

# COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN NORTHERN COMMUNITIES

## *Possibilities and Pitfalls\**

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**M**OST CANADIANS LIVE IN a narrow band along the southern border with the United States. Our large urban centres, corporate head offices, seats of government, and universities tend to be located in the south. Just as British Columbians struggle against a Canada defined by the issues and perspectives of a more populous central Canada, northern British Columbians often feel unrepresented by the policies and perspectives of southern B.C. This may be particularly so for northern First Nations communities, doubly distanced by the exclusivity of mainstream institutions and the southern definition of what issues should be considered important.

The small cities, towns, villages, and scattered settlements that comprise the communities of the northern two-thirds of the province vary in their character, but tend to share certain characteristics that set them apart from southern neighbours. Communities are often remote, not only physically but also from the ideas and values of larger centres. Yet northern residents seldom consider *themselves* remote; rather, they see southern cities and urban preoccupations as remote. Perhaps out of necessity, and perhaps because of the kinds of people who are attracted to northern life, people value independence and the ability to look after themselves. People live closer to the land and the seasons. Many make their living off the land or have chosen northern communities out of preference for a small-town or rural life closer to nature. Many First Nations people still live on the traditional lands their ancestors have held since time immemorial. There are more than the usual number of rugged individualists and interesting characters in the north.

Yet, typically, northerners also have a strong sense of community. Each town or village has its own distinct character. Everyone has a

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place and “pitches in.” There is a lack of anonymity, counterbalanced by the informal inclusivity of dropping in for coffee, pick-up hockey games, raffles, potlucks, and meeting the gang at the bar.

While northern communities are different from those in the southern or central Canadian cities, they have not been studied as much as southern communities that are nearer big urban centres and closer to established universities. Much social research is conceived and conducted in urban environments and then generalized “willy-nilly” to non-metropolitan areas such as the north. Ellul (1978) speaks of two kinds of poverty. The poor man, in Ellul’s view, is the one who is forgotten, the one whom nobody knows about and recognizes. The person of whom no one knows is truly the most abandoned of persons. Ellul also considered poverty as a lack of means of intervening with the authorities and a lack of influence. People who do not share in any decision-making and on whom social policy is simply imposed are poor.

This lack of access to recognition and influence are the roots of the oft-surfacing expressions of frustration and resentment about centralized (southern) decision-making and its implications for the north. The resources and knowledge of university researchers could be used to address many issues important to the north. Yet few northern residents have had sufficient familiarity with the culture, tools, and possibilities of research to counter these southern and urban biases and give the north a distinct place in the body of accepted wisdom and an influence on policy. In the north, traditionally there has been less participation in post-secondary education. Northerners who go away to university in the city may not come back — a within-province version of the north to south “brain-drain.” In addition, preconceptions about universities, university students, and university professors and what they do have often inhibited local participation in and partnerships with universities, especially as universities have been seen to represent southern urban perspectives. Researchers come from away, and they take the information away and recast it with a southern bias. And again, the most extreme examples of exploitive research and lack of respect for local perspectives have occurred in First Nations communities, where people’s experiences, values, and traditions — their language and culture — have been denigrated and denied.

Higher education institutions in northern Canada are relatively new establishments. Northern communities have regarded the establishment of universities and colleges as vital for the development of the north. They have hoped that indigenous universities would keep

their sons and daughters in the north by educating them in professions attuned to needs of the north. They also expect northern universities to carry out development-oriented research, and serve many needs of the north by rendering various services and providing advice to policy-makers (cf. arguments for developing a northern university in B.C., Interior University Society, 1988). In short, northern communities have seen higher education and its related functions as a developmental tool to direct a variety of social changes and to bring economic, cultural, social and personal benefits (Interior University Society, 1988). The hope is that by having their own universities and colleges, the north will gain a voice.

Whether social and community research is conducted in the north for testing theories and practices on a more representative sample of Canadians, to increase understanding of the diversity of Canadian society, or to respond to practical and policy needs of local communities, researchers need to understand the context of the community under consideration. Beyond the typical characteristics of northern communities outlined above, each separate community has its own local history, needs, and aspirations. Whether researchers come into a small community from a nearby northern university or college, or from the south, they will initially be seen as "from away," however sensitized they might be to northern or First Nations issues. They will lack knowledge of the particulars of the individuals that make up the community, the complex web of social relationships and its change over time, and the history of important events and their meanings for people. Researchers going into First Nations communities may lack even a rudimentary understanding of the language and culture.

#### MODELS OF COLLABORATION

Until northern residents have the knowledge, tools, and access to resources to readily design and conduct their own research, there seem to be two ways for university researchers to engage in social science research in ways responsive to local needs and context. One way is to conduct ethnographic research. This approach yields a holistic understanding of the culture of a community, but is time-consuming, may be intrusive, and is seldom directed to solving immediate practical problems.

Collaborative research is the other approach. There are many variations and degrees of collaboration, ranging from community-based participatory and action research models to university colleagues co-

writing papers. Approaches to collaboration vary according to collaborating partners' distance from the university system or hierarchy, the inclusiveness of opportunities for participation, and the extent of control local co-participants have over the research from inception to sharing of results. A brief summary of examples of collaborative research models follows.

Collaborative research means different things to different people. We have identified the following four broad categories of collaboration. *Intradisciplinary* collaboration describes the situation where two or more researchers in the same academic discipline or field work together on a theoretical paper or empirical study (Borden, 1992). Subjects may be studied but are not invited to participate in other aspects of defining, conducting, or validating the research. Multiple authorship has become so commonplace that some no longer include it as a category of collaboration. (This article is an example of intradisciplinary collaboration.)

*Interdisciplinary* collaboration refers to research engaged in by researchers from two or more disciplines or fields (Borden, 1992). For example, researchers from anthropology, nursing, and women's studies might collaborate on a project, sharing different forms of expertise, including subject knowledge, methodological expertise, resources and access to research participants.

*Interorganizational* collaboration may involve research partnerships between universities and government agencies, corporations and other institutions of higher education. The discovery of collaborative opportunities, exploration of these opportunities, and the crystallization of collaborative research relations can lead to rich opportunities to share resources and develop quality research products. Different organizations can share such different resources as expertise, funding, and research environments. Kreiner and Schultz (1993) have suggested that this form of collaboration is synergistic, with the potential to attract greater numbers of researchers and participants into an increasing complex of collaboration.

Although the forms of collaboration outlined above have merit and require nurturing, the remainder of our discussion will focus on *university-community* approaches to shared inquiry. Often university-community collaboration involves a university researcher working with a local practitioner (e.g., a teacher, administrator, or physician) to investigate a problem or try an intervention in the local practitioner's setting. The local practitioner might have contacted the university through practicum supervision or by enrolling in continuing educa-

tion or graduate studies, and the research might be a required part of his or her program. Typically, the collaborating team studies other community members who are viewed as subjects without control over the research process. Or the research may focus on the local practitioner's own practice, as in education studies of teacher change or teaching effectiveness (Hunsaker & Johnston, 1992; Skau, 1987; Troyna & Foster, 1988). The advantages of this research model for linking theory and practice have been widely discussed (Skau, 1987).

University-community collaboration may also be undertaken with a broad cross-section of a community or subcommunity using a participatory research model. Here the university researcher or team of researchers is not involved with only one or two local service providers, but with a wide range of community members. This approach differs from the other approaches described above in that the participants whose community is under study have a role in deciding the research questions and design, conducting the data collection, interpreting the data, and participating in dissemination of findings. Of the various collaborative models, this is the one that is most inclusive, involves people farthest from the university culture, and provides the greatest degree of control by local research participants over the research from inception to sharing of results.

Often participatory research is initiated within the local community, which then seeks advice and expertise from university researchers. An example is a recent study by the Cariboo Tribal Council (1992) surveying experiences of abuse and mental health in four First Nations communities, and linking these findings to community members' educational experiences. Action research, in which researchers from outside a community join a community with a long-term commitment to act as change agents within that community, is also an example of a type of participatory research.

## POSSIBILITIES

In the last fifteen years, many articles have appeared in the research literature of the social sciences expressing the possibilities and advantages of pursuing university-community collaborative research (Cariboo Tribal Council, 1992; Hunsaker & Johnston, 1992; Medical Services Branch Steering Committee on Mental Health, 1991; Skau, 1987). University-community collaboration involves community members in defining research and directing it to their own often pragmatic interests. Local people can make contact with the university

and build a working relationship, as well as gaining opportunities to learn about the processes and uses of research. Collaborative approaches tend to involve university researchers in studies that address practical implications and include intervention components, as practical considerations are typically the primary focus of local interest and the impetus for involvement with the research in the first place.

By involving community members as colleagues rather than subjects, either in researcher-practitioner studies, or in more community-wide participatory models, the researchers are more likely to obtain a more rounded “real world” view than could be achieved by outsiders with a priori designs. Community members know the context in the broad sense — geographically, historically, socially, and culturally — and their involvement provides the research with an ecological grounding. The community itself is a context. As an outside researcher probably can never get to know the community well, valid research will depend on having informants who will teach the researcher about the community and the culture. In traditional scientific or positivist approaches to social science research, researchers have viewed communities as statistical populations for testing their models of how the world works. In shared inquiry, research is reconstructed as an enterprise for mutual meaning construction in all the phases of planning, implementation, analysis, and sharing of results.

An obvious advantage of university-community collaborative approaches is that they are typically less exploitive of research participants than traditional approaches. Because local residents are involved in all stages of the research, they can direct the research questions to their own interests rather than only to the university researcher’s interests. They can help design the study and collect data in ways that are sensitive to local values and social conditions. Because they help analyse and interpret findings, inaccurate or decontextualized interpretations and conclusions can be avoided. Finally, they have the right to retain research products — videotapes, written reports, materials, or artifacts — in their communities to use in ways that will help their communities. This contrasts with the common result of government, corporate, or academic research, in which reports disappear into research journals or policy-makers’ filing cabinets, without ever returning to the community itself, except perhaps as top-down policies or programs.

University-community models of research may be particularly suited to research in northern communities. First, community-based

collaborative research can be an asset to a community. Through participation in research, the community members can develop awareness of the university and be introduced to people and resources at the university. Collaborative research provides an opportunity for broadening human contacts, both for community researchers and university researchers. While working toward defining or solving the particular problem on which the study focuses, community members learn about the nature of research, critical reflection, use of research tools, and ways of thinking.

This is not a one-way relationship. Collaboration also gives the university an awareness of the community. It introduces people and community resources to the university. Through research partnerships, university faculty can learn about particular northern communities, their issues and processes, and the perspectives of residents of those communities. For southern universities that in the past have focused mostly on southern urban issues and perspectives, and for northern universities that are new to a region (both as institutions, and in the sense that most members of these universities may be outsiders from away), expanded perspectives and understanding are central to successful social science research.

University-community collaborative research projects are also a way to give the university a regional presence, and northern communities a sense of community participation and ownership of the university. Northern communities lobbying for a university, and, in fact, Canadians across the country tend to think of universities in terms of their teaching role and those courses a university might offer in their communities (Interior University Society, 1988). Research collaboration will enable northerners to develop an understanding of the research and service functions of universities to complement their awareness of the teaching function. Collaborative research of this kind leads to productive relationships between the community and university, and collaborative research may promote integration of the community and university. At the root of collaboration is communication. Communication that leads to shared understandings is the foundation of good university program development, sound research agendas, and healthy communities.

While community residents may develop a broader conception of the nature and roles of universities through engaging in research in their community, with increased familiarity with the university they also might come to see higher education as a possibility for themselves or their children. Conversely, members of the university community

might begin to understand how the university can adapt itself to provide programs and courses that better serve northern communities.

As northern residents gain greater familiarity with their regional university and universities in general, the mystique of university — feelings that university and what it represents is unattainable, or condescending, or oppressive, or the answer to all problems — will begin to be dispelled. People who have felt that the university has nothing for them might take a chance with university study as a route to learning, change, and personal growth. And this, the pursuit of lifelong learning, more than provision of professional training programs to “keep the kids at home,” is where real changes for the north will begin. Perhaps through participatory research and participation in learning, the north will find ways to use its voice for the empowerment of all northerners.

University-community collaborative research particularly holds great promise for First Nations communities in the north. The needs are large in northern First Nations communities. There is a strong desire for and active promotion of change in these communities. People are working to regain some control over their lands, communities, governance, health, and education. First Nations peoples look to use research as a tool for change and a way to access and contribute to knowledge of the wider society. Collaborative research provides access to the resources of the university, including people with skills and knowledge, equipment, systems, money, and ways of thinking. For First Nations people, there are fewer other routes to this knowledge and these resources, given the lower rate of high school completion and lower rates of participation in post-secondary education (MacPherson, 1991), as well as historical exclusion from decision-making bodies in Canadian society. Thus, collaborative research addresses pressing problems, while providing an informal and practical way to gain knowledge and experience in research, writing, and program development.

However, many people oppose the notion of outside researchers coming into their communities. Historically, First Nations peoples have been abused by research conducted by outside researchers, who have often used “objective” scientific research paradigms, and have seen themselves as unquestionable authorities. Scientific western-European rational-empirical approaches might seem inconsistent with more holistic First Nations’ perspectives emphasizing respect, spiritual health, and responsibilities to the clan, the community, and the land (Haig-Brown, 1992). On the other hand, it is possible that



problems have resided less in the methods used than in the presuppositions about First Nations peoples held by researchers and policy-makers.

In the past, when cultural differences were recognized, they were often considered evidence of heathenism or savagery, and the stated goal was to eliminate native language and culture as quickly as possible (Haig-Brown, 1988; Kirkness, 1989). Art and cultural artifacts were removed from communities for study and display without any question about the rights of First Nations peoples. Consequently, outside research in First Nations communities has supported policies of cultural genocide as well as a sad history of well-meaning but intrusive and culturally insensitive interventions (Haig-Brown, 1992). Control has not been in the hands of First Nations people, and research has left a bitter legacy (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Collaborative approaches provide a way to return control to the First Nations communities.

First Nations cultures differ from mainstream Canadian culture. First Nations people strive to walk within two cultures. If cross-cultural understandings are to be achieved, researchers must turn to collaborative approaches. While collaborative research provides an opportunity for First Nations community members to learn about and gain access to university and mainstream culture and tools, it also enables university researchers and the wider society to learn about First Nations perspectives and teachings. Pragmatically, university-community collaboration may be the only way for outsiders to develop well-rounded "authentic" understandings.

The possibilities inherent in collaborative research approaches in the north can be summed up by Mumford's (1970) idea of plenitude. Northern and First Nations communities represent part of the great variety of human belief, activity, and endeavour. What the north does, and what northern communities do in responding to their situations and the environment, is of interest to other communities because it provides a counterpoint to "the usual." Northern communities and ways of life represent unique adaptations to a particular environment. Knowing about the adaptations and solutions to problems that northerners create are of interest simply because they suggest richer, more diverse possibilities for all.

Paulston (1993), in outlining the history of research in general and research in education in particular, describes the collapse of grand theory and homogeneity of perspective in the social sciences. No individual or community is now in a position to claim a monopoly on

truth or to claim to fill a certain intellectual space. Rather, a growing number of researchers see all knowledge in the social sciences as incomplete and problematic. While orthodox social scientific researchers views heterogeneity as problematic, writers such as Husen (1988) and Paulston (1990) suggest that no one perspective can answer all questions: that all views complement each other to give a richer perspective about problematic social phenomena. The strength of collaborative research is that it encourages open communication and the airing and understanding of differences. While orthodox research traditions have favoured efficiency and an emphasis on homogeneity of knowledge production, participatory approaches are organized towards facilitating democratic communication and an appetite for human diversity.

While traditional social science research approaches have fractured research roles according to the notion of the division of labour (a researcher and an object-like “subject” who need engage in little dialogue or mutual understanding), collaborative approaches blur the distinction between the researcher and the researched.

#### PITFALLS

Despite all these good reasons for engaging in university-community collaborative research in northern communities, there are some very real problems in this enterprise. There are problems of compatibility of needs and goals, the difficulties of the process, and questions of ethics.

The first of these problems is that university culture and university researchers’ needs may be incompatible with a community’s needs. For example, because of the nature of the external university granting system funding university research, as well as the publishing demands placed on individual researchers, the time frame of research studies and programs of research is frequently too short to meet the specific needs and concerns of the community. The process leads to studies that describe situations, policies, projects, or problems, but that seldom continue on to intervention or evaluation studies. Researchers feel pressured to get in, get the data, and get out, and may resist long-term commitments to projects and communities. This can lead to few real changes and disillusionment of community members and researchers.

On the other hand, collaborative studies tend to be limited to applied research. Local participants typically foreground the purpose of seeking practical benefits to the community from the research and tend to direct all phases of the research toward that end. Theoretical

and basic work needed to support the applied work often goes undone. University researchers may worry that the study has become more of a community development service than an academic contribution to knowledge.

University-community collaborative research is hard to do, especially when using inclusive participatory designs. It is not easy to construct shared understandings among people, and it becomes more difficult as a greater diversity of people and perspectives are included, and as the control is dispersed among all.

One cannot assume a uniformity of beliefs, values, needs, and goals in any community. Large-scale university-community research tends to discover considerable diversity of opinion and understanding. Contrary views cannot be easily deleted from further consideration as "outliers" as with traditional research orientations directed at shaping facts into nomothetic or law-like generalizations.

If university researchers collaborate with a community, how are they to deal with the multiplicity of voices, perspectives, values, and expectations of directions the research will take? Some community members will hold points of view that are diametrically opposed. Collaborative research is riddled with the "problems" associated with democracy. For some, collaborative research is "inefficient." Endless consultation and discussions can "interfere" with the primary task of "getting on" with the research and obtaining "results." Collaborative research is research by committee. Consequently, this form of research has the same pitfalls of other forms of committee work: work by committee often moves at a glacial pace, conflicts between participants arise, difficult decisions are avoided, and the result might seem incoherent and please no one (Borden, 1992).

Because of difficulties in developing trust and productive communication, an ever present danger of collaborative research is the tendency to pose or investigate only the easy questions. By avoiding difficult, complex questions, and by implication avoiding the long-term project of establishing trust, findings might be trivial, or reflect only what the researcher or community wants to find. For example, in education research, if teachers and principals are involved as collaborators, explanations for findings will be unlikely to focus on ineffective teaching or school management strategies. School-based researchers will be unlikely to look for or want to find those sorts of results, while university researchers will feel bound by the social contract of not "betraying" the collaborators who have worked with them.

Another problem is that the relationship between the state, the university, the researcher, and the researched is necessarily asymmetric (Troyna & Foster, 1988). The question is, how collaborative is collaborative research? Collaborative research can be more rhetoric than reality. Often collaborators are collaborators in name only. More often, the collaboration is limited to particular phases of the research. For instance, community participation in the problem-definition and data-gathering parts of the research does not ensure sharing of findings. It is difficult for local members of the community to have influence in research of this kind when the university researcher has the power and control. For the university researcher comfortable with the isolated routines of research development, implementation, and analysis, the sharing of power and control can be discomfiting and handicapping.

Although collaborative research is often touted as a more ethical approach to inquiry than other research approaches, ethical concerns nevertheless remain. Even research or interventions conducted with the best of intentions may have (and in the past have had) unforeseeable negative consequences on communities. For example, missionary work in B.C. with First Nations in the context of European viewpoints of the nineteenth century seemed good and necessary at the time from the point of view of the missionaries, but has had profound consequences for First Nations beliefs, practices, and ways of life (Patterson, 1982).

The issue of researchers decentring themselves — of considering the other's perspectives and needs first — is perhaps germane here. If collaboration in a real sense is to take place, the research participants need to have authority and control (Haig-Brown, 1992).

The question we must ask is whether all research is simply a western-European technique used to describe, explain, predict, and ultimately control. If so, perhaps research is, by definition, an institutional form of colonialism. The transmission of university culture or mainstream culture is not value-free. Even seemingly innocuous ideas and apparently helpful programmes can be as disruptive to a culture as the diseases that disrupted native life at contact. If all research is a form of colonialism, then involving members of a community in collaborative research on themselves may simply engage them as instruments of their own cultural destruction.

The potential risks of collaborative or any other kind of research on northern communities are perhaps greatest for First Nations, as many of their communities exist in a state of desperation, and are therefore

vulnerable to further exploitation. People may have little control over wider social processes, or access to systems, material goods, decision-making power. The potential of collaborative research is that it might allow such communities to appropriate control. The risk to the university researcher, however, is that result might make the researcher (and maybe the university as well) unpopular with organizations that currently wield control over marginalized groups. The researcher ought to be prepared for unpleasant challenges should the research be controversial and not just “happy talk.” Critical research requires some personal courage to live with such difficulties.

## CONCLUSION

To collaborate, co-researchers need *time*, they need to develop *trust*, and they have to be prepared to offer long-term *commitment*. Collaborative research requires that the university and the community forge a relationship. Relationships need time to develop, yet universities have a research cycle that by its nature makes it difficult for university and community researchers to develop close relationships. University research is subject to an unremitting mechanical ticking of the academic clock, while relationships have an organic quality which requires patience, sensitivity, and give-and-take. This is especially true with First Nations, with the history of having exploitive research imposed, and the broken promises about benefits and changes said to arise from the research, and the challenges of building understandings across cultures. University culture and constraints prevent taking the time needed.

Limited physical accessibility of many small northern communities makes long-term collaborative research difficult. The mere addition of a university researcher (and his or her ideas, family, technical equipment, and so on) to a small community may have both short-term (and thus influence findings) and long-term (leading to ethical considerations) influences on the community as the researcher becomes a significant element in the ecology of the community. Fundamentally, the question is whether cross-cultural communication can be achieved between the university culture and the northern or First Nations culture. University researchers must consider carefully whether to become involved in research in a community in the first place (Haig-Brown, 1992).

Consideration of ethics is an integral aspect of social research, particularly of collaborative research. Since collaborative research

involves extensive involvement, communication, negotiation, and compromise, an extensive review of ethical problems and dilemmas should be at the heart of such research. Perhaps the potential for harm is even greater with collaborative research than more traditional approaches, as betrayal by a person who has insinuated himself or herself into a community as friend and colleague will seem greater than the familiar exploitation by "objective" strangers.

Although the uncertainty of and risks associated with collaborative research are great, this approach towards creating understandings of complex phenomena is both worthwhile and necessary. Traditional research traditions have generally severed research technique from the question of ethics, itself seen as a technical question. Modernity represents a cultural break of major proportions in Western thought by its severing of the "ethical subject" from the "truthseeking subject" and constructing the researcher as a disinterested objective seeker of knowledge. In this way, notions of what people do and notions of what people ought to do have been separated.

The recent commitment to collaboration stems from a reintegration of knowledge-seeking and ethics. Collaborative research can be seen as an important element of democracy, a reconceptualization of the central role of social science research. Collaborative research, like democracy, is difficult, but we do it because it is both right and necessary. People in northern and First Nations communities deserve no less.

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Louisa Anderson, 1907-1989. Photograph taken by Margaret Seguin (Anderson) ca. 1978. Louisa was tying dried salmon *wooks* in a smokehouse.