Editorial
Relational Accountability to All Our Relations

Stan Wilson
Peggy Wilson

With participating students from the First Nations Graduate Education Program (in alphabetic order): Lewis Cardinal, Tracey Friedel, Pauline Giroux, Peter Hanohano, Brenda Jones-Smith, Rose Labouchan, Jane Martin, Bernadette Sawan, Noella Steinhauer, Patsy Steinhauer, Melissa Turner
University of Alberta, Department of Educational Policy Studies

Working as a team putting together our first edition of *CJNE* has been a challenge. Carl Urion told us it would be hard work. How right he was! Coming to consensus with a team of 13 has meant that all of us have learned to listen a little harder, to think a little deeper. In the end we feel pretty good about the process. Some articles that appear in this journal were accepted before we came on board, and although the group did not necessarily agree with decisions that had previously been made, they all agreed that promises made must be kept.

The more we work together, the more we realize that Native[1] researchers and scholars work from a different framework from that of their mainstream[2] counterparts. In this introduction to our first *CJNE*, let us recount our findings from research conducted across Canada in six provinces by 10 First Nations graduate students in the master's and doctoral program at the University of Alberta. This research took place from May through September 1998.

As one of the core course requirements of the First Nations graduate education degree, students are asked to conduct community-based research. Student researchers were expected to learn about current educational issues as they were expressed in several First Nations communities. To gather this information, each researcher was expected to live in an unfamiliar community: to become immersed in the life of the community; to interview, observe, and learn from the people there. The data gathered were then to be compared with information from the researcher's home community. A final research paper that examined issues (both positive and negative) in First Nations education across Canada was the culminating assignment.

Student researchers visited and became familiar with communities in provinces away from their homes. Some visited communities where education was band-controlled. Others immersed themselves in inner-city neighborhoods where the predominant population was Indigenous. Still others visited Metis communities where schooling was controlled by the provincial government or local municipality. Information was gathered while researchers attended ceremonies; took part in daily activities in the community; and conducted more formal talking circles, focus groups, or individual interviews.

The student researchers met in October to analyze their summer work. While the reports were being analyzed, a distinct pattern began to emerge. In the written report each researcher to some degree expressed mixed feelings, either explicitly or implicitly, about what and how to report portions of the data.

We are sure that all researchers experience some quandary when analyzing their findings; sorting through which data are relevant to the research question, deciding which best informs the inquiry. But it was not the same quandary that faced these students. The nature of the difficulty, rather, was personal. One student in particular voiced her concern succinctly, "When I went into that community, I felt like I was at home. Their concerns were my concerns. If I report about the negative things, I am reporting about myself. And not only about myself, but about my home community—and all Native communities. We're all related." As students continued to process their summer research experience, the nature of the dilemma became more and more clear. If negative data were used, then readers would receive a negative view of the community. Because all the students were strongly rooted in their own communities, they could not and would not air their communities' "dirty laundry." And because each felt a relationship to the outside community that they had become a part of, they could not and would not report anything negative from that setting either. They identified with and felt accountable for and to their host community.

The experience of working through the summer research experience with our students allowed us to recall a similar earlier experience. A Native student working on her master's degree in educational administration had all but completed her research for the thesis. As she read and reread her material, she felt a deep sense of discomfort, not in the way the material was written, but rather in the exposure of negative information. Her discomfort was so great that she could not finish. The thesis was completed but she would not present it to her committee for approval. She says,

I readily reacted to the state of powerlessness, helplessness, and apathy that was visible in the transcripts, by being remorseful. I could not present this information as it was too negative. In my heart I believed in the people's will. There was much to learn from these people, only it was not yet within my grasp.... I was not prepared to present a thesis that cast a negative frame onto any First Nations community.... thus my personal journey began. I placed the manuscript aside for a time while I began this learning trek. (Steinhauer, 1997, p. 10)

This student set the external work aside for two years while she churned over the implications internally. Only when she was able to present her material in a context that honored all those involved was she able to proceed with her thesis defense.

This dilemma does not appear to be local or provincial. Its tendrils reach across countries and across continents wherever Indigenous peoples still reside. At a recent presentation at the American Anthropological Association's annual conference in Philadelphia, Bryan Brayboy (1998), a Navajo postdoctoral student from the University of Pennsylvania, reported similar findings from his study of Native American students at Ivy League universities. Monu Meyer, an Indigenous Hawaiian, reported this same sense of obligation to and with "all nature in its totality" in her doctoral thesis (1998). In analyzing the research experience of Native students and scholars, both here in the First Nations program and else-

where, a distinctly different world view from that displayed in mainstream cultures emerges. That difference we have termed *relational accountability*.

A Description of Relational Accountability

In our attempt to understand clearly the concept of relational accountability, we have examined similar concepts from mainstream-oriented disciplines. Recent writings on deep ecology (LaChapella, 1998; Suzuki, 1989) by people concerned with the depletion of renewable resources and arguing for sustainability, as well as those who discuss relational responsibility from a psychological perspective (McNamee & Gergen, 1999), express views oriented in the direction of an Indigenous world view. Neither movement appears as yet even close to the depth of relational accountability that our students and other Indigenous scholars experience. Indigenous peoples who follow traditional ways seem to provide the clearest glimpse into the depth of this accountability. In ceremony and in prayer they honor and give homage to *all our relations*. In various ways this term is used in most Indigenous cultures as a way of expressing one's place in the universe.

In Cree *mena ka ki haw ni wah koo makaganak* means "and also to all to whom I am related." The Cree language is structured so that the whole world is divided into either the animate or the inanimate, much as Romance languages categorize everything as either masculine or feminine. A major difference, however, is that Cree pronouns do not distinguish between humans and other living creatures or between males and females.[3] When the pronoun *owa* is used it does not reveal whether the speaker is referring to a human or to another living organism. The listener can grasp that only from the context of the sentence or discussion. The language thus provides a structure for a world view in which the individual is related to all living organisms.

In addition to being related in a kinship manner to all living organisms, there is the added dimension of respect for and taking care of "all our relations." In this context is held the admonition that an individual not fulfilling his or her role as a responsible relation by showing (or indeed feeling) intolerance, hostility, aggression, or disrespect will be served natural justice in order that balance be achieved. Each individual is therefore responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation. Individual responsibility for actions must be in relation to all living organisms. It is this web of relationship with each individual in the center that stretches out in all directions. This is our understanding of how the universe is held together. We believe that the interconnection among all living organisms is essential for all life forms. The connections must be respected and honored.

This relational world view, carried consciously by some, subconsciously by other Indigenous peoples, affects how we conduct ourselves (even as researchers) in everyday life. We remain powerless until we can use the negative to work through to the positive and offer solutions to our communities. We ask for your prayers in assisting us to do that—*for All Our Relations*.

Notes

[1]We use here the term *Native* to refer to all Indigenous groups, whether they be status, non-status, Metis, Canadian, or American. Although we prefer the term *First Nations* and have used this term in the naming of our graduate program, *Native* was more commonly used when *CJNE* was formulated. Like all names given to Indigenous groups from outside

the culture, terminology has political implications. Indigenous people themselves have their own way of naming and identifying their own cultural group. Usually in their own languages that name includes none of these political or evolving terms, but rather designates a particular group as *the people,* whether that be Dene, Ininiwak, Annishnabe, and so forth. In English *First Nations* is the term that arose out of constitutional talks in which Indigenous groups in Canada were involved, so it is preferred by most.
[2]In her article in this edition of *CJNE* Joannie Halas refers to mainstream cultures as "whitestream." This seems appropriate and more descriptive than *mainstream.*
[3]The lack of gender specificity is expressed in Alexandria Wilson's recounting of the Weesageychak legend in this edition of *CJNE.*

References

Brayboy, B.M. (1988, December). *Climbing the ivy: Examining tensions around identity for Native American Indian students at two Ivy League universities.* Panel presentation at the 97th annual conference of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia.

La Chapella, D. (1998). *Sacred land, sacred sex: Rapture of the deep-concerning deep ecology and celebrating life.* Finn Hill Arts.

McNamee, S., & Gergen, K., and Associates. (1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyer, M.A. (1998). *Native Hawaiian epistemology: Contemporary narratives.* Unpublished doctoral dissertaton, Harvard University.

Steinhauer, D. (1997). *Native education: A learning journey.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta.

Suzuki, D.T. (1989). *Looking at the environment.* Toronto, ON: Stoddart.