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Indigenous Researchers and Indigenous Research Methods: Cultural Influences or Cultural Determinants of Research Methods

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Original artwork by Bob Martial.

This article is a personal story about the experiences of an Indigenous woman doing research with Indigenous people. Many of her experiences can be recognized in the other articles in this issue. It is a story told from the heart, offering insight rather than science.

Introduction

The question of how researchers work with and select research methods is complex. For Indigenous researchers, the complexity takes specific forms, usually forms that are embedded within the values and beliefs about human interaction. These values and beliefs are inherent to the culture implicated in the research, and if the researcher is a member of that particular cultural group, the challenges can be even more complex. Many, if not most, Indigenous scholars engage in contemporary research for the explicit purpose of bringing benefits to their communities and their people, and they are usually prepared for such challenges. The challenges that some of us may not be well prepared to face are those associated with what seems to be recognized in the academy as 'acceptable' scholarly research, with definitions and descriptions from within a specific discipline. However, even to have full understanding within the parameters of one discipline would still leave some of us struggling with the issues that surround the situation of 'acceptability' within an inter-disciplinary approach to research. My observations and research experience have shown a predominance of inter-disciplinary approaches in the research carried out by Indigenous researchers working from or within an Indigenous reality.[1] While documenting support for this statement is certainly important, that is not the focus of this paper. I mention it only as a part of the foundation to my thinking on the topic of Indigenous researchers in relation to Indigenous research.

In this paper, I want to focus on research methods that I have used in my work within Indigenous communities. More specifically, I would like to initiate a subtle examination of how such research methods were selected in these particular contexts. I will begin the discussion with a brief description of the context for the topic, addressing the particular significance that personal responsibility holds for most Indigenous researchers. The second part of the paper will describe several specific events in Indigenous communities — events planned and carried out with clearly stated research purposes. The third section will discuss the process of arriving at this particular research

1. If we assume that social reality is a reflection of how individuals within that social reality function and think, then it is not a great leap to recognize that Indigenous researchers will prefer inter-disciplinary approaches to their research projects. Indigenous communities, it is broadly claimed, tend to reflect 'holistic' world views and their social practices, i.e., education and health, reflect this 'wholism' in patterns of organization and operation. I would argue that where Indigenous community organization patterns have and continue to 'fail,' it is because this inherent tendency towards wholism has not been accommodated and likely cannot be accommodated within the 'imposed' structures of contemporary models of self-government. In this paper, I am presenting inter-disciplinary approaches in research as emerging naturally and logically from a holistic world

event, and the conclusion will speak to the significance that culture plays in relation to the research methods employed by Indigenous researchers.

Context of Personal Responsibility for Indigenous Researchers

The most serious consideration for me as a researcher is the assurance that I will be able to uphold the personal responsibility that goes along with carrying out a research project in the community I have decided to work within. Once the decision has been made to enter a community with the intention of 'doing formal research,' I am accepting responsibility and accountability for the impact of the project on the lives of the community members with whom I will be working.

Researchers make decisions about research methods through a balancing process of projections. They weigh practical considerations of efficiency (available time and money) with an anticipated degree of effectiveness (academically acceptable end product). The hope is that the end product, whether physical or not, is achieved without too many detours or modifications to the original plan or research design. The place of ethics in the research is prescribed so the researcher can, and in fact must, make ethical decisions based on formulae, policies and guidelines set by the research institution itself, and in some cases by conglomerates of like institutions. In other words, the need for research institutions to monitor the ethical conduct of their own researchers, partly as self-protection measures, is built into academic research processes as a general practice. In such institutions, ethics in research is mandated and enforced through formal control mechanisms, generically some form of Ethics Review Boards.

Individual researchers associated with these institutions must at all times hold to and meet the forms of ethics that are being regulated and enforced. Conflicts and/or discrepancies between personal forms/codes of ethics and institutional forms/codes of ethics are not easily resolved. Individual researcher ethics or minority group ethics are often not given formal recognition and therefore will not likely be accepted or integrated into the larger shape of institutional ethics. The argument for the exclusive use of institutional standards and/or forms of ethics to guide research has the weight of efficiency on its side: less time and money is expended if researchers accept that their work is guided by one set of ethics and embedded in one culture of research. In contrast to efficiency, the effectiveness of research ethics guidelines from an operational perspective is either ignored or not addressed in this line of thought.

The situation that is created denies a simple fact: any research that is carried out with people is carried out within the context of an existing community. When a researcher assumes that the ethics guidelines of a hypothetical 'research community' can take precedence over those of a real community of people (real faces and real bodies) situated in space and time, this surely constitutes a breach of ethics and ought to raise serious questions about the research project itself. Where a researcher cannot discern and does not recognize what lies in the space between the ethical world of the hypothetical 'research community' and the ethical world of the real community, s/he will be unable to take such critical information into account in the research project being conducted. Logically, the existence of such a knowledge gap would call into question the findings, results, products, and outcomes from such research.

I want to situate these points into the context of a real person doing real research in real communities. I am reluctant to talk about someone else's research experiences in this context so I will talk from personal experience.

An interest in research is one of the reasons that people associate themselves with a university. So we accept that Indigenous persons at a university are immersed in dialogues and discussions about research issues in ways that are similar to other scholars. In our discussions, we have identified several significant principles that guide our research. In some ways, these can be related to laws and principles that are sometimes talked about in sessions with traditional Indigenous teachers and Elders. These natural laws or principles of ethics are simply stated: kindness, caring, sharing, and respect. They are meant to govern our relationships with all other living beings and forms of life. A fifth that is sometimes added is service to community and others.

I will limit my discussion to two principles of Indigenous research, and make brief reference to how these connect with the ethical principles that guide relationships. The two principles of Indigenous research that I believe are key to decisions regarding research methods are both tied to personal responsibility of the researcher:

1. the researcher is accountable for the effects of the research project on the lives of the participants, and
2. the purpose of research is to benefit the community and the people of the community.

The researcher is accountable for the effects of the research on the lives of the participants, and indeed can also be held accountable for impacts on the lives of everyone in the community. This means that in choosing research methods, I, as researcher, must consider carefully not only the possible effects

of my whole research project, but also the effects of each specific research method that I might wish to employ in carrying out the project. Sometimes the method itself stands apart and has its own life, initiating and carrying along a research strand that I never anticipated.

Community-based research that is carried out in this manner is not so much the object of the researcher's design and direction as it is a movement of investigation and knowledge creation where co-researchers move out at various intervals, pursuing their own quarry along exploratory side-paths that re-connect further down with the main trail of the research. In this image of research, I, as researcher, will act more as a facilitator, keeping in mind the objectives of the project as well as the interests of the collective group. At the same time, I will ensure that both people and environment are protected on this journey that I have committed myself to guide. In this approach to research, I will look for methods that enhance cooperation, require collaboration, depend on mutual thinking and reflection, spark creativity and inspire visions and dreams and the sharing of visions and dreams.

The use of narratives and storytelling are often associated with the teaching and learning practices of Indigenous societies and there is ample evidence to support this as a valid connection. In addition, much contemporary research by Indigenous scholars uses narrative and storytelling as the primary method of supporting research objectives and community goals at the same time. These are methods that can stand alone and work well to lead researchers and community co-researchers down many paths of knowledge acquisition and creation. Other specific methods include interviews, focus groups, talking circles, sharing circles. These may all be enhanced or supported with the use of audio and video recordings, or with old-fashioned notes and photographs.

On the surface, there appears to be actually very little that is explicitly Indigenous in relation to the methods that an Indigenous researcher may choose to employ in a research program. In fact, there is very little or no difference if we take the position that "an interview is an interview is an interview. . . ." However, to leave the discussion with that statement does not lead to deeper understanding, a broader knowledge base around cultures and research design, or more ethical research and researchers and those are our objectives, both for ourselves and for our communities.

Community Events as Research Methods

I will describe three community events that demonstrate how community members became collaborators with me in research projects. Each event

was a part of a project in which the objectives were shaped outside of the community itself. In one project, the community could gain or lose by its participation, and there was no way of predicting the long-term outcomes. The community members who chose to participate did so with recognition of the responsibility that went along with their decision. In two projects, the community members could choose to become involved or not; their decisions were not tied to any perceived benefits or losses. Any possibilities of outcomes were clearly not of such a nature that any sense of personal responsibility accompanied the community members' decision to participate or not.

The first step of the first project I want to talk about entailed a gathering together of a number of women. The method I used was ongoing personal contacts through a variety of means: house visits, telephone calls, coffee stops. The ultimate objective or purpose of the project was the formation of a community school board and this purpose set the focus of the 'research' efforts clearly and quickly. Those who did not support such a notion had already spoken; the large majority were those who were uncertain but they were listening and waiting for more information and more understanding of the issues. The women who had chosen to get involved, stepped forward to fill that information gap. These were the mothers, the grandmothers, the courageous ones who wanted better schooling experiences for their children and their grandchildren. They were willing to try again after so many years of being beaten down and ignored. For me, as the 'facilitator' of the research process, I look back now and I shudder at my own ignorance and what many thought of then as sheer audacity. But it didn't seem like audacity then and it doesn't now. I do recall, however, the images of the events as they unfolded, and I am amazed at the unshakable faith that I had in the power of this small group of women to face the formidable challenges of moving their communities and bringing their vision to reality.

In the early stages of the project, I had invited a woman to travel with me who had many personal connections in the communities involved. This woman has been a friend of mine since childhood and the hours we spent on the road were never wasted. We spent the time discussing the issues related to the project and how these were coming from or impacting the communities we were working in. By the time she left the project, we had met a great many people and two or three women's groups were beginning to take shape within the communities themselves. While I was still perceived as the 'leader' of the project, since that was my assigned work, I served more and more as the facilitator and the support for the women as they moved ahead with the actual day-to-day work in the communities.

As individual women came forward and accepted or offered their services to inform the broader community of the plans for a local school board and to encourage the people's participation and involvement in upcoming elections, things started slowly to change. The weeks went by and the women grew in their confidence and expression of their own competence. We laughed a lot as we talked at each week's visit. The change was towards the positive: more and more people were talking about what they wanted in the schools, they were thinking and talking about the board and what that could mean to their system of education. But it was not all positive. One week, at one house, the woman told me she had to stop working with the group. She didn't say why but she also told me she would continue to do a number of other tasks to support the other groups and to ensure that the project would go to completion successfully.

The following week, on my arrival in the community, I was told to go to a particular house to see one of the strongest women of our group. When I arrived at her house and entered, I saw that the main body of women who were leading the community movement was in fact already gathered here. When I moved to greet the woman, I saw that her face was swollen and marked with bruises and dried blood, and I felt her pain and the pain from the whole group go through me. We talked that day about what was happening and why it was happening; we talked about the future and about going on with what we had started. I need to say that they talked about going on because I could not: I was getting through my own sickness at knowing that this woman had stood her ground when her husband told her she had to stop working with the project and with me. She had stood her ground because she believed there could be a better way for the education of her children and her grandchildren, and she had discovered the strength and the knowledge of her own capacity as a woman to act on her own thinking and her own beliefs. In looking on and listening that day, however, it seemed to me that the price was too high. Today, the recollection of that woman and those women in that space and that time remains a vision of might and unbelievable power. When I face educational issues based on theoretical positioning and political maneuvering, I think back to events like this in that small kitchen so long ago. Those women gave purpose and meaning to research.

The second event I will share with you also takes place in a kitchen. In this event, I was to interview three Elders and a traditional Cree counselor. Arrangements had been made months earlier. All day, I had been preparing food for the meal and when the four guests finally arrived, I was so flustered and nervous, I couldn't eat. I was happy that the table was too small to seat

all of us so it was logical that I serve the meal. After the meal, we moved to the living room and I set up the video camera and audio system for taping. I talked briefly in Cree to the Elders and explained that I was not fluent in the Cree language and so had asked the younger man to act as facilitator for the discussion. They were in agreement with this process, and, in fact, the process had already been discussed and explained to them months before. The discussion proceeded but the talk was not addressing the question that I had raised. I intervened once, successfully, to re-iterate and clarify my primary question in English to the interpreter and facilitator. He and I worked out the question and he brought the question back to the group of Elders. The discussion was general and the question wasn't making any 'connections' with the thinking of the Elders. Then the one man, who had not been saying too much, spoke and everyone stopped talking to listen. I knew immediately that he had the question and he had an answer that fit! In fact, everyone in the group knew he had the answer that fit. He had come up with the exact Cree term that I had been looking for and when the others heard it, they also knew that that was the right term for the topic and for my questions. The excitement rippled through the room, and everyone wanted to contribute to the discussion. It was a wonderful event — everyone seemed to be as happy as I was that we had come up with that one critical word, a word that probably took us all back in time about 300 years.

The third event was also in a kitchen, this time in a Métis community. The old man and some of his extended family were present to do some videotaping. Again I had prepared for this event for several months. When the time arrived, I went and visited and stayed overnight with the old man and his wife the night before the taping. That morning, we had breakfast together with the other family members and friends, and I answered questions about the project I was working on. The old man knew all about the work I was engaged in since I had met him and had visited him on several prior occasions. This series of questions was mostly for the family and other guests who had arrived to listen and participate possibly. The taping went on for two hours, during which time everyone listened because it was a special occasion to hear this story narrated by the main characters. The story that was the heart of the event itself was the story of Wolf Lake, a Métis Settlement whose boundaries were lifted in the 1940s. The people telling the story were the people who were loaded up into the backs of trucks and wagons and physically hauled away to other towns and areas. The old man was the head of the only family that refused to move from their home. He lived there up until his death two years ago. He was not pressured or asked to move off the land. His son

related the pain and loss that he had felt at watching his friends and their families drive away or be driven away from their homes. He remembered and described growing up with a community of empty houses and memories of a thriving and busy community, filled with children, families, and animals.

Selecting a Research Method

In this section, I will go back over the three events I have just described. I will discuss how I arrived at my decision to use these particular methods for these particular pieces of these particular projects. I was conscious from the beginning that I was entering communities in the context of fairly stringent and unstated community expectations about the behaviour of an unmarried woman. These expectations I recognize and respect as the ethics of the community. The degree of knowledge I have about how to enter a community and talk to people, one on one and in groups, becomes a critical factor in the reception I get and in the long-term success of the research project I am initiating. Protocol takes on a whole new meaning because I am immersed in a world of protocols. Like the fish in water, most of the time I don't think about them because I have lived in that water all of my life. But, in the context of research, I am compelled to be conscious of their significance. I carry a different sense of personal responsibility when I enter the community with a research program and invite others to join me. I am saying to them, this is safe and we can gain from it. They, of course, make the choice to join or not, and they also carry that sense of responsibility and accountability to the rest of the community. Relationships drive the core of the research. Methods arise from the flow of movement as the work progresses through time and space. The researchers make decisions about today's methods based on yesterday's activities and methods.

In the first project, with the women of courage, I had to find ways to meet people and form trusting relationships as quickly as possible. I used my own personal network of friends and relatives and invited a friend who also introduced me to her network of friends and relatives. Because we had already formed bonds of trust over many years of relationship, it was natural to extend this into other areas, including this one of collaborative work. Further, she was interested in reconnecting with family, friends, and relatives in the other communities, as was I. The project fit us well. When we entered into the other communities to do the work associated with the project, we had already spent hours on the road. During the driving time, we talked about the project, the implications for the communities, educational issues in general and specific in relation to Indigenous people and our families. We also

talked about how to do the project and collaborated on the right methods and approaches. When we entered the communities, all our conversations — the theoretical aspects of research design and planning — got filed and we followed the flow of community movements and directions. I didn't have to talk to her about it and she didn't have to talk to me about it. We knew what to say and do because these were our people and therefore our communities. We could work together, not only in the sense of having a common objective, but also in the sense of knowing what the flow was, and sharing a sense of each other and of the community's response to us.

Some of the women who offered to join the process and work in their community in the promotion of the community school board initiative were also women whom I had met in earlier years. Although we did not know each other well, there was a sense of trust based on family connections as well as simply 'word of mouth' reporting on my trustworthiness. That is an essential factor to consider in planning to do research in Indigenous communities. The methods from which you can select for the purposes of research are more limited if you have no personal history and connections with the people of the community in which you intend to work. And, I should add, even less if you have a negative history with anyone from that community. It is not simply the size of the community that must be considered; I am familiar with Cree communities that range from 60 people to 4000 people, and most people in these communities will rely somewhat on word of mouth reports in their consideration of strangers who come into the community and ask to do research, even collaborative research. I must say 'somewhat' because, especially in the North, people do listen and treat everyone with respect so relationships are not that difficult to establish. It is simply to make the point that it is helpful to be aware that it can take many years to establish the kind of relationships and acquire the kind of knowledge that permits a researcher to actually access and participate fully in the experiences of community as Indigenous peoples experience community.

The women I spoke about had been meeting on their own as well as with me on a bi-weekly or weekly basis. The first woman who had to stop working on the project did so because her husband told her she had to. She chose to keep working, but in ways that did not go contrary to her husband's wishes. The second woman broke her husband's order to stop meeting with me and talking to me and also to stop her work with community members. By continuing her work and connection with me, she had accepted the threats and had been very badly beaten by her husband. In our meeting, she talked about how he felt she was undermining him and his identity and work as a man.

She told us how we as women and the project itself threatened him and other men in the community. She told us why she continued to work and how she planned to go on doing what she had started. The talking was a circle, a method for us to research and learn about and from each other. But it was more than that. It was life-affirming for each of us — we needed that talking. We needed it especially as we looked at her face and thought about her danger, and the danger of others in the group, of our danger. During the session, we went down into the darkness of our own Indigenous women's pain, holding on to each other. Then, slowly, we came back up and out into sunlight and hope — hope because that is the story of our Indigenous traditions. The old people have said in many words that we must love and respect all in all circumstances; there is no other way, no other choice. There are no real written records of that specific event except those written in our hearts that day.

The second event started years before it took place. When I had met two of the Elders, I had known instantly that these were two teachers for me. I had kept in connection over the years with them. At my first visit to the community, I had met my grandmother, a woman I had not even known existed prior to that point. When I met her and introduced myself through my family connections and relatives, the word went through the community and after that, everyone knew who I was and who my family connections were. Because my grandfather had been held in very high esteem n the community, I was welcomed under that influence. I have tried to honour that respect accorded me because of my relations there in that community. When I chose to make research connections there, it was because there is a knowledge base there that is a part of my heritage and I want to be a part of it. The people know that about me and recognize my visits to the community as a natural desire to make connections with my family/ancestors. I know, however, that it is up to me to make the effort to learn from the people who are still remembering the teachings of my grandfather. This might sound as if it has little to do with research methods; however, I ask you to recall that the meal I prepared was for the old people who now know me and have placed me in the proper family connections. They are also showing me that they are willing to help me if I am willing to put out the effort to be there and to learn from them. This exchange was all a part of the meal and the giving of gifts. The meal was not a method; it was an event in the stages of respectful adherence to protocols in establishing significant relationships with teachers and guides for one's spiritual journey towards individual growth.

The third event, was again a meal with stories to ground the listeners and pull them together into a shared history. A wonderful experience of Métis re-

ality — a Métis man who refused to give up his home and his land, even as he watched his friends and family pack up and leave, leaving him and his family alone, surrounded by empty houses, gardens, and corrals. The emptiness so stark because it had once been full, and there has never to this day been an explanation given as to why the people were moved. We listened again to pain, and shared again in the pain and loss. Then we laughed again as we came out of the darkness and went on in to the day. But I still ask, as do they: why? And still no answer comes. The old man is gone now and the Cold Lake airforce base is expanding into the lands the old man once held for all of us, hoping that the people would someday return. The Métis Settlement lands at Wolf Lake were ours before the old man died. His life of silent but absolute protest is quietly held in our breath as we wait too for the people to return.

The Significance of Culture to Research Methods

The influence of culture on method selection is always present, but in Aboriginal communities, an Indigenous researcher may find that the method is actually determined by the parameters set by the ethics and principles of the culture in which s/he is engaged.

My method has never been to record what people said with the purpose or goal of analysis. My methods have always been more immediately motivated by my desire to address what I perceive or interpret to be a situation of injustice or despair, both individual and social. In particular, I feel compelled to go where people are crying out because they do not have information and/or knowledge or the means to access information and knowledge or the power to use their information and knowledge to address their own issues and concerns. I have lived my life with traditional Indigenous people and this knowledge has informed the way I have addressed the research questions that came into my life. This same knowledge has given rise to my understanding and articulation of particular research principles that have worked to guide my thinking and my way of operationalizing research. This is critical because for me there has been no research whose life did not depend upon the relationships I had established with the people who somehow 'called' me into their lives to share with them and to listen with them and to create some special knowledge and understanding with them.

A basic premise in traditional Indigenous knowledge systems with which I am somewhat familiar is that as human beings, our connections — our identity with — other living beings, the environment, and the Creator and the Creator's agents, are what maintains us in life. The connections are local

and specific — it's not an abstract idea about the unity of living things. It is a connection to the specific localities, places, physical geographies, where we live and in which our ancestors have lived. The connection to people is not to people in general or to a collectivity, but to specific individuals, with real faces, personalities, histories, and identities, and no matter how we collectivize them, the connections are unique and individualized with each person.

In more common philosophies of thought, we tend to think of individuals as autonomous agents, and the focus is on the varying characteristics or attributes or actions of individuals or collectivities as agents. In this Indigenous perspective, the focus is on the nature and characteristic of the connection between and amongst living things and their environments. The value of the individual is a 'given' as is the individual volition or will. The choices I make as a researcher about what and how I contribute to the nature and quality of the connections I have with others and with the environment are reflected in the choices I make about how I do research and with whom I do research and what I do as research. I can choose ways that affirm life, or ways that throw me, and those around me, out of balance with each other.

I must recognize and accept that, as a part of life, these imbalances will happen and are continually happening. They bring us into growth and learning. Within the individual experience, similarly, an Elder pointed out it is so unusual to have the heart and mind in harmony, that in those instances when it happens, we feel it, physically, in our chests and heads, as a kind of warmth. This experience is a rare jewel, that comes seldom but when it lands on you, it is a gift for life. Empirical knowledge is what Cree culture is about, and while these statements about balance and harmony are often taken to be not empirically sound, they are certainly borne out of thousands of years of empirical research by traditional Indigenous researchers.

Just as the normal state of affairs within an individual is a kind of resolution of inconsistency and contradiction, the whole system of which we are a part has a tendency to go out of balance. A researcher cannot possibly look at any one phenomenon, and propose to study it, and assume, even operationally, the posture of the objective observer.

When I attempt to do research with people on any matter of concern to them, I interpose myself with them who are experiencing the substantiality of that concern. Or perhaps as a being of volition and will, I do not. If however the people I am working with are Indigenous people within Indigenous communities, the nature and quality of the relationships I establish with them will certainly contribute and impact on any outcomes or results, findings, or developments that flow from that research. This is so simply because

the connection exists and is a part of that lived reality. It doesn't really matter whether or not I, as researcher, experience or live that connection, it will be a significant and active element in the shape of the research process and of its conclusion. If I accept my place and my responsibility in the establishment of that connection, I enrich the research process and am in turn enriched by the process along with all others.