Student Success Research Consortium: Two Worlds Community-First Research

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Although this article does not directly address the provision or improvement of early childhood education (ECE) to grade 12 education, it does address the theme of Indigenous Knowledges and provides an example of how to conduct community-first educational research. Research that is centered on a community-first perspective must be negotiated so as to cultivate respectful, reciprocal, and responsible relationships with the community in which the research is situated. The Student Success Research Consortium on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory is a research collaboration that seeks to examine ways of defining and supporting student success from a community perspective. This article explores the emergence of community-first processes that occurred while the foundation for the educational research was being developed. We discuss the distinctions between community-based research and our approach to community-first research that we describe as land-based research. We also focus on the consideration of Aboriginal ethics from a community viewpoint, the development of a memorandum of understanding, and the emergence and implications of ethical space.

Introduction

Alarmed by the circumstances of a segment of their youth population at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory (Six Nations) in Ontario, the Student Success Research Consortium (public secondary schools, community police services, welfare department, social development office, and Brock University) was formed to investigate the elements of this social phenomenon. Early in the research process, we recognized a gap in the literature as few articles focused on the practical aspects of negotiating the challenges associated with the development of an Aboriginal[1] community-based research project in consultation with a university. Although we could find good theoretical resources on guiding principles and how research partnerships should be established, few resources offered practical guidance and examples of how partnerships were established and how

such partnerships evolved over time. Given this gap in the literature, we decided to document and examine our own journey of collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. In this article, we journey forward from an earlier article (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberry, in press) by discussing how we moved forward after receiving approval from the Six Nations Ethics Committee and Brock University's Research Ethics Board. Specifically, we address our approach to community-based research, our engagement in the larger issues associated with ethics and Aboriginal research, how this engagement influenced our development of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), and the difference between what we proposed to do and how the research was actually conducted. We also address how we have managed our varied perspectives and how these perspectives have challenged and informed our work. We start at the beginning of the journey and provide a brief overview of the project's origin and development.

The Student Success Research Consortium (Consortium) was formed out of a research collaboration between a group of community agencies and educational personnel from Six Nations and Brock University. The community agencies and research personnel were concerned about the social and educational challenges faced by young people in their community. They formed a loose group of concerned individuals and agencies, and as they began meeting, they realized that each of the various organizations and educational personnel held diverse pieces of the puzzle that had to be understood in order to address the difficulties being encountered by the young people. The social service agencies identified a steady increase in applications for welfare assistance by younger people that was associated with the higher dropout rates noted by the educational personnel. They also noted a significant problem with students coming late or being absent.

The community group met regularly and considered the varied information that each offered to explain the difficulties that youth were exhibiting. Anecdotal information collected from the principals of the primary schools on Six Nations revealed that junior kindergarten had one of the highest absenteeism rates and had generally been viewed by the community as optional and not essential. The principals also noted a significant incidence of children in the primary grades resisting or being reluctant to attend school. The group brainstormed a number of factors that might be contributing to academic difficulties for students including not being prepared to attend school (no clean clothes or breakfast), having no lunch to bring, needing to help at home and/or prepare younger siblings for school, not having parents available for help with school work, not valuing school as important, social promotion instead of academic promotion of students, and lack of quality assessments for students experiencing academic difficulties. The group became concerned that the

problematic attendance seen at the primary level was becoming an established pattern for many of the students that would be perpetuated throughout the upper grades. It was clear that youth were facing problems in high school as the academic student advisors' case loads staggeringly high and at least half the 500 students were at serious risk for dropping out.

It is also noteworthy that the reality on Six Nations corresponds directly to the provincial reality documented by Statistics Canada. According to the 2001 Census, Aboriginal populations under the age of 25 comprise nearly half the total Aboriginal population in Ontario; further, half of these individuals did not complete high school. The current trend indicates that 42% of the Aboriginal population in Ontario do not have a high school diploma versus 29% of the non-Aboriginal population. At a 2006 Aboriginal Symposium on Education and Development (Raynor, 2006), the youth who attended unanimously cited boredom and lack of relevance as the reasons for leaving school. The undereducation of Aboriginal people in Ontario has been closely associated with higher incidences of unemployment, depression, poverty, substance abuse, and family violence. It was noted by Six Nations Community Policing Services that there appeared to be a connection between increases in incidents of youth criminality with increased high school dropout rates.

After meeting for about 18 months, the group decided that they were tired of seeing reactionary band-aid programming being implemented in their community to address various issues. They wished to step back and conduct research to understand what the young people were experiencing and what could be done to promote academic success. The group's core hypothesis was that the difficulties of youth in high school had their roots in the early years of primary education, and that, therefore, research efforts should focus on junior kindergarten to grade 3 in order to break the cycle of absenteeism and late attendance early in a student's academic career. The group spent the next few meetings discussing how to go about conducting the research. Concerns were expressed in the group that people would have neither the time nor some of the research skills necessary to conduct the needed research. There was also resistance to bringing in outside researchers, as academic research for Aboriginal people has been a minefield of strong negative emotional associations, and there are always concerns that the research will be completed and taken away with no reciprocal benefits to the community. After deliberations, the group decided to consult with Brock University's Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education (Tecumseh Centre) to find out what kinds of agreements could be reached about a partnership in order to conduct the research.

In fall 2006, following a series of consultations, a research team consisting of faculty members and members of the Tecumseh Centre was intro-

duced to the community group. Building on the work that the community group had already completed, it was decided to submit a joint proposal for funding to the Aboriginal Research Development grant division of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This particular grant competition was for proposals from Aboriginal community research organizations and university-based researchers to develop teams collaboratively to investigate issues of concern to the Aboriginal community. It was proposed that the research partnership would focus on conducting a scoping exercise. The community group had already seen that each organization involved in this project held particular pieces of the puzzle and that together they formed a collective representation of a complex issue. The research partnership extended this idea into the community at large and decided to hold focus groups with the various stakeholders (students, parents, educators, service providers, and community members) to identify what factors would emerge as contributors to the social and academic difficulties faced by young people in the community. It was also agreed that the research would employ a culturally relevant framework by drawing on the Hodenosaunee Research Methodology (HRM, Hodson, 2007; Styres, 2008). This is a holistic research methodology that removes artificial barriers to research involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations by engaging in a mode of research that reflects Hodenosaunee cultural values and beliefs (Alfred, 1999; Ermine, 2005; Hodson, 2007; Ross, 1992; Smith, 1999; Styres). The grant was awarded in spring 2007, and the consortium was then responsible for deciding how the partnership would function and evolve.

In this article we outline our approach to community-based research and describe how going through the ethics process resulted in our questioning ethical protocols and engaging in a consideration of the larger issues associated with ethics and Aboriginal research. We also discuss how our engagement in the larger ethical issues shaped the development of the memorandum of understanding and the difference between the initially proposed research and how the research has actually been conducted on the land. Throughout the article we provide insights into how our varied perspectives have challenged us and informed our work.

Community-First Research: Our Approach to Community-Based Research
The term *community-based research* has frequently been used to refer to research that involves partnerships with the community and focuses on a research topic that has either been identified or validated by the community as something that should be researched (Centre for Community Based Research, 2007a, 2007b; Israel et al., 2005; Israel, Schulz, Parker, Becker, & Guzman, 2003). The Student Success Research Consortium project could fit into this description, but we refer to it as community-first research. This project was initiated by the community, has evolved in the

community, and it is in this context that we identify it as being community-first research.

Following the presentation of a working paper on the project's development, it became clear that although there were similarities between the principles of community-based research and the principles that we apply to our own research, there were also critical differences. In examining the similarities, we found that community-based researchers usually apply the following principles to their work: recognize the community as a separate identity; work to establish equitable partnerships in all stages of the research; build on community strengths and resources; be aware of social inequalities and work to empower communities and develop power-sharing processes; ensure that knowledge generation has a mutual benefit for all partners; focus on issues that have relevance to the community; employ a cyclical/iterative process in conducting the research; ensure that all partners are both involved in the dissemination process and recipients of the dissemination materials; allow time to develop relationships and commitment to sustainability (Israel et al., 2003; Israel et al., 2005; Postma, 2008). There is often a strong emphasis on the co-production of knowledge with the community and social action as identified by the community (Postma). Community-based research is also often paired with other approaches such as participatory research and action research (Giese-Davis, 2008; Shore, Wong, Seifer, Grignon & Gamble, 2008; Silka, Cleghorn, Grullon, & Tellez, 2008; Stoecker, 2008).

Although we agree with many of the principles for community-based research, we also see some critical differences between our community-first approach and the community-based research that has emerged in North America. Community-based research is seen as a "strategic approach to increasing the relevancy, acceptability, and usefulness of evidence-based scientific findings," and it is often conceptualized as being of benefit to communities that are considered marginalized (Postma, 2008). Aboriginal communities are frequently referred to as being marginalized, and this tendency to problematize the community disempowers it. It sets up a framework where the principles may be positive and directed at empowerment, but the fundamental structure and processes are operating from a deficit-based approach that implicitly positions the community as being less than the other partners and stakeholders in the research. In addition, academic research has a negative history in Aboriginal communities, which has been shaped by Eurocentrism when researchers often adopted a superior intellectual privilege and an *assumed perspective* that served to alienate the communities and primarily conducted research *on* Aboriginal communities and not *with* Aboriginal communities.

It is our view that community-first research differs from community-based research in some critical aspects. We do not implicitly position the

community as being less than the other partners: we explicitly place the community first. This is not to say that we are unaware of the power differentials and struggles that continue to exist. Rather, the community-first approach provokes, challenges, and brings to the surface the complex tensions and shades of resistance that embody the various complex issues around power relations, assumed privilege, and various positionalities, as well as how each is connected through systemic structures and enacted through various processes including, but not limited to, educational research. In fact, we are engaged in actively resisting those forces and are also aware that the power differentials are embodied and enacted in and through our everyday experiences. We are also willing to engage those tensions as they surface during the process either with a sense of immediacy or on deeper reflection and consideration. We acknowledge that this is a far deeper conversation than can be explored within the confines of this article, but it is essential in identifying the critical difference between community-first and community-based research.

The landscape in academic research is shifting and coming to recognize that research with Aboriginal populations must also involve respectful and reciprocal relationships with those individuals and their communities. Wilson (2008) has described Indigenous research as ceremony that centers on the development of relationships and on maintaining accountability to those relationships. Our research collaboration has been founded in the development of relationships and shaped by the accountability that we have to those relationships. It has also been based on elements of respect, relationship, relevance, and reciprocity (Kirkness & Bernhardt, 1991). To us, this means that all collaborators must walk in two worlds in a way that balances community realities with the systemic structures of academia while always placing relationships in a position of prominence and being willing to question our "unquestioned answers" (Wilson) in the context of the relationships.

Aboriginal ways of knowing and being are generally not respected or validated in academia. The systemic structures in universities and other institutions are not designed to address the unique concerns posed by Aboriginal research, nor do they lend themselves to the development of authentic reciprocal relationships. Engaging in research with Aboriginal communities requires a new methodological approach such as the research-as-ceremony approach put forward by Wilson (2008) and approaches suggested by others. The work of Aboriginal scholars such as Bishop and Glynn (2003), Ermine (2005), Hodson (2007), Kirkness and Bernhardt (1991), Smith (2000, 2002), and Smith (1999) has emphasized the importance of creating space for the development and implementation of various culturally centered power-sharing models of collaborative research that focuses on shared knowledge production, building of com-

munity partnerships, the co-creation of new boundaries and protocols, and shared ownership and control of knowledge.

We drew on the work of these Aboriginal scholars and on the HRM (Hodson, 2007; Styres, 2008) to provide us with a culturally relevant approach to the research. This approach served us well and was flexible enough to allow the research to emerge from the community and organically[2] evolve into a framework that both works for the research and is reflective of the community. We adopted a circular model in which all members of the consortium are considered to be sitting around a communal fire where each is recognized and validated for his or her contribution to the circle. We have purposely resisted linear and hierarchical structures and operate on the principles of respect, relationship, relevance, and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). We operate from a community-first position, which means that we are continually striving to give priority to the community realities as the various community members articulate these realities. The university partners of the consortium strive always to place the community first and to remember that we were invited to the circle to share in the learning and to contribute to it, but never to own it. This approach promotes the concept of journeying[3] together that has opened some interesting dialogue about the creation of ethical space and how we enact our various relationships in that space.

Engaging Ethical Issues

In developing this research and journeying together, we have encountered some challenges to our own beliefs and to structures that we had not questioned in the past. One major area that presented challenges and questions was the ethics processes. We do not review the ethics process in detail, but turn our attention to the larger ethical issues that we encountered outside that process. For us, going through ethics with the university and the Six Nations Ethics Committee opened a larger discussion on the university as an institution, academia as a whole, and the state of Aboriginal research in relation to these issues.

We began questioning how we would address the larger ethical issues that existed outside the ethical review process. Some of these were loosely tied to the process, whereas others were more connected to how to think about conducting the research and working with the community. These issues centered on addressing power relations and positionalities, as well as implicit and assumed privilege. We questioned what informed consent actually was and how it could be obtained in our research setting. We also struggled with the concept of Aboriginal knowledge and how to differentiate Aboriginal knowledge from other forms of knowledge. For the university members of the research team, it seemed also to involve questioning the structures, policies, and procedures at Brock and how they needed to be negotiated so that the research would stay true to the com-

munity. For everyone involved in the project, there were issues of control and ownership.

The Aboriginal Research Advisory Circle (ARAC) is one attempt by Brock University to address issues of Aboriginal research and ethics. Any research ethics proposal submitted to Brock's research ethics board that indicates that research will either directly or indirectly involve Aboriginal persons will also be given to ARAC to determine rigorously what protocols need to be adhered to; if the community and/or individuals, Aboriginal knowledge, and Intellectual property rights are sufficiently protected; what reciprocity has been put in place; what relationships have/or have not yet been developed; and if a community ethics process needs to be adhered to. ARAC is the bridge between the community/research participants and the university/researcher. It has been determined through some preliminary research conducted through Brock's Research Ethics Board that currently no other models have a specific committee, circle, or department in place to address specifically issues of Aboriginal ethics in universities. As ARAC's mandate evolves and becomes clearer and more visible in the realm of the larger university, it continues to exert pressure and influence on how the shifting landscape of Aboriginal research is shaped and acted on in both the university and the community. However, issues of Aboriginal ethics continue to be an emergent, controversial, and contested space.

It became apparent while we attempted to define and articulate the terms *Indigenous Knowledge* and *Intellectual Property* that the interpretations of these terms were cloudy and obscure. In attempting to navigate through and achieve consensus on agreed-on terminology, we found that the dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of these terms was contentious and emotionally charged. The inclusion of the definitions articulated in a report in 2001 commissioned by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2001) entitled *A Community Guide to Protecting Indigenous Knowledge* generated a great deal of controversy among various members of the consortium. Due to INAC's stated reluctance and resistance to this research project, the resulting barriers placed on access to public information, and power relations between INAC and the community, it was no surprise that the consortium raised extreme resistance to the adoption of INAC's representation of Indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights. Further investigation revealed definitions of meaning generated by Dawn Martin-Hill from inside the community that was acceptable to all members in the consortium.

Martin-Hill and Soucy (n.d.), in their report entitled *Ethical Guidelines for Aboriginal Research*, articulated that Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has been defined as an ancient, communal, holistic, and spiritual knowledge that encompasses every aspect of human existence, and further that perhaps the emphasis should be on wisdom rather than on knowledge. IK

needs to be understood as a spiritual concept, because knowledge cannot be separated from the spiritual. IK has been framed as relational to all living things. Most Aboriginal peoples agree that IK is unique to each tradition and is closely associated with a given territory. *Intellectual property* was defined as any form of knowledge or expression created with one's intellect. Intellectual property may exist in many forms including artistic and literary works, inventions and discoveries, processes, knowledge, data sets, data bases, audiovisual and computer material, and any other item, knowledge, thought, or product of research. "Simply stated, the protection of IK [is] the protection of spirituality and ceremonies ... and the observance of traditional protocols" (Martin-Hill & Soucy, p. 38).

Developing the Memorandum of Understanding

Our discussions about ethical issues with each other and the community partners served to frame the development of the MOU, which formed the Consortium. For us, the MOU provided an opportunity to challenge and resist some of the university structures or ways of operating and offered us the chance to define our collaboration on our own terms. After discussions with the community partners, it was decided that a small group of people would write a draft of the MOU, which would then be reviewed with the larger group. This smaller group (ourselves) consisted of a person from the community partner group, the principal investigator from the university, and the representative from the Tecumseh Centre who had been involved in the project.

In addition to our own discussions about ethics framing the development of the MOU, we also borrowed from the work of another Brock University research team that had written about ethics and collaborative research (McGinn, Shields, Manley-Casimir, Grundy, & Fenton, 2005). Although these researchers did not address community issues as their collaboration was wholly within the university setting, their discussion of a research team as creating a place of belonging that welcomes all team members resonated with us. They also described their development of a "principles document" and how these principles governed how issues such as collaboration, ownership, and authorship were developed. Particularly useful about this work was how the authors discussed principles and the enactment of "living ethics." This process not only developed trust among the group, but they were also able to engage in and appreciate their varied disciplinary perspectives.

The Consortium's challenge was to develop a document that would guide how we operated in the collaboration and would also serve to make a statement about our community-first approach and an affirmation that the community had initiated the research. As the small group of collaborators responsible for creating the initial draft of the MOU, it was important that we shift from a theoretical stance to a practical application. Discussing the creation of an equal power-sharing structure that is

modeled on a circle metaphor that values all members is different than its enactment in a research structure. We wanted the MOU to be the first practical application and a tacit example of our community-first approach and to help guide us through the day-to-day operations of the research.

We began the process with a charting activity that identified the vulnerable members of the research group and the respective needs of everyone involved in the research project. For example, students were seen as the more vulnerable members of the group who needed more protection, who also needed to gain experience and possible publication credits from the project; whereas university faculty members were seen as the least vulnerable. Community members were seen as somewhat vulnerable and in need of practical information from the project that could be applied in the community to make positive change. In addition, there were issues of IK and intellectual property rights; publication, authorship, and dissemination issues; as well as other ownership and control issues. We realized through the exercise that we needed to protect the research group from various outside pressures such as the university, the larger community, and INAC. We decided that we would use the MOU not only as a document to provide us with guiding principles, but also as a vehicle to create the Consortium formally.

The Office of Research Services provided us with a draft MOU, and one of the MOU specialists joined us for our consultation with the Tecumseh Centre. Following our charting activity with the Tecumseh Centre, we used the challenges that we had identified to rearrange the MOU totally. The MOU from the Office of Research Services was linear and legalistic in structure and prioritized the university's needs and those of the principal investigator above any other groups that might have been party to the MOU. Although this structure had been useful for a number of collaborations, it did not suit our purposes. We rewrote it with an emphasis on the priority of the community's needs and attempting to implement a less hierarchical and linear structure that more adequately reflected our circle approach as mentioned above. This required balancing the various needs represented in the project with protections for the more vulnerable members. We also formalized the Consortium and its membership, as well as endowing it with control over the project and ownership of its outputs. The document included provisions for the information derived from the project to be archived in the community and for presentations to the community at large as well as to the Six Nations Council.

The draft MOU was circulated to the members of the Consortium and then discussed at a meeting where the document was again reviewed and discussed. Discussion centered on how the MOU was structured and the reasons behind specific elements. We had identified particular aspects of the document that required more input from the group, and we opened the floor to any issues that other members felt needed to be addressed. We

had useful discussions about the document and made a number of impor-
tant changes. The discussion also served to bring the group closer together
and to give us an opportunity to appreciate the diversity of perspectives
that characterized the Consortium.

Our ethics approval from the Six Nations Ethics Committee was con-
tingent on the development of an MOU, and once we had a final version,
we sent it to the committee as requested. We were relieved when the Ethics
Committee approved the MOU and gave us our final clearance to proceed
to the data-collection phase. We circulated the document among the com-
munity organizations and secured all the needed signatures to formalize
the MOU. With the MOU in place, we were ready to move into the active
research phase of the project and began to schedule focus groups. These
processes spanned two years, during which time connections were made,
appropriate community protocols were adhered to, and both the research
team and the Consortium were required to exercise a great deal of patience
and collaboration. This was a process that demonstrated the elements of
respect, relationships, relevance, and reciprocity.

Creating Ethical Space

After the initial focus groups had been conducted, we reflected on whether
the approach we were using adequately captured the elements of respect,
relationships, relevance, and reciprocity that were used as the core of the
MOU. However, we realized that in the process of developing the MOU,
we had been creating ethical space without being aware of this at the time.
In reflecting on the creation of ethical space, we realized that in the focus
groups, the interaction between the research team and the participants
resulted in the co-creation of ethical space. Therefore, we continued to let
the focus groups unfold, noting that each group resulted in the emergence
of ethical space. We realized that the process of creating the MOU en-
hanced our awareness of diverse interpretations and perspectives and
allowed the emergence of ethical space in the research project as a whole
and that this new awareness also transferred into the focus groups. Had
we not been able to engage in these authentic ways, the research would
not have been a successful collaboration.

Ermine (2005) discusses the creation of space in collaboration between
two disparate world views. He says that this space is automatically created
when two opposing world views engage with one another, and further,
that the space itself enhances the disparity between the contracting world
views. This disparity automatically opens a space where the two world
views intersect and clash with each other. This space becomes contentious
and is "triggered by dialogue [that] sets the parameters for an agreement
to interact modelled on ethical and honourable principles" (p. 2). This
contested space challenges and resists the status quo, taken-for-granted
assumptions, biases, and predetermined stereotypical representations that
influence cross-cultural interactions. Ermine argues that ethical space is

where power relations cease to exist and the ensuing dialogue provides a way for confronting and resolving the conflict, and so dialoguing is "itself an ethical act" (p. 4) that breaks down the oppressive colonizing silencing factors.

We each found that as we worked through our respective questions, disconnectedness, and disorientation arising out of journeying through unfamiliar and uncharted territory, we engaged in conversations about the various cultural tensions that exist while attempting to engage ethical space. The dialogue arising from this journey can sometimes be contentious, and it is through the discomfort of this contention that the contrasts between world views are revealed. Ermine (2005) has asserted that it is from the vantage point of this contrast that a space is simultaneously created. Smith (1999) asserts, "The spaces within the research domain through which Indigenous research can operate are small spaces on shifting ground. Negotiating and transforming institutional practices and research frameworks is as significant as the carrying out of actual research programmes" (p. 140).

Ermine's seemingly simplistic notion of ethical space fails to address the complexity of the interactions that serve to create that space. In other words, we have stated that we are journeying both individually and collectively. This process of journeying where our stories intersect and converge is also a form of ethical space. As individual researchers and participants, we are in a process of creating this ethical space within ourselves by our own questioning of our unique interpretations, meaning how we are perpetuating the status quo and our taken-for-granted assumptions and biases. Further, we are consistently (both individually and collectively) questioning our participation and positioning in the scope of the research. For some of us, this position entails negotiating the complex landscape of insider-versus-outsider researcher; for others, it is maneuvering through the minefield resulting from the historical processes of *othering* in relation to research.

One of the many questions arising out of this research, and one that is not easily answered, is How did one define ethical space in relation to Aboriginal research? Is the creation of this ethical space as simple and automatic as noted by Ermine (2005), or does it occur as a result of multi-layered and interconnected complex interactions and reactions as the researchers, community members, and research participants begin to question their own paradigms? What are the border areas, and how do they affect the research processes? Styres (2009) conceptualized this form of engagement as a Frierian process of renaming and co-creating our current reality. This "dialogue, as the encounter among men to 'name' the world, is a fundamental precondition for their true humanization" (Friere, 2003, p. 137). This notion of humanizing is the direct opposite of the dehumanization of othering and is in fact a decolonizing process. There-

fore, as we are in the process of journeying into unfamiliar territory and engaging in dialogue, ethical space is opened. This ethical space is in fact also a decolonizing space. However, decolonization remains a choice. Even in the space decolonization is not to be assumed. Once in the space, we have a choice either to confront and resist those colonizing forces that are at work in us influencing our cross-cultural and intercultural interactions, or to remain as we were, perpetuating these unhealthy, self-sabotaging, colonial agendas through adherence to policies and procedures that continue to privilege the established power structures in academia while marginalizing community.

Smith's (1999) notions of healing and decolonization are a crucial component of the Aboriginal research processes. Styres (2009) asserts that regardless of our positioning "as educators and researchers we ourselves must be engaged in the process of decolonization in order to create decolonizing and healing spaces for our research" (p. 12). Freire (2004) discussed an aspect of his own decolonization process wherein he was "seeking for the deepest 'why' of my pain, I was educating my hope" (p. 22). Freire could not speak of decolonization until he had experienced decolonization in his own constructs.

As we were looking at the space, straining to envision how this space would be conceptualized, we realized that both Ermine's (2005) notion of automatically created ethical spaces and Smith's (1999) notion of shifting ground were relevant to our community-first perspective. Smith's notion that Indigenous research operates on small spaces made up of shifting ground refers to the journeying processes noted above. The shifting ground is characterized by our individual and collective questioning of our own meanings, interpretations, and identity. The creation of ethical space is a journeying process that begins by making a conscious but uncomfortable decision to move into unfamiliar territory. It is a space that is marked by observing what is happening around us and reflecting on our responses to what we observe. Ermine's notion of automatically created ethical space, in other words, involuntary or as a necessary consequence of some occurrence arises out of the reflexivity noted above. Ethical space is a sacred space where spirit, mind, body, and emotion are interconnected. In this way, ethical space that occurs through purposeful journeying directly leads us into shifting our previously held assumptions and paradigms. Thus ethical space is created both automatically and with purpose and intent.

The border areas are those spaces where process dictates that certain objectives must be achieved without any clear direction as to what constitutes this process. Take, for example, the ethical notion of obtaining informed consent. University policy dictates that we must obtain informed consent from all participants before proceeding with the research. The usual method for this includes a written document that is to be previewed

and signed by the participant before the research proceeds. However, one question with which our team wrestled was What constitutes informed consent, and how do we know when we have informed consent? In a culture-sharing group where the oral processes have historically been the method of transmitting knowledge and obtaining information, does the written document hold more value than the oral process of obtaining informed consent?

In our focus groups, the practice or norm has been that the participants have arrived at the sessions not having read or signed the informed consent form, not because they have taken issue with or lack understanding of the document, but because this community values oral processes over written processes. In addition, the participants have attended the sessions because of relationships, as one of the Consortium members did all the recruiting for the sessions and individuals attended because of their relationships with the Consortium member. Once the participants have had a chance to discuss the informed consent form and have reached consensus among themselves as participants, they have without exception signed the form. However, the question remains as to why the signed form is obligatory. Could informed consent be obtained orally and documented on audio- and/or videotape? What process is validated and privileged, the community's traditional oral processes or the university's need to have written documentation? Can this really be considered community-first research if we continue to perpetuate our own taken-for-granted assumption in validating the dominant processes? Have we taken an important step toward community-first research in establishing relationships with each of the participants in the sessions and then maintaining our accountability to those relationships by being true to what we have said we would do in terms of dissemination and honoring the voices of the participants? It is clear from this dialogue that we continue to generate more questions than we have answers for. Perhaps this is part of the ongoing creation of ethical space in that it is not a static space, and that once created, it is an organic, interconnected, and iterative space that continues to evolve and change contextually as we journey.

Styres (2009) stated that decolonized voices can

transcend traditional borders that marginalize people and delineate notions of authenticity and essentialism, thereby creating authentic spaces for healing, resistance, reclamation, deconstruction, reconstruction, and empowerment, as well as the spaces from which to determine what our responsibilities are and what course of action to take. (p. 13)

In order for our research and educational praxis to be decolonizing and healing spaces, we need to break through traditional boundaries, journey into the border areas, and allow space to be created for processes that allow us to conduct research with Indigenous culture-sharing groups in an ethical, culturally aligned manner that challenges the status quo and privileges community.

Conducting Research on the Land

Another dimension of ethical space is the concept of land. In choosing to conduct all the research and its related processes on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, we engaged this concept of land from both a practical and a theoretical perspective. From the place of practicality, all focus groups and Consortium meetings were held in central community locations; whenever possible, we used community services and businesses so that the very action of the research contributed to the community's economic well-being. In addition, we had to address some practical issues such as participant honoraria and invoicing, which is discussed in further detail below. The theoretical perspective was more complex. Taken together with our community-first approach, we realized that our research would be more aptly described as land-based research.

This concept as applied in the context of this research is still fluid and emergent. It is tied to place from an Aboriginal perspective of place as being all the history associated with the land and its people, ancestral knowledge, storying,[4] notions of identity as it relates to place, as well as the knowledge that the land has to offer. It is also tied to the idea of journeying, as we are not only engaging in a research project, but are also paying close attention to how we are journeying together through the research and how each of us has our own individual journey in relation to the research and associated relationships.

Given the above discussion, and as stated, our approach to this research is more appropriately characterized as land-based research. Land or *place* from an Aboriginal perspective carries with it the idea of journeying, of being connected to and interconnected with geographic and spiritual space: in other words, a deep sense of identification through a cosmological and ecological connection to both the natural and spiritual worlds in that place. This connection and identification lead us into a discussion of land-based research as a model for sovereignty and self-determination whereby community is the privileged voice that dictates and guides the research, and academia is a respected but marginalized voice. Land has traditionally been considered a sacred, healing space where anyone who is connected to that place can find what he or she needs to maintain, sustain, and build a healthy life.

Land-based research, therefore, is in essence a decolonizing journey into a space where community protocols, norms, voice, needs, values, knowledge, traditions, and stories are privileged and centralized in culturally aligned research methods. It is a space wherein the community mentors, teaches, and guides the researchers in how to conduct research in their space, on their land, and under their terms. The researchers willingly and humbly place themselves in the role of nonexpert and allow the community to be the experts in the research processes.

In a practical sense, this meant that we had to be willing to work with what the community representatives thought would work best and to question how we were used to doing research. For example, the Tecumseh Centre had a set approach that we had agreed to use in the project for reimbursing participants. However, it was a bureaucratic process that involved collecting social insurance numbers and contact information in advance of the focus group meetings. It quickly became apparent that this was not working in the community setting and was viewed by the participants as intrusive. The process also took a significant amount of time and was not flexible. Instead, a community team member suggested that the participant honorarium cheques be issued by one of the community agencies, and then Brock University would be invoiced for the focus group's expenses including participant honoraria. This process was more efficient and also worked better for the participants. They received their cheques faster and were not required to provide personal information. The process also supported a community approach to research and a higher level of involvement by the community agency. In investigating the process of securing cheques, there was no reason to adhere to the process other than that it had always been done that way and had worked in the past. An important part of our collaboration has been being flexible and adopting methods and processes that worked best for the community and the project.

Another practical example of how land-based research differs from other collaborations occurred during the focus groups. We had planned to use a culturally sensitive approach based on the condolence ceremony. Although we did include elements that we would not have included in other focus groups such as taking time to share food and conversation, not many other cultural elements were included. However, we did proceed in the most culturally appropriate way given our circumstances and our awareness of issues about positionality, power, and privilege. The principal investigator conducted the focus groups, and as a white woman was well aware that it would be inappropriate to approach the focus groups as an Aboriginal researcher from the Tecumseh Centre might have done had he or she been involved. Her approach demonstrated willingness to listen to participants share their stories and that she knew that she had much to learn about the community and community members. The Consortium members who resided in the community and who were present at the focus groups provided the balance, agency, and perspective that resonated and connected with the concerns of the respective participants, who then felt more at ease with participating in a research project that would benefit the community, honor the stories that were shared, and authenticate and validate the realities and concerns of the community as expressed by the participants.

Concluding Comments

It is clear to us that this research project is just the first part of a long journey, and we are privileged to share this journey with members of the Six Nations community. It is a collaboration that involves reciprocal learning for everyone involved and that we continue to reflect on and challenge each other to question our own positions, perspectives, and implicit assumptions. In this article, we share the learning that emerged from a consideration of various ethical issues and how these issues framed the development of our MOU. In addition, we explore how the development of the MOU enhanced our awareness of the implications of ethical space and explore how ethical space emerged in our research. We also describe how our community-first approach is distinct from community-based research and is more aptly described as land-based research. As the research has evolved, we have learned to be more flexible and have come to appreciate the value of *silence* and *listening* to what the community has to say. We have also gained a deeper appreciation of the role of relationships in the process, specifically of their centrality to the process. Wilson (2008) stated, "If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right." We have all been changed through this research and look forward to continuing to journey together.

Notes

[1]*Aboriginal* refers to the original or first people of a country and is used interchangeably with the terms *Indigenous, Native,* and *Indian* depending on authors' context in the use of quotations. For the scope of this document it also includes Métis and Inuit unless otherwise specifically noted (Styres, 2008a, 2008b).

[2]*Organic* refers to something that contains a life force or energy that is interconnected with other life forces or energies in order to create mutual sustainability. It is dynamic, changing, evolving, and adapting contextually (Styres, 2008a, 2008b).

[3]*Journeying* symbolizes the passage from one place to another; is initiated by questioning meanings, interpretations, and identity; is begun by making a conscious decision to move into unfamiliar territory while maintaining an observing and reflective frame of mind. Journeying is a place where spirituality is infused into the mind, body, and emotional states of our being, where our stories intersect and become interconnected with other stories. Journeying without intent is nothing more than aimless wandering. Purposeful journeying leads us to shift and transform the landscape of our previously held assumptions and paradigms.

[4]*Storying* refers to how we describe in story our experiences through personal, community, national, and global narratives (Styres, 2008a, 2008b).

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