Research Practices Involving Canadian Aboriginal Communities:

Ethical Considerations

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Abstract

Research conducted in Aboriginal communities has tended to be labeled as disrespectful, lacking benefit to the community and exploiting Aboriginal sacred knowledge. The writer’s review of published literature as well as personal correspondence with Aboriginal scholars has revealed that these views hold strong in the minds of Aboriginal scholars and non-scholars alike. Some Aboriginals are adamant that research in their communities should only take place by their people. Other Aboriginals feel that there is room for non-Aboriginal researchers; researchers that abide by the guidelines and good practices set forth by the Canadian government. This paper will review these guidelines as well as current trends in Aboriginal research.
Author Note

To minimize any confusion over terms used within this paper, the writer would like to clarify the term Aboriginal. Aboriginal, Native and First Nations people refer to all groups, which include Métis, Status and Non-Status Indians, and Inuit of Canada. In American literature, the word Indian is often used. Older Aboriginal people also still tend to use this word, even though the legal term is Aboriginal. Aboriginal peoples are made up of diverse languages, cultures, and traditions in Manitoba alone, and subsequently more so for all of Canada. There are six cultural linguistics groups in Manitoba: these are Anishnabe, Cree, Oj-Cree, Dakota, Inuit, Dene, and Métis (Fitznor, personal correspondence, November 27, 2006).
Introduction

_Ethical Issues Regarding Research on Aboriginal People_

There is always going to be some hurdles to climb for any researcher who is entering a community for which they are not a member, regardless of what cultural group is discussed. The community will likely have some apprehension of the researcher’s motive and the course of research to be carried out. Members are naïve, and perhaps curious of the researcher’s foreign ways and practices. Simply stating, the researcher is different. Different clothes, hair, eyes, language, gestures and body language. This even holds more validity for the remote First Nation communities of Canada.

How then can the presence of a non-Aboriginal researcher in an Aboriginal community influence the process and outcome of research? Smith (1999) speaks very strongly on past research in Aboriginal communities in stating “The term research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word ‘research’ itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary.” (p.115) Eurocentric research in the past has often been plagued with Eurocentric knowledge, heritage, language, and ethical behavior, undermining Indigenous knowledge. The ethical practices engaged by current researchers entering First Nation communities need to reflect on Indigenous knowledge.

_Indigenous Knowledge_. What is Indigenous knowledge? This answer is not simple. One typically wants to try to compare and contrast Eurocentric and indigenous ways of thinking and knowing. Daes (1993) defined indigenous knowledge as “all kinds of scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge, including cultigens, medicines and the rational of flora and fauna”. This knowledge trickles down from
generation to generation and its preservation is sacred to its people. Simply, it is knowledge of its territory. Anyone working in this ‘territory’ should have knowledge of the territory. To make this statement even more sagacious, the writer will explain with an example: It is synonymous with a Canadian researcher entering a Korean school ready to conduct a research project with Korean children. This Canadian researcher would, at best, have contacted the authorities, as well as the appropriate teachers and parents to obtain consent in engaging children in the project. The researcher would also need to be very sensitive to the cultural issues of the children, their language and pragmatics. If these steps would not be taken, the project would surely be a failure. Besides the obvious opposition from staff and families, the information gathered by the researcher would likely be biased. This is true only because the setting (researcher interviewing child) in which the information was extracted would not be natural for the children. In addition to this, the researcher, ignorant of the Korean language, expression and culture, would likely misinterpret the messages. This may occur while analyzing for meaning and trying to conform it in to a standard Canadian mold or product.

This is a fear that many Aboriginal people have regarding research taking place in their communities. Aboriginal people are very familiar to the common malpractices of non-Aboriginal researchers who in the past, presumed all too well to know what is best for them.

*Royal Commission on Aboriginal People.* Thus, with the help of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People created a set of ethical guidelines (RCAP, 1993). These guidelines were derived avowably, knowing Aboriginals have a unique cultural heritage that needs to be preserved. Researchers
conducting research with Aboriginals need to respect Aboriginal perspectives, experiences and understanding of their territory. For the reader to have a better understanding of some of the issues considered in guiding research in an Aboriginal community, an abbreviated version of the Guidelines is as follows:

*Aboriginal Knowledge*: Researchers are urged to be consciously aware of the Aboriginal perspective, language, and culture. *Consent*: Individual consent by the person participating in the study, by groups, councils, or other authorities within the community or organization. As well, participants should be provided with information about the project so that they can provide informed consent. Participants are free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality shall be maintained throughout the study. *Collaborative Research*: Aboriginal communities need to be allowed the opportunity to be involved in the planning process as much as possible. *Review Procedures*: The results of the study shall be reviewed both within the community and abroad in the scholarly community prior to publication. *Access to Research Results*: Open public access to final reports of research activities. Research may not be published if a violation towards privacy or that of resulting in harm is of any participants are brought forth. *Community Benefit*: The researchers completing community-based research shall place strong emphasis and thought as to the benefits that will be forthcoming from the existing research. *Implementation*: The above guidelines need to be included in all research contracts sponsored by the Commission (RCAP, p.37-40).
Tri-Council’s Policy Statement. When Canada’s three research councils – The National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Medical Research Council (MRC) met in 1998 to draft a policy statement for ethical conduct in research, they agreed that Aboriginal people should have their own section. In doing this they confirmed that Aboriginal peoples have rights and interests that are unique to their heritage, customs, and communities. Below is an excerpt of the tri-council’s policy statement (SSHRC, 1998):

Research that is premised on respect for human dignity entails high obligations to individuals and groups. Indeed, there are historical reasons why Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples may legitimately feel apprehensive about the activities of researchers. In many cases, research has been conducted in respectful ways and has contributed to the well being of aboriginal communities. In others, Aboriginal peoples have not been treated with a high degree of respect by researchers. Inaccurate or insensitive research has caused stigmatization. On occasion, the cultural property and human remains of Indigenous peoples have been expropriated by researchers for permanent exhibition or storage in institutes, or offered for sale. Researchers have sometimes treated groups merely as sources of data, and have occasionally endangered dissident Indigenous peoples by unwittingly acting as information gatherers for repressive regimes. Such conduct has harmed the participant communities and spoiled future research opportunities. (p. 139)
Within the policy statement, the councils also provide a list of ‘good practices’. The topics covered in this list include the following: How the Aboriginal community’s cultural state and property will be protected; when a preliminary report will be available for comment; the potential for employment by the researcher; researcher’s willingness to cooperate with the community; researchers’ willingness to deposit data, and working papers and related materials kept in a mutually agreed place.

Northern Research in Aboriginal Communities in Canada. For the researcher who plans to conduct research in the northern communities, specifically above the permafrost line, the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS, 1992) has put forth a statement entitled Ethical Principals for the Conduct of Research in the North (1982). Because of the changes occurring in the north concerning governments and communities, these principals needed some adjustment, and therefore a revised version followed in 1993. The author will not list the 20 principals presented in the document. However, in summary, it should be noted that the purpose of these principals is mainly to foster a mutual respect between the researcher and the people in the North. Because part of the writer’s research will take place in Northern Manitoba, these principals will need to be applied to the research. In applying these principals, there will be a greater chance that the research will be conducted in a fair and honest manner.

Cross-Cultural Issues

Not only are there ethical issues regarding completing research with Aboriginal peoples, there are also cultural issues. There is controversy in the literature, by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers regarding whether or not it is even ethical for the researcher to be non-Aboriginal, and careful thought should be given to a non-Aboriginal
researcher conducting research in an Aboriginal community (Swisher, 1998). Swisher, a Native American Indian, argues that Indian people must start speaking for themselves, especially concerning Indian education, their needs and their cultural perspectives. A National Dialogue Project on American Indian Education is an example of some of the initiatives that are beginning to emerge from Aboriginal scholars. The report of the regional dialogues, *Our Voices, Our Vision: American Indians Speak Out for Educational Excellence* (1992), stated the following regarding research with Aboriginal peoples:

> Just as the exploitation of American Indian land and resources is of value to corporate America, research and publishing is valuable to non-Indian scholars. As a result of racism, greed, and distorted perceptions of native realities, Indian cultures and economic commodity has been exploited by the dominant society with considerable damage to the Indian people. Tribal people need to safeguard the borders of their cultural domains against research and publishing incursions (p. 19).

This statement exemplifies the strong inner sense of exploitation of the Aboriginal people and their distaste for any non-Aboriginal researcher entering their community to conduct research. However this is only one Aboriginal writer’s perspective, albeit very strong. Champagne (1998), an Aboriginal scholar at the University of California, raises some debate on this issue. His view focuses on the ethics and guidelines of how scholars should conduct their research and disseminate the results. As described earlier in this paper, specific guidelines and suggested practices have been implemented for such studies. He further argues that all humans have the capacity to have an open understanding of the various cultural, institutional, and social on-goings belonging to
different ethic groups. Therefore, no researcher should be shut out of the investigative process. In reading this, it is hoped that with careful planning and sensitivity, any researcher who is not part of the minority group being studied will take an open minded and unbiased approach towards the study in order to successfully meet the research goals.

Action based research has become a popular theme in the last decade. It is founded by the principal of giving back to the community or participants in which data is collected and used. With this type of research, the purpose of the study is very obvious to the participants, and the researcher’s intention is to provide the community with knowledge that is purposeful and additive. This is the type of research that Aboriginal scholars are beginning to demand from any researcher conducting a study in Aboriginal communities. Gilchrist (1997) summarized a list of factors which make using one specific methodology or protocol impossible when entering a community; these factors include degree of isolation, size of community, complexity of economic activity, quality of leadership, vitality of culture, cohesiveness of the community, existence of resources, nature of social problems and intensity of divisions within the community. The action based research that is beginning to be demanded will lessen the objectivity and perhaps contribute to decolonization and a move towards self-determination and self-government.

It appears that much of the negativity emanating from the Aboriginal people relates to the manner research was conducted by anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s, and the empirical way in which data was collected and published, often leaving the host community with little benefit. Now it is more common for the First Nation communities to request reports, presentations, and perhaps even sharing circles of information. It would also be of great benefit to pass on some skills to the community in which data was
directly obtained. The solution to this dichotomy between non-Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal researchers lies in education in both groups. Aboriginals need to take a more active role in ensuring that the RCAP guidelines and practices are being followed and have a better understanding of the benefits of research in general. Having more Aboriginal people educated at this level would be of tremendous help in ending any type of exploitation which is occurring. Non-Aboriginal researchers and scholars alike need to have a more appreciative understanding of native culture before deciding to conduct research.

Scollon and Scollon (1981) in their research on interethnic communication with Canadian Athabaskan children admitted that there were difficulties in completing research in the community. The first challenge was how English and Athabaskan people view interpersonal relationships, with the Athabaskan tribe having a high degree of respect for a person’s individuality. The second challenge came from the way Athabaskans view the treatment of children. A child who performs outwardly in public may inflict danger to one’s own spiritual, mental, and psychological well being. Thirdly, the challenge of producing research that is of relevance to the community.

In light of the cultural issues which face non-Aboriginal researchers entering an Aboriginal community, Battiste (2005) refers to at least five struggles that exist: (a) language, (b) personal space, (c) sacred knowledge, (d) research methodologies, and (e) informed consent. The writer will elaborate on these important issues.

Language. There is of course not one native language, just like there is not one native way or science. Even though there are shared beliefs among Aboriginal people, each community brings with it their own traditions, socio-economic status and language.
In the writer’s study for example, the community where the research will take place is mainly versed in Dene, although, for the students their first language remains English. Interestingly, regarding traditional teachings, how the teaching “is taken up is defined by personal experiences, the life, the land, regional ways, and culture of the group” (Fitznor, 1998, p.27). Fitznor further explains how Native tradition is one that is rich in its oratory. Sharing circles for instance are very important in Native culture in Manitoba as a means of sharing, learning and teaching. Therefore language, especially in its oral form, is an all encompassing form of learning and teaching in Aboriginal communities. Small children are not known traditionally to be very oral around elders, but instead are comfortable in listening to the stories and teachings of the elders in their community. It takes many years of listening to these stories to feel prepared to be able to become a story teller. It is truly an honor as much as an art.

Finally, there is always the problem of translation of one language to the next, and what is lost in translation can easily change the meaning. Language differences can cause misunderstandings that are necessary for the consent process. Adaptations of the consent forms may need to occur to ensure clear understanding of the research which is about to take place. Interpretation of meaning can also be misconstrued in translation of Aboriginal knowledge, traditions, and spirituality

*Personal space.* Depending upon your cultural heritage, public and private space may have different definitions. One needs to be aware of this when entering a person’s home or place of work. Respect for the community members and the community as a whole needs to be shown. Respect is a well honored teaching in the Aboriginal community. Not only do Aboriginals hold respect for one another as human beings, but
respect for every living creature surrounding them. Respect is seen as a very reciprocal entity between nature and humans. Therefore, researchers must be cognizant of what is personal space, sacred space and public space and be respectful of this.

*Traditional knowledge.* Earlier in this paper, the writer touched on Indigenous knowledge, or traditional knowledge. It can also be described as “folk knowledge”, “local knowledge or wisdom”, “non-formal knowledge”, “culture”, “indigenous technical knowledge”, and “traditional ecological knowledge” (Battiste, 2005). This knowledge has as much to do with relationships as it does with understanding meaning. Daes explains Indigenous knowledge as comprising of a particular group and its territory, of which has been transmitted from generation to generation. Fitznor speaks of one of the key aspects of traditional knowledge is that of spirit being in everything that is alive. There is a consciousness within, much like a human being. Therefore, when you take from the land, you should be respectful and give back to it in some way. Wilson (2001) gives a circumstantial description of Indigenous knowledge in her description of Indigenous methodology. Her depiction of Indigenous knowledge is one of relationships, not just with one another, but with everything around. It is the relationship with ideas and concepts that we are trying to explain through our research. Therefore, it appears to be quite different from most empirical research that takes place when answering questions of validity and reliability. Indigenous knowledge is not owned. It is all about having relational accountability. In doing this, people are not objectified as subjects. Instead participating in research requires a sense of honor and respect, while fostering relationships.
Informed consent. Researchers, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, should be aware of the importance of gaining consent when conducting a study. What is not apparent to most researchers is how consent in cross-cultural research can be misinterpreted. Often it appears to be the researcher’s ethics which govern the study’s consent agreement, instead of those individuals that are being researched. Menzies (2001) stated “there are still many researchers who continue to conduct research on aboriginal peoples as opposed to with us” (p.21). As mentioned earlier on the topic of language, much can be lost in translation, particularly in Aboriginal communities decades ago. As Piquemal (2001) noted “One of the most critical problems I foresee is that of differing communicative norms and patterns of interaction. These communicative differences can lead to misinterpretation of statements, including those of consent” (p.67). Piquemal further describes how consent can easily be misinterpreted in native culture simply as a product of the tacit nature of their people. Communication breakdown could occur without knowledge to either the researcher or those being researched. For example, a researcher may believe they have received full consent while instead, the Aboriginal participant may have simply answered with an acknowledgement of the question. This does not agree with the ethical guidelines of obtaining free and informed consent. In other words, it was not’ informed’ in the sense that it was not mutually ‘understood’. This discussion thereby leaves us with a question ‘what makes consent informed?’

Piquemal does a nice job in describing how a researcher working with Aboriginal communities can make gaining consent as informed as possible. This can be done through negotiating and renegotiating. It is not a one time deal but instead a circular process. As a result of this discussion, Piquemal and her co-researchers came up with
four main ethical recommendations in one’s pursuit of free and informed consent. These recommendations are as follows:

1. Negotiating responsibilities prior to seeking free and informed consent. It is suggested here that the researcher becomes well acquainted with the community before starting the process of gaining consent. This may mean the researcher needs to investigate what type of government structure or political organization stands and subsequently identify the gatekeepers to the community. Collaboration and talks may also begin with the participants in so that they can freely speak and inquire about the study. Collaboration between participants and the community is continual and essential.

2. Obtaining free and informed consent from the relevant authorities. This ethical recommendation stems mainly from a situation where sacred knowledge is involved. The consent is not drawn solely from the participant, but also from the keeper of this knowledge, which is collective knowledge, thereby giving way to collective agreement. In other words, even though the data is collected from perhaps only a handful of participants, these participants are relinquishing knowledge that is sacred to the community, and therefore the community should allow for this consent.

3. Confirming consent to ensure that consent is ongoing. This is best described as the circular process where throughout the study, the researcher continues to consult with the participants and ensure that they are comfortable with the information that they have brought forth. Traditional research would likely not favor this as much, as there would be some debate over whether information may be lost or the content changed in some manner.
4. Completing the circle: providing the community with data. The research becomes complete once the participants have received the outcome data and at best, any information that is beneficent to the community. The participants would also need to give consent to how the results would be used and disseminated.

**Political Issues**

Finally, political issues will play a part in how research is conducted in any community, but this is especially true for the First Nation communities. Political challenges such as self-government and self-determination in these communities may challenge the researchers’ access into the community. A history of colonization and exploitation of the First Nation communities will make the building of rapport within a community challenging. For many of these communities, their people have been unwilling habitants of deconstructionalism, and through education and self-determination, they want to become advocates to their own thoughts and actions. Some researchers in the past felt that their Western government was the authoritative body to decide what words should be kept sacred and what is for the public to hear. Aboriginal elders and community members felt much differently towards this. Just because information is spoken, does not mean it is for everyone’s ears to hear. Research which took place in the late 1900s was much more challenging for the Aboriginal people because of the lack of respect of their stories and narratives. In fact, one of the most challenging political issues which now faces Western initiated research is the lack of respect that Aboriginals feel is given to them when researched. This again stems back to the 1960s and 1970s when anthropologists often exploited the First Nation communities with minimal collaboration or negotiation with the community or participants. As the
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writer mentioned earlier in this paper, respect is a term that is well versed in the minds of Aboriginal people. It is the heart of their beliefs and feelings about relationships both in nature and humanity. Smith described Aboriginal respect as ‘a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principals which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct” (p.120). Smith had very strong views of how Western civilization persecuted Aboriginal culture through research that was seldom shared or left any beneficence to the community once completed. Her political view of Eurocentric research is in par with the idea of the West denying Aboriginal people any type of citizenship and human rights, the denial to self-determination, which inclusively exemplifies the lack of respect that Western civilization has towards First Nation communities. Hermes’ (1998) work is taken from the perspective of a researcher in a Native community, and describes the manner in which her particular research unfolded was directly in concert with the community’s response. She used the term ‘situated response’ to describe how research should be conducted within a community. One’s research question and methods should evolve with the communities’ cultural traditions and not take a static, preformed approach. Hermes felt that the relationships of reciprocity and respect ordered her methods; making the whole study a process that would not be likely be replicated when conducting a similar study in a different community.

Conclusion

In the past, there seems to be a recurring theme of respect or lack of respect of white researchers conducting studies on Aboriginal people. This principal seems to stem from studies completed by anthropologists wanting to study Aboriginal practices and traditions. Unfortunately, the research that was completed was often conducted with a
lack of respect towards the participants or the community. In terms of reciprocity, little was given back to the communities. The result was exploitation of the Aboriginal people.

Subsequently, even though many years have passed from these initial studies, the Aboriginal people remain extremely apprehensive towards non-Aboriginal researchers conducting research within First Nation communities. The first attempt towards a more reciprocal and fair method of conducting Eurocentric based research with Aboriginal people came in the form of a set of guidelines written by the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Further to this attempt, the three research councils in Canada produced a tri-council policy statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans, in which Aboriginal people have their own section.

Thus, the principals for conducting ethically based research on Aboriginal people are in place in Canada. It is now the responsibility of both the Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal researchers to abide and follow these guidelines. Using action based research as well as changing the methodology in accordance to the situation or community will only add to the quality of research done in First Nations communities. It is the writer’s belief that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can work together in harmony to produce research studies that all Canadians will benefit from.
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