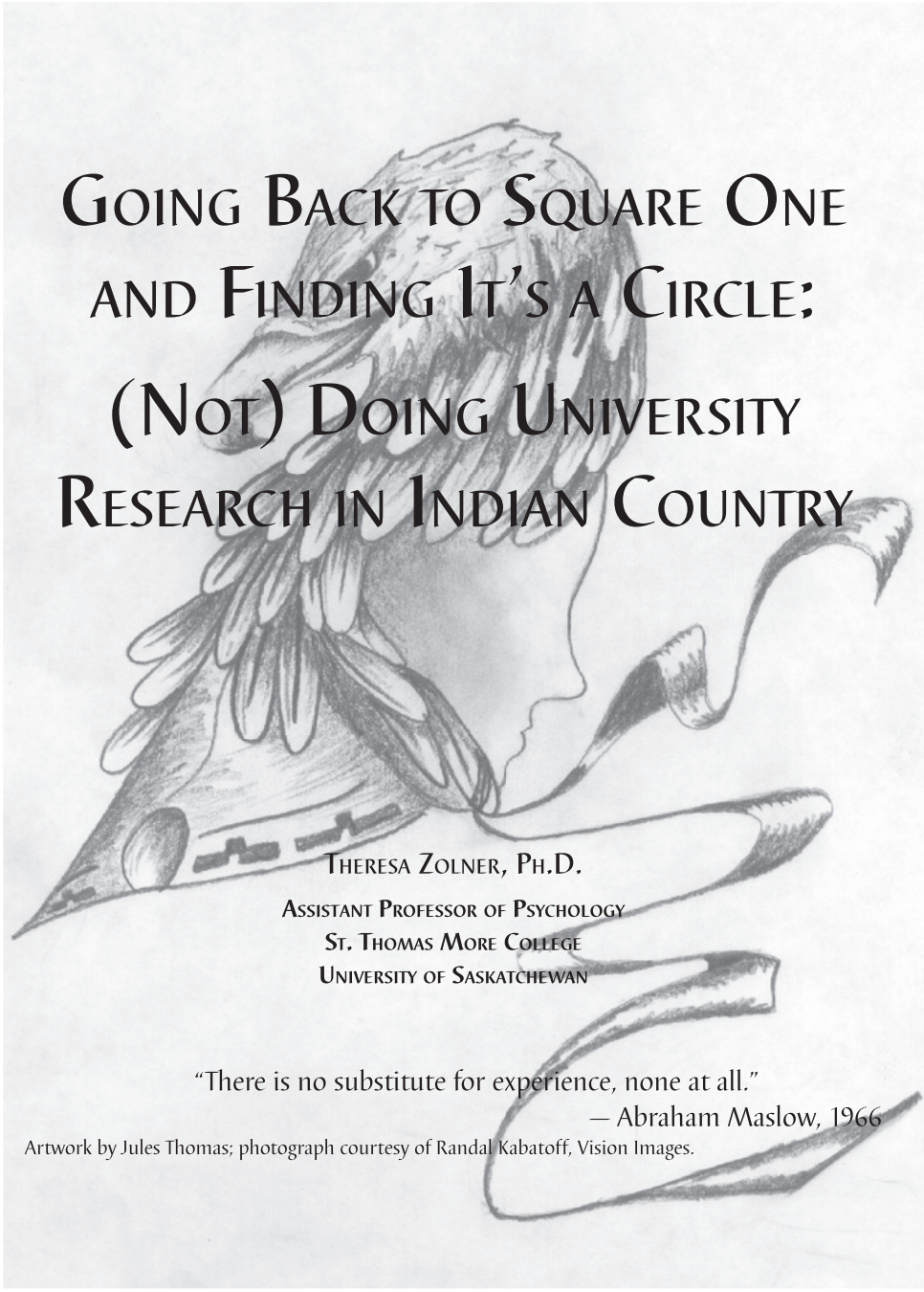
Globethics Repository



Going Back to Square one and Finding it's a Circle

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Zolner, Theresa
Publisher	Native Counselling Services of Alberta and the ACADRE Network
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-14 21:17:34
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/171923



Going Back to Square One and Finding It's a Circle: (Not) Doing University Research in Indian Country

Theresa Zolner, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Psychology
St. Thomas More College
University of Saskatchewan

"There is no substitute for experience, none at all."
— Abraham Maslow, 1966

Artwork by Jules Thomas; photograph courtesy of Randal Kabatoff, Vision Images.

University-based researchers know that, in order to fund and carry out a good program of research, a number of administrative steps have to be taken to obtain project approval. Graduate students also have to go through these, and other, administrative steps in order to complete their work at the masters and doctoral levels. University projects and funding require documentation of procedures as well as compliance with a variety of standards or expectations that have been established by precedent and policy development. However, in terms of intercultural research, what a university asks for does not always work in the field. To illustrate this point, this paper reviews my experience of engaging in intercultural research with some First Nations individuals as part of a doctoral degree in clinical psychology at a Canadian university. The paper includes a critical analysis of ethics application procedures, securing of funds, and attempting to meet academic criteria while retaining the integrity of a community-based research project. Maintaining that integrity requires trust, courage, sacrifice, openness on both sides, and, above all, a sense of commitment to the community of people involved in the project ahead of personal or academic goals and expectations.

The Initial Idea for a Project

During 1992-93, I was working as an entry-level government psychologist in a young offender program at a Canadian mental health clinic. During this time, I noticed that a high percentage of the clinic's clientele were youth of First Nations heritage. I noticed the same phenomenon when conducting masters' level research on young offenders that same year — the sample I obtained from provincial correctional facilities was overwhelmingly First Nations. Following natural curiosity, I decided that my doctoral research would focus on the experience of First Nations' peoples in the mental health system, specifically on how the mental health system could better meet the needs of First Nations women. Once I had developed the proposed focus for this research, I applied for a doctoral fellowship from a national granting agency, which I received, and then commenced the research.

In the early stages of the research project, I had been reading a considerable amount of literature on participatory action research and community-based research projects. Given my perception, at the time, that First Nations people were a "vulnerable population," I decided that I would engage in participatory research in order that the interests and needs of the community participating in the project would be addressed. The problem with deciding to "do" participatory research is that the research requires people with whom to participate. I spoke with many different people — First Nations and

non-First Nations — about the best way to go about this type of research. However, I could not find anyone to participate in my proposed project with me. I began to feel discouraged and wondered if the project would work after all, failing to see at the time that research can only be participatory if it originates within the community itself.

The feedback that I received from the people I consulted about the project idea was mixed. Some were very enthusiastic and supportive, but none offered any practical advice or contacts from the First Nations community whom I could meet. One asked me to think about whether I was "the right person" to be doing this kind of research. Others were polite but offered very little help. One advised me to talk to her therapist, whom she felt was very good in working with First Nations people. I spent approximately two years meeting a lot of people and doing a lot of reading about First Nations. However, I still did not have a "community partner."

In the summer of 1996, some scholars at the University of Saskatchewan hosted a conference on "Oppressed Indigenous People," which I decided to attend. It really felt like a last effort to meet people who might be interested in the issues that were of interest to me. At that conference, I met Collin Rope, a First Nations man who was working on research and other projects with a branch of the Indian government in Saskatchewan, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN). I had heard him speak at the conference, and he had heard me speak. We talked, and I told him about what I was interested in doing. After obtaining the relevant permissions from within his own working group, he asked me to give him a copy of my proposal and eventually invited me to discuss research possibilities with him and Sandra Atimoyoo, the Director of the Indian Child and Family Services (ICFS) sector of the Health and Social Development Commission (HSDC) for the FSIN.

This invitation felt like the big break I had been waiting for. It *was* the big break I had been waiting for, but not in the sense that I had anticipated. I was under the impression that they wanted to meet because they were impressed with my research proposal and credentials for carrying out a research project. At that point in my career, I had obtained a number of academic degrees and had acquired some intercultural experience both within Western Canada and the Eastern United States. However, when we met, they made it clear that my proposal and schooling were not what had interested them. Instead, the way that I spoke and the things that I had said were what caught their interest. As we negotiated how a working arrangement might be established, we were observing each other to determine whether something fundamental and necessary could be established between us: trust.

As I sat in their offices, I represented myself and, to a certain extent, the university at which I was enrolled. I was accountable to my supervisor, my doctoral committee, and the behavioural science ethics approval committee. What I did not see, at first, was that they also were accountable, not just to their particular program or budget, but to their governmental organization, chiefs, band councils, and, ultimately, all First Nations people and nations within their organization's jurisdiction. My success in the doctoral program depended upon the project working, although, if it failed, other projects might be proposed. Their jobs and reputations within Indian country were at stake: If they were willing to trust a non-First Nations professional, then they would have to be accountable for what I learned on the project and how I then used that information. I had a heavy burden of accountability, but theirs was heavier because they were risking collaboration with a person who represented the very system and culture that had been oppressing First Nations for generations.

I had wanted to study mental health service delivery to First Nations women, but Collin and Sandra suggested that I become involved in their research on the impact of psychological assessment on First Nations peoples. The topic was still within the area of mental health service delivery, and I agreed that this was a good way to narrow it down.

Doing Participatory Research?

I had some familiarity with the psychological and other literature in the area of participatory research prior to working with any First Nations people. Once we started working together I realized that I did not need to "demonstrate to the community" the value of participatory research or of addressing pressing social concerns. The project was expected to proceed with mutual cooperation, not with me "running the show," and with a focus on a pressing concern — psychological assessment.

Gibbs, Huang, and Associates (1989) stated that, when working with First Nations peoples in Canada, the issue that is most important, the issue that becomes a central metaphor for building research relationships, is trust. Based on my own experience with this project, I would concur that, without trust, nobody has anything. This research project was definitely participatory in the sense that the research team worked cooperatively to set the agenda for the research, including the topic of study and the process for studying it. I collaborated consistently with Collin and Sandra on how best to interpret information throughout the observational and interview aspects of the project, refining the process as we went along. However, the final writing of the

dissertation was my responsibility alone, and the experiences derived from the project that contributed towards that dissertation also essentially were my own.

From an academic perspective, validity for this type of process was discussed by Moustakas, who stated (1990: 32-33):

> Since heuristic inquiry utilizes qualitative methodology in arriving at themes and essences of experience, validity in heuristics is not a quantitative measurement that can be determined by correlations or statistics. The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? This judgment is made by the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic phases of incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis not only with himself or herself, but with each and every co-researcher. The primary investigator has collected and analyzed all of the material — reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences that comprehensively, distinctively, and accurately depict the experiences. . . . The heuristic researcher returns again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience to determine whether the qualities or constituents that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings. . . . In such a process . . . 'certain visions of the truth, having made their appearance, continue to gain strength both by further reflection and additional evidence. These are the claims which may be accepted as final by the investigator and for which he may assume responsibility by communicating them in print.' . . . What is presented as truth and what is removed as implausible or idiosyncratic ultimately can be accredited only on the grounds of personal knowledge and judgment.

Not all research can be reduced to numbers or statistics. There are ways of knowing, and knowledge, which can be attained only through reflecting on, sifting, and exploring information acquired from talking to others. The researcher who undertakes this kind of inquiry must understand that he or she is an integral part of the meaning to be found. By including self and the influence of others, it is possible to arrive at a deeper truth than mere numbers. It is for the researcher, then, to bring all of his or her experiences to bear in a careful, thoughtful, process of letting the data reveal its truth.



The validity of the interpretation of that process really lay with what Moustakas termed the 'primary investigator.' Despite my collaboration with Collin and Sandra, I became the "primary investigator" on the project because the project became self-reflexive and heuristic. In order to learn about how some First Nations people viewed psychological assessment I had to learn about myself in relation to the people I was trying to study. I learned about the relationship I had to First Nations peoples as a psychological clinician, a Canadian citizen, and the daughter of immigrants to Canada. I learned that, in interviewing people for a research project, the communication that occurs between you and the person is affected by your relationship to each other and by the knowledge that you have or do not have about your respective world views. As a consequence, the learning and any writings that I produced from this particular process of doing research were my own and represented only me, nobody else and definitely not "the First Nations community."

Attempting to understand the people with whom I was working brought me face-to-face with the necessity of understanding who I am as a researcher and a person. I recognized, while working with Collin, Sandra, and the people whom I interviewed, that I knew very little about First Nations peoples and cultures, despite my sense that I was culturally enlightened at the start of the project. Initially, I didn't really believe that their worldview was radically different from my own. I found out is that it is — radically — different. Therefore, the project that I set out to do, which was approved by my research supervisor and funded by SSHRCC, itself became radically different. Each change in focus had to be re-approved and revisited at every stage of the academic process I had engaged at the university.

In the early phases of our work together, Collin and Sandra requested that I attend a number and variety of meetings to become familiarized with the major issues in ICFS. Some of the meetings were with ICFS directors from bands all over the province. I also attended funding negotiation meetings between First Nations agencies and the Department of Indian Affairs. Some of the meetings were with other commissions within FSIN such as justice and health, and some of the meetings were at various tribal agencies and band offices. At each of these meetings, various issues were presented for discussion, and I had a first-hand opportunity to learn about the complexity and difficulty of the many issues that ICFS directors had to face. I also was able to observe the kind of difficult and burdened relationship that exists between First Nations organizations and the Department of Indian Affairs (Zolner 2000).

At the start of this research project, I knew Collin and Sandra wanted me to learn. I did not realize that much of the primary learning I had to do was

about myself. I had to learn how others would see me as a member of a mainstream academic and clinical discipline and as a member of the dominant sector in Canadian society. The First Nations people with whom I was working were inviting me to participate with them in a research project, and I was just as much a participant in their research as they were in mine. The First Nations people with whom I was working were teaching me that I had to be able to see the world from their perspective, to look back on my own world from their side. This was cultural psychology in the real world, not from a book and not derived by mainstream psychological theory.

I have to admit that this was a scary prospect because it meant letting go of the wire without a net. I quickly learned that I would instinctively rely on mainstream psychological assumptions and theories to explain First Nations knowledge and ideas that I did not immediately understand. I looked for validation of this type of research process in the mainstream psychological literature to see if any other psychologists were seeing that a step over to the other side could mean a clearer view of where I had been standing.

Mainstream Researchers like Mainstream Anchors

I found some readings in what was, at the time, a new area of psychology, called cultural psychology (e.g., Shweder 1993, 1990; Much 1995). Researchers and writers in this new area were most noted for their common interest in overcoming biases of parochialism and ethnocentrism in social science (Much 1995). Cultural psychology was touted as a "new agenda" for social science (Much 1995). According to Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt (1990: viii),

> The basic idea of a cultural psychology implies that an 'intrinsic psychic unity' of humankind should not be presupposed or assumed. It suggests that the processes decisive for psychological functioning (including those processes promoting within-group or within-family variation and the replication of diversity) may be local to the systems of representation and social organization in which they are embedded and upon which they depend.

These readings gave me something that would justify the process and existence of my research to my academic committee. In addition, they showed me that research in the area of cultural psychology should be culturally embedded, culturally "situated," rather than culturally comparative, universal, pan-cultural, or cross-cultural (Much 1995). Thinking back on my experience with First Nations, I wondered whether the researchers who wrote about

cultural psychology developed these ideas on their own or whether they had some experience with an indigenous, non-Western people that led them to see how a change in perspective can make a western researcher's perspective very different.

> Research in the area of Cultural Psychology should respect the indigenous knowledge and theories of each culture, understanding that part of the value of dialogue with indigenous theories of other cultures is the power they have to reveal the biases, and often the weaknesses, of one's own theoretical assumptions. . . . One reason for studying the indigenous theories of other cultures is to understand our own indigenous theories better and to put them in perspective within a transcultural psychology (Much 1995: 113).



The basis of cultural psychology is that people view their world, not in a fashion common to all humanity, but as they are taught in their families and communities, by local language and custom.

The advantage of cultural psychology is that an understanding and acceptance of another culture's understanding of the world provides a more acute and perceptive understanding of one's own culture.



Therefore, researchers in cultural psychology should examine their own biases and weaknesses, placing themselves on an equal footing with those whom they study. When performing a psychological assessment with a First Nations client, clinical psychologists must also be able to see and understand the culture of academic, clinical psychology to understand critical philosophical and cosmological differences between non-First Nations psychologists and First Nations persons. Psychologists also could benefit from being aware of their own personal identity and how it relates to the culture of academic psychology.

To understand self in the context of this particular project meant engaging in cultural self-exploration, that is, critical self-examination (Moustakas, 1990; Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, and Loya, 1997), recognizing that my cultural assumptions could have as much impact on the assessment and research process as professional training and clinical instruments. Collin and Sandra encouraged me to examine my assumptions, knowing that I would have difficulty acknowledging, understanding, and respecting a First Nations worldview if I did not also understand my own. This path to self-exploration, a nat-

ural, age-old, and necessary process to them, was exorcised from traditional psychological research long ago.

Nevertheless, there is some precedent in the current psychological literature for a self-exploratory research process. Some researchers in psychology have recommended and supported models or processes for performing self-exploration, including Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, and Loya (1997) and Moustakas (1990). The following words of Moustakas (1990, pp. 10-14) describe what a heuristic process is like:

> The heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing. . . . From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery; the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration. . . . Emphasis on the investigator's internal frame of reference, self-searching, intuition, and indwelling lies at the heart of heuristic inquiry. . . . Whatever the effect, the heuristic process requires a return to the self, a recognition of self-awareness, and a valuing of one's own experience. The heuristic process challenges me to rely on my own resources, and to gather within myself the full score of my observations, thoughts, feelings, senses, and institutions; to accept as authentic and valid whatever will open new channels for clarifying a topic, question, problem, or puzzlement. I begin the heuristic journey with something that has called to me from within my life experience, something to which I have associations and fleeting awarenesses but whose nature is largely unknown. . . . the mystery summons me and lures me 'to let go of the known and swim in an unknown current. . . . ' In heuristic research the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been actual autobiographical connections . . . in a vital, intense, and full way. . . . The heuristic research process is not one that can be hurried or timed by the clock or calendar. It demands the total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity of a researcher who not only strongly desires to know and understand but is willing to commit endless hours of sustained immersion and focused concentration on one central question, to risk the opening of wounds and passionate concerns, and to undergo the personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey.

A large component of this research process was to examine my own interactions and assumptions while working with and learning about First Nations people. I was engaged in a First Nations process for learning and doing research as guided by Collin and Sandra. At the same time, Moustakas' comments, based on his own experiences, helped me to justify my project to the university. My research was valid from an academic perspective because a social scientist had written about the process and published it, thereby making it autonomously authoritative to an academic audience.

I sought assistance with interpretation of the information from the rest of the research team, namely Sandra and Collin, who were and continue to be far better interpreters of First Nations knowledge than I. Ultimately, however, it was not the final product arising from this project that was as important for me as the process of the project itself. The dissertation represented my development to the moment it was defended. I have continued to develop in my understanding since that time. In the words of Collin Rope (Personal Communication, October 2, 1997), "In a First Nations Unity Ride from Central Saskatchewan to South-Central South Dakota in 1996, a young woman asked the spiritual advisor to the ride 'When will we get there?' The reply was 'The journey or the trail to our destination will be more important than arriving there.'" Different paths mean different outcomes, and as much may be learned along the way as at the final destination point. As co-researchers, we examined each step in the journey to determine whether the process was fine or whether something needed to change in order to obtain the best possible learning throughout the duration of the project.

The Reality of Systemic Barriers to Understanding

The fall of 1996 was spent meeting ICFS staff and presenting myself and my interests at an ICFS Directors meeting in Saskatoon. I spent a lot of time talking with Collin and Sandra, so that we could get to know each other and so that I could learn about some of the issues in ICFS. In addition, I spent part of that time working out terms of reference for the Vice-Chief for permission to work within Social Development. I also had to submit an ethics application to the university so that I could proceed with this type of work.

This initial period of work was very tentative and slow-moving. Collin and Sandra did not know me, nor I them, and a lot of effort was invested in trying to understand each other. Trust was a definite issue for all of us, and, at times, Collin and I argued. Tempers flared. At the time, I could not see any reason for them to not trust me. I did not know what type of damage it was possible for me to do or what it meant to bring a non-First Nation academic researcher onto their team. Looking back, I am surprised that they approached me at all, given the types of statements and events that I have witnessed between First Nation people and non-First Nation people over the past several years.

The ethics application for the university was another difficulty. This research was very different from hypothesis-directed, positivistic projects,

which the ethics application appeared to be directed towards. I was concerned that the language of the application would destroy the trust we were working to build. To satisfy the requirements of the university committee *and* FSIN, I submitted a very delicately worded ethics application, explaining at each step why the question being asked was or was not appropriate to my proposed project. It was a difficult balancing act.

I realized that the developers of the ethics application form assumed singular control by a researcher, or a student and that student's supervisor. This was apparent in the first question which required a listing of the researchers and their "departments," but not non-academic or community-based persons who might be involved:

> 1. Name of researcher(s) and department(s).
>   a. Name of student(s), if a student study, and type of study (e.g., B.A. Hon., M.A., Ph.D.)

For this question, I added the additional community names and redid the presentation of the information so that my supervisor was not listed as the "primary researcher" but as a co-collaborator in the project, along with the HSDC and myself.

Second, the form asked for the title of the study. For a study based on a preconceived hypotheses, this is a feasible question. Given that this project was exploratory in nature and process oriented, it was difficult to come up with a title that reflected the essence of the project at the beginning. I did not know what the main learning would be, so I left the title out.

The third question asked for the hypotheses of the study:

> 3. Abstract (100-250 words): provide a brief statement of the hypotheses (or a brief statement of the research questions) to be tested.

I had no hypotheses, only research questions. The wording of this question was also problematic because it implied, again, singular control over the research, adequate predictive ability, and a positivistic orientation towards "testing of hypotheses."

Questions five and six created similar problems:

> 5. Subjects: Report on procedures for recruiting, selecting and assigning subjects.
>
> 6. Methods/Procedures: Describe the procedures to obtain research data and attach copies of measures, instruments, questionnaires or interview schedules to be used.

We were planning for me to use data belonging to the larger assessment project on which the Social Development Sector of HSDC was working. In addition, other forms of "data gathering" would be done through archival data analysis, direct observation and ongoing interaction with members of the ICFS team. Nobody in this study was seen as a "subject." The word itself strongly connoted university researcher control over and scrutiny of all persons involved in the project. I was not going to be administering tests or measures, and was not planning to use structured interviews or questionnaires. Clearly the form was designed for projects generating quantitative data.

We were trying, in this work, to build strong working relationships. The ethics committee, through their application process, was asking me to delineate who and what I was going to be in control of and test. I was concerned that if my co-researchers read these questions, they would think that I was deceiving them about the type of relationship I wanted to form with them.

Question seven asked outright about risk and deception:

> 7. Risk or deception: Indicate if any aspects of the study involve risk to the subjects or deception of the subjects and what measures will be taken to minimize their impact.

There were inherent risks to First Nations in becoming involved in a university-based, academic study. I took no issue with identifying what they might be, particularly in line with what Collin and Sandra had described to me about past experiences and worries regarding non-First Nations researchers' use of data and findings on First Nations peoples. However, the concept of deception made everybody on the project nervous. I stated there would be no deception involved, but the question introduced awareness that psychologists sometimes do use deception.

There is an ongoing tension in this type of project between the internal requirements of the research and the external requirements imposed by bureaucracy; between what information should be kept within the community and what can be shared outside of it. These concerns are not limited to First Nations. Even in psychology, there is information that is kept internal to the group. For example, the specifics of psychometric test questions and procedures are rarely discussed in the open or published, except within professional psychological circles. There is always the worry on both sides, researcher and researched, that the information will be misinterpreted, misrepresented, or misused. There can be no hint of deception. This aspect of the ethics application form was discussed at length by the project team.

Question ten brought up the issue of debriefing:

> 10. Debriefing and feedback: Indicate how the subjects will be debriefed following their participation, and to offer information on the results of the research once the study has ended.

The term "debriefing" might seem like a positive and necessary part of doing research with people from a psychological point of view. From a non-psychological point of view, the term sounds like something that is done to people by governments or institutions after being through extreme trauma, such as war, disaster, or torture. When working with people who have experienced the oppression and trauma of residential schools, the academic term "debriefing" is not appropriate. As academics, we need to be aware of how our jargon affects people who do not ordinarily use it.

The fourth question asked for a disclosure regarding funding for the project.

> 4. Funding: Indicate the source of funds supporting the research. If externally funded, state whether the grant or contract is in application or has been awarded.

As a student-researcher, I was funded by SSHRCC. This agency did not influence how the project was to be done, nor did it oversee the research project. It funded me as the student-researcher, rather than the particular research project. They required only that the project topic be approved as part of their mandated funding jurisdiction and be necessary research. There is nothing wrong with disclosing funding and, in fact, it should be encouraged. I had no concerns about SSHRCC influencing this project, but it was yet another relationship that had to be explained so that Collin, Sandra and others did not think that I was working for a department of the federal government. Given the ICFS's experiences with the Department of Indian Affairs, there was some concern that being funded by a federal department meant that there were "strings attached" in terms of how the data from the project would be used and who might have access to that data.

Questions eight and nine addressed issues of confidentiality and consent.

> 8. Confidentiality: Describe what measures will be taken to protect participant confidentiality and privacy.
>
> 9. Consent: Describe the process for consent. Enclose a copy of the consent form. Give a detailed justification if one is not being used. (See Guidelines for Informed Consent below.)

These two questions brought up the issue of who should be considered participants. The procedures outlined in the university ethics documents identified a type of individualized consent and confidentiality that would have violated the sense of group membership and responsibility that Social Development staff had. Permission to initiate and proceed with the project had to come from leadership within the Federation, specifically the Vice-Chief in charge of the Social Development Sector of the FSIN. Permission also had to be obtained from the ICFS Directors, who were responsible to the communities whom they represented. Their agreement did not reflect their personal permission to be in the project but their consent to be in the project as representatives of a larger group of people. In fact, the group that this project stood to have the most impact on were the people back in their home communities. To ask solely for the individual consent of people apart from the groups and/or communities as a whole was not appropriate, even though participation in the project could bring good or harm to those communities. Once a group of people opens up its doors even slightly to an outside person, there is always the possibility that the outsider will learn information that the community does not want to be shared outside the bounds of the group.

Therefore, the individualized consent forms did not capture the scope of consents that needed to be obtained for this project. Individual people being interviewed had to grant their consent, but there was disagreement about whether they should sign a consent form. The university considered signatures on forms and other documents to be essential; some of the people with whom I was working distrusted them. Treaties were also "signed," and the implications of what a signature could or could not mean in terms of consent was debated. In the end, verbal consents were agreed to for people being interviewed, but a signed consent was obtained from the FSIN Vice-Chief for participation by the HSDC in the project.

Finally, these last statements appeared on the ethics application form:

> 11. Signatures of the applicant(s) and departmental head(s). Student applications must be submitted by the faculty supervisor and signed by the supervisor. If reviewed by a department or college ethics review committee, the signature of the committee chair and the committees' response should be attached.

It became very clear that in collaborative projects, community-based co-researchers are working not just with the student researcher, but with many other people, including supervisors, committee chairs, committee members, department and faculty members, ethics committee members, and more. As

a student-researcher, I represented not just myself but my academic department and institution. I felt comfortable speaking for myself in this research relationship, but less comfortable speaking for an entire institution, including processes and people over whom I had no control.

The issue of data ownership and use came up at this point in the process. Collin and Sandra explained situations to me where an outside researcher had come into a community or First Nation organization, gathered data, interpreted the data according to their own observations and viewpoint, and then used their conclusions in ways that misrepresented or harmed the very people the researcher was trying to understand and "help."

While I agreed that all data used from First Nations sources would be owned by the HSDC, the issue of interpretation and later use of that information was not so easy to resolve. Interpretation of the First Nations data would be done in collaboration, not singularly by myself, so that I would not have free license to interpret the data in whatever way seemed correct to me. At first this seemed like a necessary "courtesy" on my part. I thought I could agree to co-researchers looking over my interpretations to make sure there were no gross misunderstandings, without being biased or influenced into changing interpretations just because they seemed unflattering or disagreeable. I still wanted to be objective and report on findings "impartially," although I later realized that "impartial" sometimes is equivalent to "mainstream."

Other discussions took place around authorship and later use of data, once the dissertation project was completed. I learned then that the way that dissertations are thought of at the university negates some of the fundamental tenets of collaborative, community-based research. If this was a collaborative project, then how could I be the single author of the final dissertation? How could the University of Saskatchewan have the final say regarding its acceptability? These were difficult questions to address. I felt torn between the requirements of the university and the requirements of this project. Sometimes we reached a deadlock and at one point I didn't believe that I would be able to complete the project at all. My doctoral degree itself was threatened, but I was willing to take risks to uphold the integrity of the project. An officer of the university told me that if I did not comply with their requirements, I could not proceed to final defense of my dissertation. When I replied that I would not, then, proceed, and that I was prepared to walk away from the project before I jeopardized it, the officer and my supervisor together found some way to make the process work. To this day I do not know which strings were pulled and how.

The point at stake was whether a member of the project team could participate in the dissertation defense as a formal member of my dissertation committee. My entire dissertation committee agreed that having a member of the project team from FSIN on the committee was crucial. The office of graduate studies informed me that all members of the dissertation committee were required to hold doctoral degrees to ensure their expertise in the area of research. I explained that the proposed member had extensive experience and knowledge in this area and was told that I would have to provide the person's name and telephone number so that she could be questioned about her credentials and expertise. I was not about to let this person systematically destroy the working relationship of hard-won trust that I had built with Collin and Sandra. I refused to provide the information and was again told that I would not be able to complete the defense. That was a risk I was willing to take. I doubted that something could be worked out, but with the experienced intervention of my supervisor, we succeeded in having a member of the project, Sandra, on my dissertation committee.

The process of applying for ethics and the final ethics application became the official working terms for my involvement with the HSDC. The nature of the application form and the assumptions contained within it required that I make those assumptions and biases explicit in the process so they could be discussed. This was risky, because I was altering the regular process for obtaining ethics approval, but it seemed to me that the only way to build trust was to make assumptions clear and explicit to both sides. I learned that laying assumptions bare and discussing them was a better way to approach issues than by avoiding or defending them outright. In this way, Collin, Sandra, and I all became intermediaries with our respective communities.

Collecting Data: Learning about Barriers to Effective Communication

After spending months attending and observing meetings, talking with people, and getting to know about the issues in ICFS, I came to the realization that I knew less than I thought about First Nations communities. Once again, I had to step back and re-examine what this project was all about. I had intended to study psychological assessment collaboratively with First Nations, but I also recognized that to do an assessment requires a strong understanding of the psychology of the people being assessed. I was slowly discovering that, in fact, I did not understand the psychology of First Nations people, individually or collectively. I did not understand their history, the contexts of their lives, their cosmology, their humour, the way they use the English

language, nor any of their own languages. I did not understand interpersonal social expectations, parenting styles, or family structuring. I did not understand their worldviews.

In working with the Social Development sector, I found that I had a lot to learn about how First Nations communities operate, what types of policies and services are currently in place, and how those services work. I did not, at first, realize how much I did not know. Worse yet, I was not always certain what was important to know and what was not. I never was certain when or where I was making a mistake in my assumptions or interpretations about events. I had to watch other people's reactions to myself and my statements very carefully and seek out guidance from others if I was not sure what was happening. My learning became a kind of immersion in the professional and community activities of the Social Development sector.

I attended ICFS board meetings and developed preliminary working relationships with staff from various tribal councils and bands around Saskatchewan. I also met with some Directors of other Commissions in FSIN to understand how assessments and services were delivered in their areas. I observed and learned about cases involving First Nations clients within Justice and Family Court. Part of my learning required knowledge of how outside agencies interact with First Nations, including agencies of the provincial and federal governments, non-government organizations, as well as private counselling and consulting services. All of these agencies have an impact on how people obtain access to mental health service delivery and how those services are viewed and utilized.

As I met different people and learned about various issues and historical circumstances, I began to consider how I would do a typical psychological assessment of a First Nations person and whether it would affect the assessment if I did not understand that First Nations person's worldview and culture. I needed to understand more about how First Nations people saw psychological assessment and Western professionals. The assessment project team from Social Development sector felt that they needed to take a critical look at mainstream psychology in order to understand how to change the discipline's generally limited and restricted view of First Nations. Therefore, the project team agreed that I should interview people who regularly worked in the various service delivery sectors of First Nations systems.

Collin and/or Sandra approached people ahead of time to explain the parameters of the project and determine whether the person would be willing to be interviewed. I was then welcome to contact any of the people they mentioned to discuss participation in the project and then interview them

if they agreed. I initially contacted six of the many people Collin and Sandra mentioned and scheduled appointments with them.

Collecting data and conducting interviews were two activities I felt ready for and trained to do. As a Western researcher, collecting data felt like a more "productive" activity to me than meeting all those people and attending all those meetings. I did some research on good equipment to buy (microphones, tape recorders, tapes) and read about different interviewing styles. Collin, Sandra, and I decided that an unstructured interview would allow for more open and free discussion that would not be constrained by pre-selected and possibly biased ideas or structure. Given the open-ended nature of the interviews, the participants were free to take the interview in any direction.

I interviewed six people, men and women, who worked in different areas of service delivery to First Nations persons. In interviewing them I realized that the easiest person for me to talk to was the one who spoke to me mostly about mainstream issues and was university trained in a mainstream program. The degree of difficulty that I had in a conversation seemed related to the degree to which the person spoke from a more traditional First Nations perspective and style. It became clear to me that there was an interaction occurring between (1) what I had asked to discuss with the person, (2) the manner in which I initiated the conversation, (3) the level of acculturation and mainstream colonization of both people in the conversation, and (4) the ability of both people to put aside their mainstream training and speak from as well as hear a First Nations perspective.

Some of the earlier interviewees, particularly the first three, spoke more to my mainstream understanding, but not because they did not know their First Nations heritage. First, my mainstream training and the manner in which I broached discussion brought out discussion in a mainstream way. Since I was asking about mainstream assessment, they talked about mainstream assessment from a mainstream perspective. Second, all three had been trained in mainstream academia and spoke with me as an academic colleague. Third, their mainstream training in academia may have overridden their First Nations perspectives, acting as a colonizing force over what they were saying and our entire discussion. After talking these experiences over with the project team, I realize that the information people tell you may always be affected by any or all of the following (Zolner 2000):

- how they see you
- how they think you might see them
- how you see them
- how you want them to see you

- what they want and need
- what they think you need
- how much they adhere to mainstream or colonized ways of thinking
- what their view of standards and process are in assessment
- how much they trust you

- what you want and need
- what you think they need
- how much you adhere to mainstream or colonized ways of thinking
- what your view of standards and process are in assessment
- how much you need to be in control

These plus an infinite number of other invisible variables act as barriers to communication between First Nations and non-First Nations people. As a mainstream researcher, the impression that you are really communicating with a First Nations person is the moment to ask yourself if you are really getting a First Nations perspective. That person may be speaking with a colonized voice from a colonized perspective; may be giving you what you want to hear to be nice. You may be hearing what you want to hear. As a mainstream researcher, the easier it is to talk with a person from another culture, the more likely it is that the person is going along with your mainstream approach to things, and the less likely it is that you are learning about their perspective or worldview.

During this research process I was reminded that assessment is based entirely upon communication between people. If, as a psychologist, you do not know and understand even the most basic elements of a person's culture, history, and worldview, you can neither communicate with nor make a valid assessment of that person's life and circumstances (Zolner, 2000).

To really understand a First Nation person's worldview, you have to take a genuine step over to their side and see things from their perspective a little. This requires assistance within good, trustworthy working relationships with First Nations people who can help you through the process. It takes an open mind, a willingness to examine personal assumptions, and the ability to learn from others without simply substituting their ideas with yours or yours with theirs. Having taken the smallest of steps over, I then had the responsibility of respecting and not misusing what I had learned, which continues to be a bigger task than the process of learning. In interviewing the people I did, I learned that, as a researcher, who you are, what you ask for, and how you ask all have a big effect on what you do or do not learn about people from another culture. The entire process depends on trust and the willingness of both people and institutions to enable creative, new ways of exploring information and learning. Above all, it depends on people's and institutions' will-

ingness to see First Nations knowledge as valid and to change the way business at the university is ordinarily done. Finally, it depends on a willingness to learn the history and the ongoing circumstances of First Nations peoples across Canada.

During my doctoral research, I realized that sometimes, as university-based, mainstream researchers, we think we know what we are doing when we do not. What we think of as good and benevolent may be doing harm in ways that we do not foresee. These were humbling lessons to learn, and I continue to struggle with them in my current academic work. A researcher who can build solid and trustworthy partnerships and is committed to non-exploitation of First Nations knowledge might consider working with First Nations peoples, if they want to work with that researcher. The willingness must be mutual. No matter how committed researchers or institutions claim to be, their commitment extends only as far as their ability to consider real change and the validity of learning from First Nations peoples in ways that work for those peoples.

It is easy to speak about commitment, but difficult to carry it out with integrity. If we, as researchers, do what our institutions and governments want, based on our expectations, policies, and procedures, then we will never be able to step outside of our own perspectives to learn about the perspectives of other peoples. If we are not courageous enough to change, we reduce ourselves to using past research as tyrannical precedent for future learning and perpetuate a vision of the world exclusively according to us.

References

Gibbs, J.T., L. Nahme Huang, and Associates.
1989 *Children of Color: Psychological interventions with minority youth.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Moustakas, C.
1990 *Heuristic Research: Design, methodology, and applications.* London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Much, N.
1995 "Cultural Psychology." In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, and L. Van Langenhove, eds., *Rethinking Psychology*, pp. 97-121. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Shweder, R. A.
1993 "Cultural Psychology: Who needs it?" *Annual Review of Psychology* 44: 497-523.

Sodowsky, G.R., P.Y. Kuo-Jackson, and G.J. Loya
1997 "Outcome of training in the philosophy of assessment: Multicultural counseling competencies." In D.B. Pope-Davis and H.L.K. Coleman, eds., *Multicultural counseling competencies: Assessment, education and training, and supervision*, pp. 3-42. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Stigler, J. W., R.A. Shweder, and G. Herdt,
1990 *Cultural Psychology: Essays on comparative human development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zolner, T.
2000 *The impact of culture on psychological assessment*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Saskatoon, University of Saskatchewan.

A Community Comment

I am a Kungarakan man on my grandfather's side, and Gurindji on my grandmother's side. I am a traditional owner of the Litchfield Park and Adelaide River regions in the Top End of the Northern Territory of Australia.

I have been involved with health research for the last nine years at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin. A majority of the work involves Indigenous health. In a nutshell, my position and role tends to align itself with an advocacy role between researcher and the community – and vice versa. A lot of my duties and responsibilities are associated with interpretation, suggestions around protocols and cultural safety, and "plain" explanations of research for community members.

Many of the experiences of Theresa Zolner, as a Canadian non-First Nations researcher ring true here in Australia as well. She appears to have travelled an interesting yet educational "inner search" journey!

Interpretation is an interesting and passionate field (to me), so my attention was drawn to the title. After some juggling around with the words, I came up with the following:

"Indian Doing Research

in Country

(Not University)"

which seems to sum up the other side of the researcher-community member equation.

Her discussion of "participatory research" is interesting. My experience is that often the participation occurs too late, or is too tokenistic. It should happen during all stages of a project, and is especially important in the early "thinking up of an idea" stage. Zolner is perceptive in her description of the diversity of First Nations people and the many different ways they are accountable to their communities, and how this might affect their choice of research priorities.

Zolner also displays a characteristic trait of researchers – *persistence*! The community's characteristic trait — *reluctance* — is probably based on history and experience. And that is the dilemma. Over the years, many a researcher or service provider has visited communities, compounds and reservations, and *all* foster this sense of belief, that "their" project or program is/will be of great benefit to the community. She also raises issue of deception in research.

My experience is that the commonest deception comes from researchers overselling the possible benefits of any single research project.

Communities will be less reluctant to participate if there are tangible offers of paid employment in the research process. This will also build trust, which she rightly identifies as essential. She states "without trust, nobody has anything." Equally, "without trust, anybody does anything," hence the need for protocols around cultural safety.

I was also interested in Zolner's use of language with respect to participatory research. I could read her struggle with the roles of "controller," "leader," and "follower" and the tension between "I" and "we" in the writing (e.g. "I collaborated with Collin and Sandra" vs "Collin, Sandra and I..."). This seems to mirror the issues of "control" she identifies in the problems with the language of ethics application forms. I was most impressed with her ethics form without a title — most radical!

Finally, Zolner's initial attempts to establish a research project in collaboration with First Nations peoples may have been helped if her university had already established formal partnerships with the appropriate bodies. This then allows individual projects to be discussed within an agreed context. Who has the power, who owns the results and who is accountable for what then becomes more obvious. That might allow for the doing of truly trusting and collaborative Indian-University research with lasting benefits.

I hope that I have been constructive more than I have criticized. To Theresa Zolner: "you are on the right path — and may the Spirits guide you."

Call for Papers

Pimatziwin is a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal, with an audience of Aboriginal community members, health professionals dealing with Aboriginal community health issues and academic researchers working with Aboriginal communities to address their health issues. We are looking for papers for our next two issues in the following areas. Papers may be submitted in writing or given orally and transcribed through the *Pimatziwin* office.

Volume 1, Number 3

Theme: Ethics and Community Health Research
Guest Editors: Patti LaBourcane-Benson and William L. Freeman
Deadline for submissions: **August 1, 2003**

We welcome articles, preferably from original research, on related topics including:

Theoretical perspectives

Ethical guidelines and models

Ethical challenges for scholars

Ethical challenges for community members

Strategies for ethical research protocols

Collaborative articles that are in a discussion format are also welcome, as are photo essays. All articles are reviewed by both academic and community peers. Articles reflecting community perspectives and content must be accompanied by a letter from the appropriate authorities in the community confirming agreement to publish.