

Researching With Aboriginal Peoples: Practices and Principles

Michelle Pidgeon

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Donna G. Hardy Cox

University of British Columbia

The increasing participation of Aboriginal students in Canadian higher education had been attributed to the development of services for students in institutions of higher education. Pigeon (2001) studied the relationship between students and student services in the evolution and delivery of these services. This article reflects on an important facet of this original research used to conduct this project. It highlights the importance of developing a culturally sensitive research process when exploring Aboriginal issues. The research process of this study included the use of technology, the development of a Web site to enable such a process. Lessons learned from conducting this research are shared in relationship to research process, care principles and guiding values.

In this article we review an original national research study conducted with Aboriginal university students (Pidgeon, 2001). By way of case example, we present practices for conducting research on student services with Aboriginal students by presenting both research process and practice. *Research* is not a word that is taken lightly by Aboriginal peoples. Depending on the audience, it is a word that has varying contextual and historical significance. Research is a Western world term: for Aboriginal peoples it is has meant centuries of violation, disrespect, subjectivism, and intolerance, all in the name of research. For example, Smith (1999), in her *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, discusses in detail the implications of imposed Western research ideologies on Aboriginal peoples. Darou, Kurtness, and Hum (2000) discuss the negative experiences of the Quebec Cree with behavioral scientists. Their study identified several issues related to “research” such as rigid protocols, requests for self-disclosure, perceived dishonesty, and lack of redeeming social value of the research. Many existing research guidelines, textbooks, and other relevant sources are written by and for a Euro-Western audience. Such resources provide information on how to conduct research based on Euro-Western beliefs and ideologies (Kowalsky, Verhoef, Thurston, & Rutherford, 1996; Smith, 1999). However, recent works by and for Indigenous researchers (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Crazy Bull, 1997; Sefa Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Smith, 1999) are creating space for Indigenous knowledge and research.

Political correctness and revised ethical guidelines have attempted to protect the rights of minority groups, but misplaced research practices have discouraged many Aboriginal groups from becoming willing participants (Darou et al., 2000;

Kowalsky et al., 1996; Smith, 1999). A core question is how do researchers, whether they are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, ensure they are not exploiting a people by following indoctrinated research methodologies?

In fact, in a search of the literature databases using the combined terms *research methodology* and *Aboriginal/Indigenous/First Nations/Native/Indians* it is difficult to find guidelines or practices on how to conduct research with Aboriginal peoples. Ethnographic research from the fields of sociology and anthropology provide some insight into researching with ethnic groups and/or minorities. However, these guidelines are imposed with Western ideologies, with undertones of colonialism and imperialism, and fail to consider an Aboriginal perspective. However, searching the Internet provides a wealth of information and resources written by and for Aboriginal peoples. These online documents provide researchers with important guidelines and practices that are Aboriginal group, community, and context. The Alaska Federation of Natives *Guidelines for Research* (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu.afnguide.html>) and the Mi'kmaq *Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch: Principles and Guidelines for Researchers conducting research with, and/or among Mi'kmaq people* (http://www.stfx.ca/campus/service/academic_funding_and_research/Mi'kmaqEthicsProcedures1.doc) are just two examples. If researchers are cognizant of general guidelines and how best to facilitate the process for such groups, harm may be avoided and reliable and valid research results obtained (Kowalsky et al., 1996).

Research can benefit from an Aboriginal point of view, that is, a view that encompasses respect for individuality and relevance to an Aboriginal world view that promotes reciprocal relations with others and encourages responsibility over one's own life (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). A Canadian example of such research reveals the not-so-positive experiences of First Nations students in anthropology classrooms. TeHennepe (1993) discusses anthropologists' assumption of authority as a source of negativity in the research process. This presumptuous act to articulate and academically represent what are "legitimate" First Nations issues and perspectives extends beyond anthropologist's own academic realms and disregards First Nation authority.

Oppelt (1989), in describing cultural values and behaviors common among tribal American Indians, also made several broad generalizations and reinforced negative stereotypical descriptions of American Indians living on a reservation. Although Oppelt's article does create some awareness about tribal Native Americans, one has to mindfully that it was written two decades ago. In today's context of political correctness and diversity, Oppelt provides an important reminder of the need for Canadian Aboriginal people's voices in the research process to enrich the findings and the overall research perspective.

Researchers must be sensitive to their own approach to research to ensure that inherent assumptions and guiding principles of research methodology do not increase the divide of understanding and learning from Aboriginal peoples to address collectively Aboriginal concerns and issues. Past research protocols often resulted in researchers telling Aboriginal peoples what was relevant research. As a result, Aboriginal peoples have been treated as outside viewers in their own lives. Research led by the first two Native studies doctoral graduates at the University of

Alberta addressed these realities. For example, for her dissertation Jane Martin (2001) studied the experience of eight Aboriginal female students at the University of Alberta. Her methodology was deemed groundbreaking, introducing new research practices based on the Medicine Wheel. "A meaningful university experience is really about reclaiming identity," she said of her findings (Brasen, 2002). Another graduate, Hanohano (2001) analyzed and documented in his thesis how Native Hawaiian families can take steps in their homes, outside the education system, to bring about academic success.

Although much of the current student affairs research originates from the United States, Canadian student service professionals have recognized the need for the Canadian perspective to aid those practicing in a Canadian context to understand and communicate further the Canadian postsecondary experience (Hardy Cox, 1992). Research findings often combine Aboriginal students with other minority students, resulting in inaccurate Aboriginal perspectives and often treating Aboriginal peoples as outsiders. Student affairs research also offers a theoretical approach to understanding and responding to the ever-changing needs and expectations of students. Over the last 30 years there has been a movement away from providing services based on perceptions of need to gathering information in a reliable and valid way to identify need for a service and to improve current service provision (Barnes, Morton, & Austin, 1983). In particular, a gap currently exists in the literature from a Canadian perspective with respect to student affairs and Aboriginal students (Pidgeon, 2001). Over the past 30 years many Canadian postsecondary campuses have seen an increase in their Aboriginal student population. However, Aboriginal students still represent fewer than 5% of the student population on most university campuses. Statistics Canada data report that numbers are growing despite the caveat that this information not based on representative sample (Saku, 1999).

Aboriginal people see higher education as one path to a self-sufficient nation empowered by its own people (Barnhardt, 1991; Danziger, 1996). However, historically and currently, Aboriginal youth have not had positive experiences in postsecondary institutions (Danziger, 1996; TeHennepe, 1993). A need and institutional responsibility has emerged for Aboriginal student services: (a) to address university preparation issues; (b) to identify achievement and retention factors/issues (Falk & Aitken, 1984; Henderson, 1991; Meyers, 1997; Wright, 1985); (c) to develop partnerships between Aboriginal organizations and Canadian universities (Degen, 1985; Ignace, Boelscher-Ignace, Layton, Sharman, and Yerbury, 1996); (d) to create institutional and community cultural relevance and sensitivity (Arvizu, 1995); and (e) to improve postsecondary provision of Aboriginal support services (Collier, 1993; Moore-Eyman, 1981; Oppelt, 1989).

In this context we return to the core question: How does one conduct research that is neither intrusive, oppressive, nor disrespectful of Aboriginal students in higher education? The answer lies in the writings of Indigenous peoples who share their knowledge and perspective on research with Aboriginal peoples. It is also important for researchers to be cognizant of past research practices that exploited people by following indoctrinated research methodologies. These growing discussions in the literature and among Aboriginal peoples about Indigenous knowledge

and research (Cardinal, 2001; Steinhauer, 2001; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2001) are taking the journey to fulfilling the "Indigenous Research Agenda" (Smith, 1999). Below, Kirkness (2001) describes the Aboriginal peoples' hallmark for research at the turn of the century.

So what is the Aboriginal peoples' hallmark of research at the turn of the century? Aboriginal scholar, Dr. Carl Urion (1991) explained: "Aboriginal peoples' research discourse has as its first assumption, the integrity of the person. It assumes a context in which there is unity and wholeness to be, discovered or affirmed ... It is thus essentially empirical. The major requirement is that subjects and the researcher should engage together in creating the discourse. This participatory research using tradition as a base for change, is a means of gaining our security as a people." (p. 6)

Pidgeon's (2001) work adds yet another perspective by helping to bring the voices of student service professionals and Aboriginal students to this agenda. It is indeed recognized as an issue, and many researchers are involved in productive discourse and research on the topic. This article is intended to further this dialogue by sharing three key lessons learned from conducting research with Aboriginal university students and student service professionals. The focus of these lessons is to discuss how "we must conduct research to in order to reclaim Indigenous ways of knowing" (Kirkness, 2001). The lessons to share based on (a) the research process, (b) care principles, and (c) guiding values.

Lessons to Share: The Research Process

"Indigenous research methodologies are those that enable and permit Indigenous researchers to be who they are while engaged actively as participants in research processes that create new knowledge and transform who they are and where they are" (Weber- Pillwax, 2001, p. 174).

Words to express processes can inaccurately reflect the process itself. It is critical to address this lesson early in the research process. Such discussions of ethical research and building of research partnerships or collaborations are contributing to creating a space for discussing better research practices and protocols with Aboriginal peoples (Smith, 1999). The recognition of Indigenous knowledge is an important part of these discussions. Indigenous knowledge is not a uniform concept. It is as diverse as the cultures of those who hold this way of knowing. It is composed of traditional teachings, empirical observations, and revelations. Indigenous knowledge is personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Smith, 1999). Researchers working with Aboriginal communities need to be aware that discussion of Indigenous knowledge is practical, personal, and contextual and needs to be respected as such (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Therefore, knowledge that is shared is in a specific context; taken out of this context it could lead to misinterpretation and mistrust. Respecting the depth of Indigenous ways of knowing in research privileges Indigenous concerns, practices, and participation as researchers and researched (Smith, 1999). By incorporating Indigenous knowledge (e.g., cultural protocols, values, and behaviors) as integral components of the research methodology, First Nations researchers are working toward the building of an Indigenous methodology (Smith, 1999). To avoid using the Western-coined term *research methodology* to describe the details of the project, the term *research*

process was borrowed from Archibald et al. (1995). Research process was the chosen language and was intended from the beginning of the research to create an atmosphere wherein the study became “a flexible procedure rather than fixed, rigidity, an organic entity adaptable and consistent with Aboriginal principles of respect and honor that are basics to the traditional teaching[s]” (pp. 15-16). Therefore, the research process became “a dialogue that was growth-oriented and allowed the incorporation of other Aboriginal values such as spirituality and sense of community” (p. 16).

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) suggested the use of the four Rs—respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity to improve the postsecondary experiences of First Nation students. These four principles were extended by Pidgeon (2001) to shape and guide the research process used in her work. Before the official beginning of Pidgeon’s research, a series of informal discussions took place between the researcher, Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal student service providers. These conversations introduced the researcher’s interest in the topic and the potential for the importance of understanding the higher educational experience of Aboriginal students. The topic was of great interest with student service professionals whose main responsibility is to provide services to Aboriginal students. From these initial discussions the researcher learned of the need for a sense of community to be established across the country. Initial interest and support of the project encouraged the researcher to initiate this research process. A compilation of a current listing of all Aboriginal student service providers in Canadian institutions was the first step. In the absence of an official listing, searching university Web sites, consulting with the most recent Canadian Association of College and University Student Services’ (CACUSS) directory, writing formal letters to institutions, and telephoning or e-mailing Aboriginal student centers were essential to gather the required information. This process was significant as it provided the researcher with the opportunity to become acquainted with the participants.

The process model adopted for this study was a continuation of Archibald et al.’s (1995) belief that “any First Nations educational research must involve the stakeholders in the design and implementation phase and that ultimately they must benefit from the research experience” (p. 13). The key stakeholders in the study were Aboriginal students in Canadian universities, student service professionals who serve these students, student affairs and services national organizations (CACUSS), Canadian universities, and Aboriginal peoples across Canada (Pidgeon, 2001).

The process model was developed in phases. An initial step, to further a sense of community, was the development of a Web site designed specifically to represent a community-building research process. Participants (either professionals or Aboriginal university students) could complete their respective survey online or dialogue with the researcher. The site also contained information about the project, consent forms, and personal information about the researcher. The Web site design was such that online users proceeded through the main Web page (before they entered the survey area of the site) where they were asked to read the opening prayer as a sign of respect and community. Confidentiality and security of the participants was respected online through the use of user name and password

access to the restricted areas of the site. The latter was designed so that participants could gain password access from a person of trust such as a participating student service professional or the researcher.

Phase I involved the pre-test of the survey instruments specifically designed for this project. There were two separate instruments, one for the providers of the services and another for the users: Aboriginal university students. Two surveys were designed to demonstrate respect and gather the perspectives of each group. Field testing the survey instruments with both Aboriginal educators and non-Aboriginal student service professionals provided the cultural respect or relevance and the professional input needed to ensure surveys were sensitive to Aboriginal student service professionals. The student questionnaire was pre-tested among Aboriginal students who were not be considered part of the projects' target audience. Pre-testers were either Aboriginal students who had graduated from university or those who did not use Aboriginal support services. Also, during this phase a document analysis was conducted on the Web sites of Aboriginal student service centers.

In Phase II, the surveying, a letter of introduction including the research Web site address and the survey was sent to student service professionals who had shown interest in participating in the project. The letter also outlined the professional's role in assisting the researcher to distribute surveys to Aboriginal students who visited their center or office. Another letter was attached to the Aboriginal University Student survey introducing the project and the researcher. Both letters informed the participants of the opportunities for involvement in the various stages of the study and told them that further input would be sought from them on the completion of Phase II. This ensured that all participants were aware of the research process, their role in it, and the opportunities to participate further or withdraw from the study. The Web site was designed as an additional tool to bring the research process closer to the participants. The ongoing opportunities for involvement in the research process and getting to know the researcher were key elements in fostering communication and building community. For example, in keeping with the process model for Aboriginal research, participants were invited to discuss further any relevant issue pertaining to the project by contacting the researcher personally using e-mail or regular mail.

Phase III of the process involved a comparative analysis of both the Aboriginal Student Service survey and Aboriginal University Student survey. This analysis revealed the relationship between students' and professional opinions regarding Aboriginal students needs and expectations for services in institutions of higher education. Based on the survey results, document analysis, and the review of student development theory and other related literature, a national perspective of Aboriginal student services was gathered. Throughout all phases the researcher's knowledge and sensitivity to the four R's (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) and honor remained constant.

Honoring *research as process* engaged participants from the concept to the findings and analysis stages of the research. Pidgeon (2001) demonstrated that the involvement of Aboriginal students in research design and administration is an

important lesson to ensure meaningful results to inform student services practice, policies, and programs designed for and by Aboriginal students.

Lessons to Share: Care Principles

"As people concerned with First Nations education and research, we must consider whether our motives and our methods honor and respect First Nations ways" (Archibald et al., 1995, p. 12).

A core principle of research with Aboriginal students is symbolized in the sacred circle. This holds a significant meaning for Aboriginal peoples, representing togetherness, community, and harmony. Including Aboriginal peoples in the project from start to finish assists the researcher to develop research questions, methodology, applicable instruments (e.g., surveys, focus group questions) that reflect and respect the cultural beliefs and practices of Aboriginal peoples. During the research process, involved participants can help facilitate part of the research, provide valuable contacts and the encouragement to pursue challenging questions. For example, researchers like Hains (2001) have also used traditional methods of talking circles and vision quests to address issues like the Native student dropout rate. Also, Kowalsky et al.'s (1996) research on fetal alcohol syndrome was conducted collectively with the community. Their shared wisdom highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and collaboration with the research process. Their guidelines included: (a) to be prepared for uncertainty; (b) to recognize that Aboriginal people are in charge; (c) to be honest about the researcher motives; (d) to be oneself and be prepared for the unexpected; (e) to allow for time; (f) to show sensitivity, respect confidence, and guard against taking sides; and (g) to maintain ongoing consultation. Although they caution that these guidelines are not suited to every situation or Aboriginal group, they highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity in any research process.

Being cognizant of such cultural variation between Aboriginal groups is the first step in respecting Aboriginal peoples and gaining perspective on whether a particular methodology or even research project will be relevant. There are over 80 different Aboriginal groups in Canada, and each has its own unique cultural identity. Therefore, what may be perceived as a worthwhile project with the Bella Coola of British Columbia may not be relevant to the Mi'kmaq of Newfoundland and Labrador. Aboriginal peoples are not a homogeneous group with similar histories, beliefs, cultures, and more important, needs. Considering all Aboriginal peoples to be a homogeneous group of people would be an incorrect assumption from which to begin the research process. Researchers' awareness and sensitivity to cultural diversity is another hallmark of relevant research related to Aboriginal students that reflects the acknowledgment of difference as key to caring.

Lessons to Share: Guiding Values

Issues of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility raised by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) provide guiding values for research with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal peoples in general. *Respect* begins with the involvement of Aboriginal groups, communities, and individuals in the research process, discussing each other's ideas, helping to ensure the project will be of benefit to all parties. Establishing trust that is based on honesty and respect helps to build initial support

for the research process. Attention to this initial relationship building block can also inform other aspects of the research from the development of the instruments to participation in focus groups. Pidgeon's (2001) study, for example, involved Aboriginal students and student service professionals in the design of the questionnaires. The commentary of these two key partners was critical to ensure the questionnaires were culturally relevant and did not offend. Trust was further developed by the researcher being accessible, approachable, and available by e-mail and regular mail (Wilson, 1994).

Respect is also centered on the basic premise of racial-cultural-social identity. Using the terms *Aboriginal* and *Mainstream or non-Native* brings to the forefront the debate of identity and the dichotomy of using *us-them* in relation to social perception. Calliou (1998) examined the issues of belonging, entitlement, representation, and autonomy in the context of this debate. She found that using these binary terms often conflicted with some traditional Aboriginal teachings that state that all humans are beings and therefore should be members of the same family. Mutual respect for each other's differences and similarities is key. Pidgeon (2001) demonstrated attention to respect throughout the research. She created mutual respect, for example, by ensuring each Aboriginal group mentioned was referred to by the group's self-designation. Also the research Web page design of an opening prayer and personal information regarding the research and researcher placed respect at the forefront of this research process.

Relevance takes into consideration the importance and relevance of study to the researcher and Aboriginal group(s) involved. What is relevant to the researcher may not be a priority to the Aboriginal peoples involved in the research. Therefore, understanding each other's expectations and points of view will help the communication process and build relationships. It is important that the research, the Aboriginal group, and the researcher be flexible to meet the needs of each other. However, it is the researcher's ultimate responsibility to the people involved and the research process itself to ensure that respect and integrity are observed. Researchers must strive to contribute to the field of research by considering the following core questions: How will the research contribute to Aboriginal peoples? What support exists among Aboriginal people for the research? What is its relevance? What research gaps will be filled? What questions will be addressed?

For example, Pidgeon's (2001) review of the literature found no similar studies of Aboriginal student services and Aboriginal students with a Canadian context or a student service perspective. Relevance for the research was determined through preliminary discussions with providers of Aboriginal student services and Aboriginal students. They communicated a need for research to address the question of Aboriginal student service provision, quality, and accountability in higher education. This process also revealed the need for research to identify both cohorts: students and student service providers. For example, the gathering of the e-mail addresses of the latter enabled the creation of a national listserv and community-building that extended beyond the scope of the research project.

Reciprocity entails honoring each other's roles, which is important for the success of the project. Clearly defining each group's role and expectations will ensure that all involved respect each other. There must be a balance of sharing and

gathering information. Wilson (2001) reinforces the significance of sharing knowledge. He states, "An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation" (p. 176). A cost-benefit model may be used as an example. That is, what the researcher will have to contribute (e.g., time volunteering in community or sharing final results); and what is the cost to the community (e.g., cooperating with researcher, providing volunteers and information). The benefits of the project must also be clear. The researcher may have publishable material, and the community could have reliable research that would assist them with a political or legal or community development issue. The benefits of Pidgeon's (2001) work was the establishment of a baseline comparison of Aboriginal student service provision in Canadian universities and the understanding of the different perspectives of Aboriginal students and student service professionals. This research had a variety of benefits for the participants. From informational or educational perspectives it laid the foundation of understanding the evolution of Aboriginal student services across Canada. It also provided a comparative summary of the diversity of service needs and expectations for Aboriginal student services. This information was deemed valuable to these groups, who before the research often worked without such information. Also, heightening the awareness of differences in perspectives provides an opportunity for dialogue between the practitioners and students to enhance further current services and communication.

Responsibility ensures that researchers are cognizant of their responsibilities to the research, to the people, and to themselves. Designing a research process in consultation with key stakeholders, allowing for flexibility in the process, and maintaining integrity of research will ensure that respect and honor of all involved are observed. Pidgeon (2001) modeled responsibility through the consultation and inclusion of key stakeholder groups in the design, implementation, and process of the research. Feedback and commentary were sought and openly encouraged between researcher and participants. To aid the communication process, contact information was provided to the participants by paper copies copy of the survey instrument and through the Web site: <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~e02mep>. The dialogue that occurred throughout the research process between the researcher and participants also provided opportunities to build mutual respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance.

Conclusion

Aboriginal peoples see higher education as the path to a self-sufficient nation empowered by its own people (Danziger, 1996). Ensuring that the postsecondary experience is positive is the responsibility of the institutions, its administrators, faculty, staff, students, and the community in general. The opportunity and challenge exist for student services professionals and researchers in general to develop culturally sensitive research and research processes that model the principles of care and guiding values to inform policy, practices, and programs for Aboriginal students in higher education.

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