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Partnerships with Aboriginal Researchers:
Hidden Pitfalls and Cultural Pressures

Dr. Douglas Durst
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SIPP University of Regina Senior Fellow
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The Scholar Series

Each year the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy benefits enormously from the appointment of two Senior Fellows, one from the University of Regina and the other from the Government of Saskatchewan. The fellowships are each for twelve months, and are designed to recognise scholars and practitioners who have made significant contributions in the area of public policy. During their year at SIPP, the Fellows pursue their public policy research interests and participate in the various activities of the Institute.

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For his public lecture, Dr. Douglas Durst, the 2003-04 University of Regina Senior Fellow, discusses the impact of social research in Aboriginal communities and then provides ten hidden pitfalls and cultural pressures of social research in those communities. Dr. Durst concludes with a number of useful recommendations for non-Aboriginal researchers as they work collaboratively with Aboriginal individuals or groups.

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Partnerships with Aboriginal Researchers: Hidden Pitfalls and Cultural Pressures

Dr. Douglas Durst
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Abstract

Social research is political and, historically, it has been used as an instrument of exploitation and oppression against Aboriginal peoples. However, effective policy and program development needs to be driven by quality social research. Community groups, First Nations governments, and provincial and federal governments are seeking collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal researchers and groups. These collaborations have numerous hidden pitfalls and cultural pressures that pull the stakeholders in opposing directions. Their recognition and acknowledgment can assist in successful research endeavours, including graduate supervision and research. There is also a number of lessons for the outsider that will facilitate collaborative research, including gaining entry and maintaining support; engaging in reciprocity; a tolerance for ambiguity; and a personal commitment. The author argues for the need for quality practical research that will inform policy and program development.

Introduction

While living in the North during the '70s, I encountered a well-worn joke that circulated around the Arctic communities. It went something like this:

What is the definition of an Inuit family? Ahhh, it's a father, mother, 3 children, a grandmother and an anthropologist.

It seemed like the 1960s and 1970s saw a fascination with the North and Aboriginal peoples that was reflected in anthropologic and ethnographic research in universities across Canada. Young female students seemed to invade northern communities armed with clipboards and cassette recorders. Fortunately, the intrusion seems to have abated. "Fortunately" is written because social research in Aboriginal and First Nations communities has been exploitive, harmful and downright oppressive to Aboriginal people in Canada.¹ Social research is, inescapably, political.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the devastating impact of social research in Aboriginal communities and its relationship to colonialism and oppression. From this context for research, ten hidden pitfalls and cultural pressures of social research in Aboriginal communities are described and analyzed. These pitfalls and pressures are considered in the context of both community research and the supervision of graduate students. A series of practical recommendations and suggestions are offered for non-Aboriginal researchers working collaboratively with Aboriginal individuals or groups.

¹ For the purpose of this report, the term "First Nations" is used to describe persons who are status Indians as defined by the Indian Act. The phrase "Aboriginal peoples" is a broader term used to include all those people who identify with being of Aboriginal ancestry and may be of mixed ancestry. The term is used to include status, non-status, Inuit, and Metis persons.

The paper concludes with an emphasis on the need for capacity building and the need for practical informed research for policy and program development.²

Context/History of Social Research

There is an important fact that must be acknowledged and its lingering impact recognized. In the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999),

Imperialism frames the indigenous experience. It is part of our story, our version of modernity... the politics of imperialism and colonialism as an epic story telling of huge devastation, painful struggle and persistent survival (p.19).

Smith's words are a starting point; the impacts of imperialism and colonialism have been devastating and have permeated all interactions with Aboriginal people in Canada. It is a fact that has been denied, ignored and dismissed by the privileged members of society. In Canada, the impacts of residential schools have scarred generations of Aboriginal people in complex and subtle ways (Deiter, 1999; Jaine, 1995; Monture-Angus, 1999). From the privileged perspective, it can be difficult to understand or appreciate its deeper meanings and impacts.

Research is political. What topics of research are chosen, what questions are selected, what methods are employed, how data is presented and to whom findings are presented are all political decisions. These decisions are not isolated and "objective" but are rooted in the cultural values, ethics and beliefs of mainstream society and its academic community.

Social research has been used as an instrument of oppression, imperialism and colonialism, and it is viewed with distrust and suspicion in the Aboriginal community.

From the vantage point of the colonized... "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research" is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 1).

Hugh Shewell's (2004) new book, *Enough to Keep Them Alive: Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873-1965*, describes the development of social research with Aboriginal people and its relationship to the goals of Indian Affairs Branch. For some time, anthropologists such as Boas, Jenness, and McIlwraith have had been actively researching First Nations and Inuit people; however, it was not until the post war period that the federal Department of Indian Affairs became active in social research. The 1947 comprehensive study of the James Bay Cree, "awakened a flurry of interest in academic Canada and alerted the government to the necessity of funding only those studies that would advance or legitimate the state's aim regarding Indian integration (Shewell, 2004, p. 209). These new researchers

² I started writing this paper in the academic third person as in "this writer" and soon abandoned this practice in order to tell my story as well. In giving illustrations and examples, I have changed some information to protect the privacy and confidentiality of those students and individuals involved.

were the “explorers and missionaries... the new interpreters of the ‘other’ to the European mind” (Shewell, 2004, p.208).

The post war policy of Indian Affairs was to assimilate the First Nations into mainstream society in such a manner that the assimilation was willing and viewed as in their “best interests”. A “scientific” understanding of Aboriginal people could be applied to policies and programs that facilitated their assimilation into mainstream society. Indian and Northern Affairs continues its interest in research but has tried to take more collaborative approaches as in the research by White, Maxim and Beavon (2003, 2004).

Indians had been reduced by the state to objects of paternalistic administration, and now social science was reducing them to objects of study – specifically, to subjects participating in the development of knowledge for their own good (Shewell, 2004, p. 215).

This objectifying and dehumanizing process dismisses Aboriginal rights to culture, language, social integrity, spirituality and land. Such a process has been, and still is, used to perpetuate oppression and colonialism.

After decades of social research, community members tire of another researcher, whether government, academic or private consultant, entering their community seeking participants for their studies. With tape recorders, consent forms and related paraphernalia, they circle the community trying to develop a “convenience sample of key informants”. I have often heard the communities’ frustration and anger: “We are researched to death; we know the problems and we know what to do; we need resources”.

It would be simple to cease all research in First Nations and Aboriginal communities and some would advocate this approach. However, Eber Hampton (1986) pointed out that, “It may not be a shortage of research that hampers but a shortage of research that is useful from an Indian point of view” (21). In spite of the mountains of studies, there is still a lack of research that presents the Aboriginal perspective (Gilchrist, 1997; Smith, 1999).

Hidden Pitfalls and Cultural Pressures

Efforts to complete collaborative research or supervise Aboriginal graduate students are fraught with pitfalls and cultural pressures that are not obvious to either partner. In the following section, ten of these concerns are described and analyzed in the context of social research in Aboriginal communities. They include conflicting world views, competing sources of knowledge, the need to focus research topics, tensions between deductive and inductive reasoning, the role of the research “expert”, the need to dig deeper through questioning and probing, the academic culture of critiquing, the chore of writing, the role and culture of the graduate defence, and the responsibility to disseminate research findings.

Conflicting Worldviews

It is often reported that Aboriginal people have a differing “worldview” than western/Euro society. I must confess that it took me a long time to appreciate this difference and I am still trying to

understand it more fully. I am not qualified to present the perspectives of an Aboriginal worldview but I might offer some of the insights adapted from Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) in her book, *Circle Works, Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*.³ Prior to colonization, she argues Aboriginal people held a consciousness that was incorporated into daily life (Graveline, 1998, p. 51). She describes four constructs or “Truths” that shaped all persons, their relationships, their being, and their very essence.

The first of these constructs is “Immanence: Respect for all Life Forms” including “a belief in, knowledge of and respect for unseen powers” (Graveline, 1998, p. 52). In a planning meeting for a research project, I was told by a proud First Nations woman that “this paper has power; this paper has life. It was once a tree and now it holds the power of words”. All of Earth’s creatures hold mysterious powers including animals, birds, fish, plants, trees, rocks and soil. Malcolm Saulis tells us that the essence of the spiritual is present and shared among Aboriginal people. It exists in all aspects of life and is integral among the people. The spiritual essence needs to be acknowledged and expressed (Saulis, 1994 in Graveline, 1998).

The second construct uses Mother Earth as a metaphor to find balance in life. Balance is found in the four elements: air, light, water and earth. Balance is also found in how the natural world of the living and innate beings exist together. In order to enjoy healthy living, balance between the conflicts and pressures must be found. “The Traditional way embraces the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of the individual, the family, the community and Mother Earth as a whole” (Graveline, 1998, p. 54).

The next construct is “Interconnectedness: Our Spiritual Truth”, which means that all things are connected. The longer I live, the more I appreciate this “Truth”. Among healthy and whole people, there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community and the community and nature. Because all is connected, “acting in the best interest of others, and in the interests of the world, in general, becomes consistent with self-interest” (Graveline, 1998, p. 56). There should not be a concern with power and control but balance and harmony.

The final “Truth” is defining “Self in Relation: Our Identity Statement”. “The knowledge that each person is responsible for his or her actions in relation to the larger community is a shared fundamental belief. Self relates to the family that, in turn, relates to the community that, in turn, relates to the agency and that, in turn, relates to the world. The self is defined not as a separate individual but as connected to an ever-expanding circle.

These Traditional “Truths” influence and shape the Aboriginal researcher and/or student. They influence how they view their research and what and how they approach social research in subtle but profound ways.

The Sources of Knowledge

Knowledge – what one knows – has sources and these sources influence the value one places on the knowledge. Most research textbooks offer four sources of knowledge: traditional, experimental, common sense and scientific (Monette, Sullivan and DeJong, 1998). However, a fifth source of knowledge is spiritual knowledge. Each source has its own strengths and limitations, and offers some

³ Forgive me, Jean, for messing up your eloquent work and I don’t mean to trivialize it.

insights and pitfalls for research with Aboriginal communities. A brief discussion of each is necessary to appreciate its application to the social context – individuals, families, relationships, and so on.

Traditional knowledge is connected to culture and is rooted in custom, habit and history. It includes the “old wisdom” and “truths” of Elders that are passed from generation to generation. Only those individuals who have lived life and hold the respect and honour in their communities are qualified to pass on old knowledge and skills. Traditional knowledge influences ideas about family and behaviour such as child rearing. It has the potential to address serious problems such as child discipline. In traditional Judaic/Christian culture, it is believed that physical discipline is necessary for positive child rearing and may lead to overuse or inappropriate corporal punishment generating more harm. Attitudes and beliefs towards gays and lesbians are traditionally based and can be discriminatory, hurtful and oppressive.

Experimental knowledge is gained through first-hand experience and teaching a young child that the fire is “hot” by allowing it to touch a hot cup without burning itself is an important life lesson. Some of us insist on learning by experience and, reluctantly, admit that we have placed our tongue to frozen metal! However, experimental knowledge has its pitfalls as well. Stereotyping of cultural groups is often based on limited experience. The police officer whose experience is limited to only Aboriginal offenders and has never met an Aboriginal doctor, nurse, social worker, entrepreneur, or engineer will have a limited view of Aboriginal peoples.

“Common sense” is another source of knowledge. Some people have a “sense” of what is right and wrong; they just seem to “know” what to do and make decisions on practical wisdom. They may not have a specialized training or knowledge but are logical and “sage”. Again, these assumptions may be true or false. For example, it seems logical that Aboriginal leaders apply the values of Aboriginal culture in their leadership. This may or may not be true or only true to a degree.

The fourth source of knowledge is “science” which has become a religion for much of western/Euro society. Scientific knowledge is based upon empirical, observable and measurable data of both a quantitative and qualitative nature (Babbie, 2001; Monette et al., 1998). The data/information is collected in a systematic and planned manner such that other researchers can replicate the research. Social research seeks causes and relationships to explain phenomena and enhance our understanding. Its results are tentative and provisional and are meant to be critiqued, challenged and questioned. They are meant to be scrutinized and open to debate. Through this process of challenge, biases should be recognized and acknowledged in an effort to be “objective”. However, in recent years, the subjective perspective has been valued and there has been an increase in qualitative social research. The application of the techniques of scientific enquiry to the study of society is first credited to Auguste Comte of the 19th century. This new “sociology”, the science of society, uses empirical scientific knowledge in explaining society so that out of the chaotic depths of the bloody French Revolution, a new and improved “positive” society could be created. “Positivism” has come to mean the application of objective scientific techniques to produce empirical data. It is this category of knowledge that has created the most distress for Aboriginal people, yet paradoxically, it offers the most help.

The final source of knowledge, and, one seldom listed in the annuals of academia, is spiritual knowledge. It includes the knowledge gained from the Creator and may appear in dreams, visions or meditation. Of course, this knowledge is open to interpretation and is not replicable. It is deeply

emotional and generally not valued by western/Euro culture. It can be considered sacred and often is not to be written.

Many First Nation persons feel that the Medicine Wheel is sacred knowledge and are offended when it is duplicated on paper. Some Aboriginal researchers who have described the Medicine Wheel in publications or documents have been criticized for taking sacred knowledge and exposing it in this manner. There is one researcher who has developed a complex theoretical framework using the Medicine Wheel to understand research. The model explains research as a cyclic process and avoids the linear thinking. In a workshop, I once used some basic concepts from this circle, and explained that the research circle and the animal metaphors were not meant to be taken as a “Medicine Wheel” but a cyclic process. One Elder objected that this application of sacred concepts and statements such as “seeing the big picture like an Eagle” were offensive. There is also the valid criticism of “appropriation” of voice, concepts and meanings by non-Aboriginal researchers and educators. However, using research concepts and language that are culturally inappropriate or meaningless hinders communication. Discussing these sacred concepts and ideas can be done but there must be reverence and respect (Feehan and Hannis, 1993).

Focus/Focus/Focus

When Aboriginal researchers construct their questions, they tend to take a broad and holistic approach. This is correct as all of the world is connected, but finding these connections takes a lifetime of wisdom. Some years ago, a First Nations woman wanted to study “addictions” among her people as part of her masters degree. She wanted to study addictions among the teens, adults, and seniors including Elders. She wanted to include women and men. She wanted to study addictions related to coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, gambling and whatever else she could. She wanted a qualitative study that accurately reflected her culture. She also wanted to capture the perspective in all regions of Saskatchewan and the different First Nations groups. She wanted to get the opinions of both on and off reserve Indians. She understood a holistic and comprehensive perspective and wanted to include residential school experiences, child and adult sexual abuse and impact of colonialism and oppression.

She was right; all is connected and there is nothing wrong with her concepts or her orientation; in fact, she is only reflecting her worldview. However, the practicalities of such a study are enormous and an unreasonable expectation for a graduate thesis at the masters level. It would not be realistic in a qualitative study that interviewed 10 or 12 participants to capture the entire “big picture”. After all, it is helpful to remind ourselves that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples easily slid through five years and 58 million dollars (Costellano, 1999, p. 92).

Deductive versus Inductive Reasoning

At the First Nations University of Canada, counselling services include wisdom and support from Elders, both men and women. A student there was seeking some guidance and made an appointment with an Elder. The student told me the outcome of the visit,

I took some tobacco, out of respect, and told him my problems and concerns. He then started to tell stories. I just listened and asked no questions. After several stories were completed, I was more confused than ever and left his office. Usually, the points he makes become obvious later, but not always.

Theoretical and conceptual thinking is considered an essential component of graduate studies. Many graduate classes include a solid exploration of the theoretical frameworks and their historical development, tracing the theory back to its original thinkers and making connections with other related theorists. A theory is a set of interrelated statements, assumptions or propositions that explains some phenomenon (Homans, 1964). It is a deductive process that moves from the general and abstract propositions to a specific statement that can be tested (Babbie, 2001; Monette et al., 1998). Theories offer an explanation of “why” something occurs. The understanding of “why” provides solutions and guidelines to ameliorate negative phenomena and enhance positive phenomena. The application of differing theories offers broader perspectives and deeper understandings of phenomenon. For example, examining poverty from different theoretical perspectives provides a more holistic appreciation of the problem.

Theories can shape the research in desirable and undesirable ways. They can open new ways of examining issues and problems but they can also perpetuate assumptions and beliefs that are oppressive and discriminatory. By their very nature, theories drive the research to determine which questions, problems or issues are researched and how they are researched. Hence, they define the phenomenon in ways that may be detrimental to Aboriginal and First Nations people.

“Deductive reasoning involves deducing or inferring a conclusion from some premises or propositions” (Monette et al., 1998, p. 34). The propositions are derived from the theory and if they are correct, the expected phenomenon will be present. This process of deductive reasoning is central to western/Euro scientific research.

Inductive reasoning involves moving in the opposite direction. It infers a phenomenon for a group based upon the knowledge or experiences of one or a few members of the group. Inductive thinking moves from the observed and experienced to the explanation or theory. In some situations, no theory exists that could shape propositions or hypotheses. Descriptive or exploratory research allows the observations and then the development of explanations, a.k.a. *theories*.

It is worth noting that both approaches are important in the building of knowledge: deductive reasoning that tests hypotheses and propositions, and inductive reasoning that assesses theories in the light of observations.

Qualitative research methods have been shown to be more culturally sensitive and allow for the inclusion of a broader perspective. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first presented the processes of grounded theory and, since then, it has undergone considerable development and “maturity”. It allows the researcher to engage in a fresh examination of phenomena without being hindered or burdened by preconceived notions or assumptions. The purpose is the discovery of new concepts, relationships between concepts and processes (Gilgun, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This fresh approach to a phenomenon permits inductive thinking.

In an effort to free oneself from the western/Euro ideology of social science, many Aboriginal researchers and students prefer this inductive and unencumbered approach. Gilchrist (1997) argues for the superiority of qualitative research that is participatory and inclusive. Involving the community at all levels of the research process can be empowering. There is nothing wrong with this approach to new phenomena; however, there is valuable information already available that can be built upon.

Knowledge needs to expand and grow and researching topics as if nothing else has been done is “re-inventing” existing knowledge.

The question of “so what?” needs to be asked. How the research findings relate to existing information needs to be addressed in any useful research. It must be remembered that even in inductive qualitative research, systematic and careful methods must be applied. Issues of validity and reliability are the same and the quality of the research is severely compromised if careful social research methods are not employed.

The student’s counselling session with the Elder, for instance, was an experience in both inductive reasoning and the narrative lesson. It was inductive because the student was meant to derive the wisdom from the stories. He is to “figure it out himself” and not be directly told how to respond or address his issues. The inductive is culturally connected to their culture, the ways of reasoning and thinking. The narrative is a well-recognized research method in qualitative research and it too is culturally connected to Aboriginal approaches. The pitfall is that the point is not always obvious; the lesson may not be learned.

Expert role

The literature is clear that Aboriginal people have different styles of leadership and decision making from mainstream society. For example, Aboriginal culture discourages hierarchy and positions of power, following leaders is often voluntary, and personal correction or criticism is “forbidden”. For the most part, traditional Aboriginal culture is egalitarian and promoting oneself as having special knowledge or skills is seen as rude and offensive. Humour is often used to “keep people in their place.”

This expert role can be problematic for graduate students. Through their years of university study, they have amassed considerable knowledge about issues and concerns of their communities. They possess new analytical skills and understandings of the communities’ issues. However, in their home communities, years of socialization have taught them to be silent and not put forth their knowledge, especially if they are young adults. There are two things happening. First, the members of the community want to be reassured that this educated social researcher is still “Bill’s daughter”. They want to know that this person who left the community to study, for four or five years, still identifies with them and has not become “high and mighty”. Second, the student needs to avoid “showing off” and often acts “shy”. As a result, the student’s potential contribution is voluntarily withheld. This situation may create great problems for a graduate researcher who is involved in his/her graduate thesis; there is a reluctance to promote one’s research knowledge in front of family and friends.

Questioning and Probing: Dig Deeper

Truth is truth. When someone speaks, they are speaking the truth. When an Elder speaks, it is the absolute truth and is not to be questioned or challenged. Probing questions are considered impolite and rude. Interrupting for clarification or elaboration is also rude. Here again, the social researcher or graduate student is caught in a cultural dilemma. The answer may not be evident or the elder/speaker may not have answered a question. It could be a cultural response that the student is expected to figure out or understand, or it could be a face-saving exercise to avoid the “I don’t know” response.

In one experience, a student was trying to research the effectiveness of alternative programs for Aboriginal youth offenders. Showing great respect, the student sought the opinions of her Elders. The Elder responded that there were no programs. She wrote down his response and he talked about related topics. The student was well aware of the youth programs sponsored by the local Native Friendship Centre, the John Howard Society, the Salvation Army, and the provincial government's youth services. There were, at least, four active programs which she wished to discuss. The student did not know if 1. the Elder did not know of any programs; 2. he knew of the programs but did not think they are effective; 3. he did not know of any programs run by Aboriginal people; therefore, they were not worthy of comment; or 4. he just did not care to answer the question. Some follow up or probing questions could have resolved this gap in information but the student was too immobilized to act. She was left with uninformative data.

Critique and Feedback: Cut and Slash

Mainstream research prides itself on its critical and challenging orientation, in contrast to the open and accepting orientation of most Aboriginal people. From most Aboriginal perspectives, the idea of openly critiquing someone's ideas can be viewed as disrespectful, especially if the person is older than the one critiquing. As a faculty member supervising Aboriginal graduate students, giving feedback on written work is a delicate task and requires face-saving techniques to avoid personal shame. It is quite normal to have a detailed review and critique of the student's first thesis draft. Usually, there are numerous corrections and explanations required before the thesis moves on to defence. This process can be very difficult for the student who is not accustomed to such blunt comments.

The same can also be said of the peer review process to which Aboriginal academics must submit themselves. In the scholarly book, *"Seen but not heard : aboriginal women and women of colour in the academy"*, the editors, Rashmi Luther, Elizabeth Whitmore and Bernice Moreau (2003), clearly document the discrimination against Aboriginal women and women of colour in the academic environment. In her book, renowned scholar Patricia Monture-Angus "describes her struggles with the process in securing tenure as an Aboriginal woman. It was the omissions – what she was not told – as much as what was done to her that made the university a chilly, inequitable institution to her". In Joanne St. Lewis's chapter, she demonstrates the ways in which systemic racism permeates "in the way we do our scholarship, our teaching [and] our interaction. She calls for "a new beginning". The academic community needs to re-examine some of its basic assumptions and create a more inclusive and supportive culture.

Writing Damn Writing

For the most part, Aboriginal culture is an oral culture. Education, stories, wisdom and other knowledge are passed from one generation to the next through oral communication. None of the Aboriginal cultures of the Americas developed written communication, simply because it was not necessary. The skill of writing can be problematic for Aboriginal researchers and graduate students. Sometimes, their primary and secondary education has not developed their skills, and they are at a disadvantage when entering graduate work. Aboriginal students are not alone in this regard, however, as often other students have similar problems. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon the reader's perspective, computer spellcheckers and grammatical highlighters have improved some of the basic errors.

Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p.35) devotes a section called “Is Writing Important for Indigenous Peoples?”, in her book to the problems with academic writing. She describes the dangers of academic writing and the ways it builds upon and perpetuates a particular mode of thought and discourse. She points out that most academic writing excludes many members of society, including Aboriginal peoples, by the nature of its discourse. In reading academic literature, she says, “Much of what I read has said that we do not exist, that if we do exist it is in terms which I cannot recognize, that we are no good and that what we think is not valid” (Smith, 1999, p. 35). Academic writing frequently creates and re-enforces a “them and us” mentality. I would argue that much academic writing describes and analyzes people from the outside; whether it is Aboriginal peoples, minority persons, or persons with disabilities. My Aboriginal friend is a quadriplegic and she tells me that people talk over her to her able-bodied daughter as if she does not exist. “Hey, I am here, I have ears and can hear; I can talk for myself!” As an Aboriginal woman with a disability, living off of reserve, she is well aware of how discourse excludes (Durst and Bluehardt, 2001).

For many Aboriginal researchers and students, a common weakness is a lack of specificity in their writing. Actually, this is a common problem among all students. However, there is vagueness and imprecision in written language that is not acceptable in advanced research. For example, if asked what are some of the barriers to post-secondary education for Aboriginal men, one might answer, “Racism”. The reply is correct but, in its vagueness, it is rather unhelpful. Some of this hesitancy to elaborate or be specific is related to a reluctance to state things in a definitive and clear manner. There is a “hedging” in order not to be trapped into one argument or another. If one can avoid a precise statement, one maintains other options or arguments, but at the potential cost of not reporting information that is helpful or informative.

The Graduate “Defence” of Thesis

Historically, the academic defence is an adversarial process – a “trial by fire” kind of mentality. It is intimidating and unnecessarily humiliating for some. It also contradicts many essential cultural values of Aboriginal people. The disrespect, the hierarchy, and the formality are not congruent with traditional values and norms.

In one graduate defence, both the student and the external review were First Nations men of about the same age. During the defence, it was obvious that the reviewer found it difficult to ask about or explore weaknesses in the student’s research. His comments were all positive and he offered no constructive feedback. In the committee meeting, others probed the reviewer and he was well aware of the weaknesses of the study but could offer no reason why he did not raise them in the discussion. He promised to “try better next time.”

Many Aboriginal students submit themselves to the process only because they are told, again and again, that it is a valued and necessary step in their graduate education, in spite of the fact that it violates their tradition. The defence process can be a celebration of the student’s knowledge and work. Still, there is room to create a process for critical evaluation and discussion that retains the respect and dignity of all participants.

Dissemination and Ownership: Mine, Mine, Mine

Once the research project has been completed, dissemination is the next logical scholarly expectation, and it involves public presentation of the research in verbal and written formats. This public

exposure represents promoting your work and ideas with a hint of superiority that is offensive to communitarian cultures. For all researchers, dissemination requires discipline and focus to produce papers, reports and documents that have the potential of enlightening others. It also has the potential of influencing policy and programs. It is important to disseminate findings and draw linkages to policy and programs in the research. However, it is hard work, and often the presentation of ideas is not very rewarding.

The issue of dissemination leads to questions of ownership. Gilchrist (1997) argues for a qualitative participatory approach as being the most culturally sensitive, as it permits community ownership. She advocates for community control of the entire research process and the ownership and control of all research products and dissemination including copyright (Gilchrist, 1997, p.77-8). Although ideal in many circumstances, this control can be problematic in others.

After reading about participatory research by such authors as Alary (1990), Kirby & McKenna (1989), Maguire (1987) and Reinharz (1992), graduate students have arrived at my office door enthused about completing a thesis using participatory “action” research. “Not possible”, I say. It is true that the student can complete his research using the principles of participatory research but giving up ownership and control is self-defeating. First, the student may become committed to a research project that is not his/her interest. It may not be “do-able” in a reasonable timeframe and it may not be applying sound research methods. Finally, I add, “What will you do if the community tells you that you cannot print the findings?” For the student, giving up control could mean not graduating.

Working in collaboration with a First Nation agency, I applied for a grant from the federal government. We stipulated in the application that the final control of the data would rest with the Band Council. The application was approved, and we received about 100 thousand dollars. I had hoped to administer the grant through the research department of Memorial University of Newfoundland. As the paperwork was being completed, the senior research officer of the university noted this “little” detail of final control of dissemination. He argued that this situation was untenable for an academic and the university refused to participate in the study unless I removed this condition. In the end, I found the Band Administration more than capable of administering the grant.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Collaborative research can be done and it can work (Harrison, 2001). However, there are a number of lessons for collaborative research projects that are helpful for the outsider or non-Aboriginal researcher. The following recommendations have been adapted from Wolcott (1995): gaining entry and maintaining support; reciprocity; a tolerance for ambiguity; and, personal commitment.

First, whether it is working with an Aboriginal student or community, it is important to gain “entry” and maintain support. In community research, the outside researcher and the study need to hold “legitimacy” within the community. There must be some connection to the broader community and people will be distrustful if this connection is not evident to them. For example, I have been involved in a national research project that is attempting to determine leadership and governance styles in Aboriginal Friendship Centres. Because the study is a collaborative effort with the National Association of Friendship Centres in Ottawa, volunteers and staff of Friendship Centres have

willingly and enthusiastically participated in different components of the study. It is the recognition of the national body that legitimizes the researcher's entry into their domain.

It is also important to prepare for the community and determine if there are any protocols that would demonstrate respect and understanding. Do not hesitate to ask. Ask your community contacts and they will be more than willingly share some insights on this matter. When working in First Nations' communities, for instance, it is always wise to have some tobacco ready to offer as a token gift.

Depending on the situation, maintaining rapport can be difficult. For example, if the study seems intrusive with a bold researcher who is pestering for information, goodwill can deteriorate. Be prepared to follow up with a quick note, phone call or email. Take time to "have tea" and visit. Do not allow all of your time for "business" – socialize a bit. This custom leads into the next tip, reciprocity.

The principles of social and economic reciprocity are fundamental to most Aboriginal communities. The sharing culture embraces the community in a way that individuals just do things for one another with no expectation of "repayment". When they get to know you, people are generous, often offering food. Accept their offer and be generous in return. When travelling to isolated communities, take fruit with you and give it to the children. When they visit you, take them to lunch or offer small gifts. In a recent study, the interviewer gave 10 dollar coupons for Tim Horton's to the participants as a small token of her appreciation and an acknowledgement of the participant's expertise. These small gifts were well-received.

Sometimes reciprocity requires tact and diplomacy, however. In one community where I was researching, I had several requests to bring liquor. I simply said that I do not carry liquor – for anyone. The answer was accepted.

It is generally unhelpful to boast or exaggerate to the community members how this research is going to affect and improve their lives. For example, it is inappropriate to suggest that a modest thesis on housing is going to influence federal policies and generate financial resources for the building of new homes. They have heard all of this before and it will only create suspicion.

The researcher needs to exhibit a tolerance for ambiguity. Things never work out as you had planned – people that you had hoped to see are not available, schedules change, resources are unavailable and so on. The researcher needs to be adaptable, flexible and resourceful (Harrison, 2001, p.57). Unfortunately, some funding agencies have difficulty with flexibility and even though they insist on collaboration as a condition of the grant, they show little patience for any of the things that must be done to achieve collaboration. There are limits and this is when diplomacy can assist in finding new approaches or establishing limits.

Finally, the researcher needs a personal commitment to making the collaborative effort successful. There must be a demonstrated sincerity to collaborate in a meaningful manner that shares authority, responsibility and credit. This sincerity cannot be faked and frauds are quickly exposed and met with a passive aggressiveness or just simply ignored. Related to commitment is a recognition and an openness to the ethical issues pertaining to the researcher's actions and the study as a whole. Normally, there are subtle but profound ethical implications.

In social work, the profession refers to “cultural competence” and non-oppressive practice. These principles of cultural sensitivity and non-oppressive actions need to be present in the researcher’s consciousness. Constant self-examination and honest critique will ensure the best collaboration possible. In this paper, these ideas are simply listed and seem quite prescriptive. They are interrelated and complicated. Unfortunately, the personal traits and characteristics of some competent researchers prevent them from achieving successful collaboration in a cross-cultural setting. They just should NOT attempt it.

Concluding Comments

There are some concluding comments that I would like to leave with the reader. First, there is a real need for quality research and the development of quality researchers. There is a need for research to inform policy at the local, provincial and federal levels. Solutions will be found in partnerships and through collaborative efforts, not in unilateral actions from various stakeholders. The capacity building of community and applied social research needs to continue. There is a severe shortage of individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills. In the Aboriginal and First Nations communities, skilled individuals are quickly thrust into leadership roles with its messy politics or service with its tight funding. Ironically, it seems that the best trapper or jingle dancer is also the best Chief or Executive Director who is also the best financial administrator and so on. The leaders are multi-skilled, badly needed and soon overworked, leading to burn-out. The priority of research is often lost in the day-to-day and immediate concerns of the community. Unfortunately and frequently, research comes last on the community’s agenda.

For whatever reason, many of the Aboriginal researchers are frequently women, such as Costellano, Gilchrist, Graveline, Green, Harrison, Monture-Angus, Smith, and the non-Aboriginal researchers are men, such as Hylton, Shewell, and White, Maxim and Deavon. This discussion of why this is so is for another paper, but suffice to say that women are the communities’ strength and offer leadership that promises real change. I have come to deeply admire and respect them.

This paper raises a number of serious issues. It is important to recognize and respond to the hidden pitfalls and cultural pressures with openness and honesty. Social researchers need not abandon what they believe to be good research practices to accommodate the cultural values and ethics of traditional Aboriginal peoples but need to practice in a culturally sensitive manner. Aboriginal researchers need not abandon their culture and perspective to participate fully in practical and policy-applied research. There is room for holistic research with a critical eye. It is important to not keep “raising the bar” but to be clear and consistent in expectations and standards. It takes care and effort but true collaborative partnerships are possible and well worth the effort.

kinanâskomitin (Cree: "I am grateful to you")

Douglas Durst
November 18.04

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Dr. Douglas Durst teaches in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina and has been researching the issues pertaining to Aboriginal persons and immigrants and refugees for most of his professional career. He applies both participatory and qualitative research methods with some quantitative methods in attempting to capture a holistic understanding of the social integration and participation of marginalized groups such as immigrants, persons with disabilities and Aboriginal people. Dr. Durst has a Ph.D. in Social Work from the University of Toronto and a M.S.W. from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. He has practiced social work and conducted social research in the Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

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