As a committed member, he eventually obtained the senior pastor’s permission to conduct a study about the culture of the church’s pastoral staff. From there, his intimate connection to the site intensified: He began a new role as organizational consultant, and, eventually, his dissertation focused on the church’s executive team and their efforts to develop a strategic ministry plan.

Ryan’s distinct methodological approach, which he describes as ethnographic facilitation—a methodology where scholars “employ ethnographic practices”, facilitate group discussions “to promote change or development” and “report their findings to scholarly and relevant practitioner communities”, resonates deeply with the NES quality of partnership (Hartwig, 2014a, p. 60; see also Hartwig, 2014b). He advocated for “shared leadership models” by helping team members to understand and actively participate in their own communication practices and culture (p. 64). He viewed himself as a facilitator and scribe and stressed to the executive team their responsibilities in ultimately developing the strategic plan. As an engaged native, Ryan also desired to use his research to benefit the church. However, Ryan’s commitment to contribution was not fully championed by his primary partner in the research, the senior pastor. After presenting the executive team’s strategic plan to the pastor and perceiving a favorable response, he subsequently prepared to share it in a larger meeting with church members; but when the meeting convened, the pastor was conspicuously absent. In Ryan’s words, “his lack of being there was a big flashing billboard that this doesn’t matter” (R. Hartwig, personal communication, June 6, 2018). Moreover, this absence disrupted Ryan’s identity as an engaged native: “Not only is he a co-participant in my research, he’s also my pastor. How do I sit in the pews [after he failed to show up]? It was painful” (R. Hartwig, personal communication, June 6, 2018). Feeling unsupported, Ryan and his family eventually left the congregation, and without support from the pastor, the team’s strategic ministry plan was never implemented.

Ryan’s case represents a somewhat cautionary tale of the native engaged scholar. His deep and ongoing connection as a native and his collaborative dynamic with the executive leadership team helped him co-produce actionable strategies for the community. These qualities of partnership and intimacy

seemingly set him on a trajectory for fulfilling the final promise of NES roles: the commitment to a lasting impact for the people involved. However, without the continuing endorsement of his original partner, this contribution was left unfulfilled. Ryan's story illustrates the importance of securing widespread partnership and alludes to other complexities of the NES role.

Together these cases offer a novel look into the lifeworlds of native engaged scholars and illustrate the often overlooked, understated, and unpublished benefits of *being* native prior to engaging in academic inquiry. Indeed, the intimacy, partnership, and contribution qualities embraced by NES help these individuals to know their communities deeply. This deep and intimate embeddedness, fostered over time, can help facilitate the discovery of authentic knowledge (see Cheney, 2000; Janesick, 2000). Moreover, these cases resonate with Lewis' (2012) view of partnership; she posits, "Fundamentally, our knowledge is better if we partner in diverse learning communities rather than simply aloofly draw our own conclusions and then generously share them with those who are the objects of study" (p. 188). Finally, the above cases illustrate that engaged natives not only embody the values of engaged and applied scholarship which seek to do "something that matters, something that counts for real people who encounter a variety of dilemmas, issues, and problems in their everyday lives," but we contend that engaged natives' ongoing relationships with communities ensure that they affect not just change but lasting change (Trethewey, 2002, p. 81). Non-natives, in contrast, are often unable to remain with the organization under study long enough to see whether or not change is enacted and embraced. Instead, they often part ways with their sites long before the implementation of scholarly outcomes. Thus, for the scholars in the stories above, and other engaged natives like them, Boyer's (1990) articulation of meaningful theory development rings true: "Theory surely leads to practice. *But practice also leads to theory*" (emphasis added, p. 16). Next we speak to the unique complexities that engaged natives face as they embrace their varied positionalities as both engaged native and engaged scholar.

### **The Inevitable Tensions**

While the role of an engaged native enhances scholarly inquiry and benefits organizations, groups, and communities, we acknowledge that it is not free from problems and complications. Indeed, analogous to traditional engaged scholar (e.g., Dempsey & Barge, 2014) and activist-consultant roles (e.g., Crabtree & Ford, 2007), we accept the role of a native engaged scholar as inherently tension-filled. Thus, to conclude, we expound on how native engaged scholars have and will continue to struggle with, endure, and embrace three tensions that we refer to as *empathy*, *commitment*, and *identity*.

#### **Tensions of Empathy vs. Skepticism**

Because of their personal tie and commitment to the research, engaged natives are often privy to or even concomitantly endure the lived struggles, frustrations, and failures of their participants. Accordingly, these relationships are often marked by a mutual respect that motivates greater disclosure and candor from participants and ultimately yields an important benefit: richer data. That is, engaged natives experienced the quotidian lives of their participants, and as such, they have the unique capacity to know which questions to ask and how to phrase the questions to garner meaningful responses. Certainly, such familiarity with organizational culture, norms, and history enable the NES to speak the language of the community and pursue important questions for insight and discovery, all of which are beneficial to rendering rich data and nuanced interpretation.

At the same time, engaged natives' intimate and often insider positionality can make them prone to take on participants' emotions thereby experiencing emotional contagion which often leads to burnout (see Andreychik, 2019). Similarly, engaged natives may overlook meaningful nuances from their insider vantage point and take for granted that their individual native experience mirrors all others. This perceived empathy may result in a distorted perspective and false sense that "I'm a member so I know how it is" which shrouds other views and experiences. Finally, empathy may also unwittingly fog one's critical lens such that the researcher struggles to detect dysfunctions, abuses, and other unhealthy organizational dynamics at play. In this way, tensions of empathy resonate with Dempsey and Barge's

(2014) distance-empathy tension, where “a fully immersive, empathetic stance” might preclude critical analysis and application (p. 674).

In order to productively navigate the tension of empathy—reaping the benefits and assuaging the challenges—we suggest that engaged natives consider co-authorship. Bringing on a collaborator can help engaged natives layer a critical lens over their scholarship and aid them in discerning blind spots where their nativeness might indeed be a hinderance to the advancement of theoretical knowledge. Additionally, we encourage researchers in NES roles to even more conscientiously engage in practices that Tracy (2010) collectively refers to as *sincerity*. Such practices include self-reflexivity about “their own voice in relation to others” and “*how* they claim to know what they know,” as well as “transparency” or “honesty about the research process” (e.g., methods of entry, relationships with participants, fieldnoting practices, etc.) (p. 842). Important questions for the engaged native to ask include: What do I know about the culture *as* an insider? What knowledge, practices, values, or beliefs might a non-native question? What assumptions am I making because of my position in this community, and what other possibilities might exist?

### **Tensions of Commitment to Scholarship vs. Community**

Engaged natives also experience tensions of commitment as they navigate the liminal space between native and scholarly obligations, questioning: Where do my commitments lie?, To what extent will I partner with my participants in order to co-produce knowledge?, and, in line with Dempsey and Barge’s (2014) scholar-practitioner tension, How do I focus on creating theoretical insights and practical contributions? Undoubtedly, when engaged natives are perceived to be all in, organizational and community members are more willing to share the less glamorous aspects of their lifeworlds, which ultimately can produce novel scholarly insight and actionable data for their communities. However, when these commitments diverge or compete, engaged natives might find themselves with fragmented commitments, struggling to maintain multiple competing interests and, at times, abandoning one commitment for another.

For one, if native engaged scholars prioritize partner relationships, seeking to do no harm to their organizations or communities at all costs, they may inadvertently sacrifice scholarly contributions. Notably, they may sidestep important examination of wicked challenges that may face their communities of study (e.g., abuse, bullying, unethical practices). By contrast, if engaged natives prioritize their scholarly commitments and pursue unmitigated transparency, they may produce profound scholarship, but at the expense of members’ reputations and standing in the organization. Even worse, this move may perpetuate the exploitation of lower power members or groups. Moreover, even as engaged natives’ efforts to work alongside organizations may receive favorable nods from colleagues, these partnerships often do little to advance cases for promotion and tenure as they take valuable time away from other scholarly endeavors. As such, if engaged natives continually put partnership ahead of scholarship, it can stall career advancement (see Ellingson & Quinlan, 2012 for a review).

To navigate tensions of commitment, we encourage scholars to reject the false dichotomy between allegiance to site or scholarship and to embrace Ellingson and Quinlan’s (2012) perspective that “altruism and professional ambition” can coexist (p. 394). In practice, scholars might consider using dendritic crystallization (Ellingson, 2009) to produce multiple genres of representation and put them in conversation with one another (e.g., grounded interpretive analysis alongside applied reports). These kinds of couplings could help engaged natives to see where their allegiances, commitments, and positionalities shift or change with respect to audience. In line with this reasoning, we encourage scholars to ask: Whose voice am I representing? And consequently, whose voices am I omitting? What commitment am I currently prioritizing and to what ends? These self-reflective questions can help engaged natives own our analytic lens(es) while at the same time challenging us to consider what we choose to share, when we choose to share, who we choose to share with, and why we choose to share at all.



### **Tensions of Identity as Scholar vs. Member**

While tensions of empathy facilitate engaged natives' insight in the first place and tensions of commitment are related to their willingness to convey those insights, tensions of identity speak to how adopting a NES role personally influences the engaged native. Indeed, because of their closeness to the site and their dual identity as both native and scholar, engaged natives have a greater capacity for discovery as well as the propensity to see recommendations through to completion. The engaged native's research project has a greater degree of intensity which can yield high levels of self-fulfillment and accomplishment while at the same time vulnerability, opening up the NES to personal harm that comes from being deeply embedded in a site. When the research study does not go as planned, feelings of failure can overwhelm the engaged native. In this way, tensions of identity are somewhat related to Crabtree and Ford's (2007) discussion the activist-consultant dialectic, in that the activist's participatory (vs. observational) stance and personal (vs. professional) lens can leave the activist exposed.

Researchers sometimes lack the capacity to fully realize their practical recommendations in the communities under study, and engaged natives in particular mourn their inability to effect change in a community that is indelibly bound to themselves. Given the vulnerability inherent in this role, we encourage NES to attend to our varied identities and entertain self-reflexive questions like Richardson's (2000) "How did the author come to write this text?" (p. 254). Other introspective questions include: What are my identities with respect to this site? Who am I in relation to the current audience? How do I protect myself and/or make myself more vulnerable in this context? What practices can I enact to avoid burnout as I embody the NES role? If I show this side of my identity, what consequences will it have for me, and how will people judge me based on that identity? Questions like these can inspire NES to "use our own emotions as an amplifier, promoting us to interrogate further" (emerald & Carpenter, 2015, p. 748).

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, we reclaim and recast scholarly understandings of nativeness by focusing on individuals who pursue research projects with intimate ties, partner with people on the ground to mold and shape the research, and contribute to the organization or community beyond the life of the research. Our cases illuminated how engaged natives' profound trust, knowledge, and commitment can facilitate greater access, unique scholarly insights, and expanded possibilities for lasting change. Ultimately, although the role of an engaged native is not without tension or complication, we encourage scholars involved in activist and engaged research, autoethnography and narrative ethnography, and feminist inquiry to consider taking on this role in their respective research agendas. Our articulation of the engaged native role is also pedagogically consequential. Doctoral curricula should attend to the traditionally pejorative and ethically complicated practice of "going native" in the classic sense while at the same time distinguishing that nativeness in and of itself is not something to be denigrated. As engaged natives ourselves, we celebrate the complex relationships to the people and places we have studied and the consequent scholarly insights, and we continue to honor the challenges that come with living into this role.

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