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Author

Rieth, Benjamin (Iwapew)

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Creating Joy: Connecting Your Tribal Background to Your Research Studies

Benjamin (Iwapew) Rieth

Research can be intensely personal, and one's identities can be intertwined in this work.¹ Everyone has their own unconscious biases concerning their identities, as we have all grown up in different ways and come from different backgrounds. An essential part of research is knowing that our identities and biases affect our work. Mere Berryman et al. argues that understanding identity and how the identities of others, ourselves, and our research subjects is the first step in conducting a high-quality, culturally responsive study. This includes asking questions such as what biases does one hold, and what does this mean for one's self and for others with whom one relates and engages.² As a Chippewa scholar, I thought it fitting to use an Indigenous research paradigm from an Anishinaabe perspective. Within this piece, I share my story throughout my dissertation process, explaining why I chose to follow an Anishinaabe paradigm, how I kept it close to my heart, how my identities collided with each other, how this process informed my practices as a researcher, and the joy I have found along the way throughout this journey.

MY STORY AS A RESEARCHER

In keeping with Berryman et al.'s premise, researchers must disclose their position and story in their study.³ Accordingly, I am a proud gay man, an enrolled member of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa, and a descendant of the Menominee Nation. I am also a white-passing person of color. These seemingly disparate identities caused me to feel like I did not belong, and it took time for me to understand them, name them, and feel comfortable with them. Sharing my experiences with

BENJAMIN RIETH is the director of student affairs and diversity, equity and inclusion at Bellin College and a doctoral student at New England College, graduating December 2023. Rieth studies students' sense of belonging by using Indigenous research methods and an Indigenous paradigm derived from his own tribal roots.

readers will help explain how I chose to embark on this journey and why this work is important to me.

I grew up in a small town in the Midwest with approximately 3,000 people and graduated with about eighty-five other high school students. My family was the only Indigenous family within the community. My mom put on presentations for our K–12 school about our Indigenous culture, which made me proud. However, this is when people started to look at me differently, and I encountered bullies. Being gay was a burning secret I kept to myself throughout my childhood due to fear of disappointing my friends and family. Finally, at one point in high school, I decided to keep my sexuality a secret for the rest of my life. I often felt alone, lost, confused, and many times depressed. The thought of college, though, fueled me to keep going and created a dream to leave my hometown, encounter new experiences, and learn new ideas.

I applied to several schools and was accepted by St. Norbert College (SNC) in De Pere, Wisconsin. In the fall of 2013, I moved onto campus a week early to participate in SNC's Students Take Academic Responsibility (STAR) program. The STAR program is designed for first-year multicultural college students. Throughout this first week on campus, I found friends for a lifetime, staff and faculty members who would do everything they could to make sure students felt like they were important and belonged, and so much more. This experience gave me the foundation to join other clubs, make friends like me, participate in vocal ensembles, and become a member of the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity. SNC's resources, understanding, training, and positive actions created what I defined as a safe space where I felt like I belonged. Two months later, I came out as a proud gay man.

From living my story, and throughout my doctoral journey, I was able to create a deeper connection to my social identity, my work, and my sense of self. I found how my identities intertwined with each other and made me whole. Each identity helped inform who I was as a researcher, guiding me to take an ethical approach throughout my research process and to treat each story I collected with care and understanding.

ANISHINAABEG RESEARCH PARADIGM

After searching for a paradigm that would aptly represent what I was trying to study and work toward, I found the Anishinaabeg paradigm created by Tricia McGuire-Adams.⁴ As opposed to Western paradigms, Indigenous paradigms consider people as spiritual beings with multiple relationships to be nurtured throughout the research process.⁵ Shawn Wilson explained that an Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational, and that knowledge is shared with all creation. Wilson elaborated on the impact of relationships in research by stating the following:

It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge . . . you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research.⁶

Further emphasizing relationships, Wilson analyzes ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology not as four separate ideas or entities but as a circle, explaining that ontology and epistemology are based on a process of relationships forming a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based on maintaining accountability to these relationships. An Indigenous research paradigm is relational and maintains relational accountability.

In 2018, McGuire-Adams articulated an Anishinaabeg research paradigm based on Wilson's work.⁷ McGuire-Adams further incorporated other Anishinaabe scholars' theorizations of Anishinaabeg ways of being, such as Benton-Banai, Geniusz, and Simpson, which helped her weave together a research paradigm using Anishinaabemowin.⁸ To learn more about my people, break down colonial ideas, and take accountability, I decided to interweave Anishinaabemowin throughout my methodology, the language my Anishinaabeg ancestors spoke, to express more of the teachings and values of my Anishinaabe culture. Anishinaabemowin provides a spiritual connection to our land, ancestors, culture, teachings, and fosters relationships.

McGuire's Anishinaabeg research paradigm includes five interrelated components:⁹

(1) *Gikendaasowin*, which describes Anishinaabeg knowledge perceived from the "synthesis of our personal teachings. I did this by keeping myself accountable in using this paradigm and my Indigenous teachings, even when others disagreed with me.

(2) *Inaadiziwin*, which is the Anishinaabeg way of being, as it informs our beliefs about our existence or ontology. For me, this was one of the most important parts of this paradigm. We believe that stories and relationships are one of the most powerful things possible; it is how we breathe, teach, and live. I was intentional in that, before any interview or talking circle, I got to know each of my participants. We just sat, talked, and got to know each other for about fifteen to thirty minutes before asking specific questions about my research topic. However, this action was not separate from my research as an Anishinaabeg but was connected as I built a relationship with each of my participants. I was able to listen to the stories of other Indigenous researchers such as McGuire-Adams, Kamewaunkiw, my sister Natasha, my long-lost aunt Bonnie Mckiernan (Wawiyaenotinukiw), Denise Henning, and Sylvia Spears, just to name a few. These relationships kept me strong when I was down or doubted myself. It was imperative as an Indigenous person to have these relationships throughout this incredible journey.

(3) *Biskaabiiyaang*, which is an Anishinaabeg concept that means returning to ourselves, which can also be described as epistemology.¹⁰ McGuire-Adams explained, "Through decolonization, one must rely on her/his/their Indigenous identity, culture, ancestral *dibajimowinan* (passing on stories) and ontology in order to rebuild her/his/their identity, which is a process of regeneration against the effects of colonialism."¹¹ *Biskaabiiyaang*, by definition, requires an Anishinaabe researcher to personally decolonize in order to use or return to our ancestral *dibajimowinan*. For me, this was rebuilding my identity. Throughout my study, I kept our way of being by practicing my teachings, but it was much more than that, as it helped me find out who I am as a person. It can be confusing being an Indigenous person who did not grow up on the reservation, who has lost their grandparents, who were their teachers, etc. Throughout this journey, I was able to find myself and find more teachers to guide me.

(4) *Niizhwaaswi kchtwaa kinomaadiwinan*, also referred to as the seven grandfather teachings or the seven sacred gifts, are sacred teachings among the Anishinaabeg and encompass our *izhitwaawin*. McGuire-Adams said “the Niizhwaasi Kchitwaa Kinomaadiwinan are principles, ethics, and morals (axiology) that guide the Anishinaabeg to live in balance, especially as we seek *gikendaasowin*.” The seven grandfather teachings include the following:

- To cherish knowledge is to know *nbwaakaawin* (wisdom)
- To know *zaagidwin* (love) is to know peace
- To honor all of the creation is to have *mnaadendimowin* (respect)
- *Aakwade’ewin* (bravery) is to face the foe with integrity
- *Gwekwaadiziwin* (honesty) in facing a situation is to be brave
- *Dbaadendziwin* (humility) is to know yourself as a sacred part of creation
- *Debwewin* (truth) is to know all of these things.

I tried to live these teachings throughout my journey, and they made me a better person. I shared very personal stories throughout this journey as a way to show other Anishinaabeg people that we should be sharing our experiences and stories.

(5) *Wiisokotaatiwin* means gathering together for a purpose, which may be used as both a methodological framework and a research method. This taught me that whenever we meet with people, we are gathering for a purpose, which is ceremonial, and we should celebrate that. I enjoyed each person I connected with through this magnificent journey—participants, students, people asking about my doctoral journey, professors, other researchers. I loved learning about them, and each interaction was purposeful, as I gained something from them through the creator.

To live an Anishinaabeg paradigm is a special thing that should not be taken lightly. Truthfully, all Indigenous paradigms must be lived authentically, as they are sacred and must be respected. They are powerful because doing so brings us back to who we are, and what it means to be an Indigenous person, connects us back to our people, makes us better people, and therefore must be followed through with light, love, relationship, and joy. I am forever grateful for this experience.

Throughout my research, I examined what I was doing by using the five inter-related components, asking myself a range of different questions: Is this appropriate? Am I bringing too many Indigenous practices into my research? Will I make others uncomfortable? Would my community support what I am doing? Some of these questions were brought forward by Heather Shotton during one of her guest lectures at New England College on July 28, 2021. These questions haunted me throughout this journey, which is why I reached out to elders in my community, to other Indigenous scholars, and to many more people before conducting my study.

RESEARCH METHODS USED

To break down colonial ideas in research, I used some Indigenous research methods, including different ways to analyze my data, to gain consent, and to use my own

teachings to guide me. For example, I used talking circles as a forum to collect my data, and used ceremonial objects throughout my research.

First, I conducted individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with selected participants, known as purposive sampling. Second, I conducted talking circles. Both are forms of *wiisokotaatiwin*. Storytelling as a research tool has been increasingly popular either as complementary to the classical research of qualitative methods or as a research inquiry in its own right.¹² Storytelling is a potent research tool even if it does not complement but stands alone from classical inquiries, as its strengths lean more on its nature as an integral element of day-to-day communication of Indigenous communities.¹³ Many believe this tool represents a different way of learning about the world, no less valuable than classical research inquiries.¹⁴ Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko described storytelling as a “vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts.”¹⁵ Storytelling is also a powerful research paradigm because all communities have stories. Some of the reasoning why I used storytelling as a research tool is described by Lekoko: its potential to bring researchers and community members together to discuss social problems in a free and entertaining way (its problem-solving orientation; its participative, interactive, and persuasive nature; its comprehensiveness of structure that explores community interests and opinions seriously; and its narrative fidelity and respect of culture of Indigenous communities. Lekoko said, “Great stories provide us with a road map or treasure map, which outlines all of the actions and tasks we have to accomplish in order to complete the journey successfully.”¹⁶

The creation of talking circles has historically been credited to the Woodland tribes in the Midwest, where it was used as a form of parliamentary procedure.¹⁷ This does have a connection to my Anishinaabe and Menominee background, which is significant to me. Talking circles are based on the idea of participants’ respect for each other and are an example of a focus group method derived from postcolonial Indigenous worldviews.¹⁸

As Bagele Chilisa explained, there are many occasions to form a circle, including gathering around a fireplace during celebrations to sing, play games, and so forth. The talking circle is a symbol promoting the sharing of ideas, equality, togetherness, and expressions of respect, compassion, and love for one another.¹⁹ Peggy and Stan Wilson explained, “Group members sit in a circle, which represents the holism of Mother Earth and the equality of all members.”²⁰ A talking circle was explained to each participant before the start of the circle in an effort to ground us in this ceremony.

It is common for a sacred object to be used throughout talking circles, such as a feather, shield, stone, or basket, to be passed from speaker to speaker.²¹ I used an *asin*, a sacred spirit stone, almost perfectly smooth and round, that I found on the banks of Lake Superior on the reservation of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of the Chippewa Nation. This rare rock is sacred and kept secret by the Ojibwe people, and is still used in ceremonies today. When the speaker is holding this object, the speaker is not to be interrupted as the group listens silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished.²² After my graduation, I will go back to Lake Superior to return this stone and thank the creator for giving me this opportunity and for this journey.

The purpose of using talking circles in a research setting is to gain knowledge through discussion.²³ The benefit of conducting these talking circles is that they create *wisokotaatiwin*, the opportunity to tell their stories, and *debwewin*, the ability to build off each other's energy. Before the circle(s), I prepared *asemma* bundles to give to each participant as an offering for their participation. After this, I offered smudging with an explanation of what I would be doing, and asked if anyone did not wish to smudge.

Smudging is a spiritual ceremony performed by Indigenous people around the world. For the Anishinaabeg people, smudging is the burning of the four sacred medicines: tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweet grass. These medicines are represented in the medicine wheel, a circle separated into four quadrants with layers of significance and cultural meaning. The smoke of these sacred plants purifies the air, spirit, mind, body, and energies in the space the ceremony is performed. Many Anishinaabeg people smudge on a daily basis, and it is generally used to open meetings or sessions to set a tone of gratitude and positivity. During each step, I explained the reasoning for each action I took to engage and educate participants. I also explained the expectations of the circle. If at any point participants did not feel like answering a question or sharing something, they did not have to.

Postcolonial Indigenous knowledge systems can enable researchers to introduce new topics, themes, processes, categories of analysis, and modes of reporting and dissemination of information not easily obtained through conventional research methods.²⁴ I used relational accountability as a style of analysis, which requires the researcher to ask how the analysis of these ideas will help build relationships and what relationships help to hold the ideas together.²⁵ Wilson explained that an Indigenous style of analysis must explore all the relationships together instead of breaking them down into pieces in the way Western analysts do, such as when coding.²⁶ By breaking down each piece into smaller and smaller pieces, one is breaking these relationships, which goes against an Indigenous style of analysis. Wilson continued that this logic needs to become more intuitive, as the research must look at an entire system of relationships; breaking any piece of the topic away from the rest will destroy the relationships the piece holds with the rest of the topic. Wilson used an example to explain this:

Data and analysis are like a circular fishing net. You could try to examine each of the knots in the net to see what holds it together, but it's the strings between the knots that have to work in conjunction for the net to function. So, any analysis must examine all of the relationships or strings between particular events or knots of data as a whole before it will make any sense.²⁷

In keeping with this principle, I first started to examine my data by looking at each story individually. After this, I examined the relationships ensuing from how each piece of data was connected. This process involved writing memos, categorizing, and coding. Because coding can be used to break down stories, which goes against an Indigenous paradigm approach, I made sure not to break down each story while coding. I did this by finding common themes throughout each story. Another way of ensuring I did not break the relationships was by simply building relationships throughout our synthesis. This was accomplished by continuous sharing of feedback with all research

participants—conversations about what I had been finding after each talking circle and interview with the participants, and conversations with faculty and staff members at my research site. Doing this not only helped me check for the accuracy of the analysis, but also to elaborate upon ideas and learn from other participants.²⁸ Wilson explained that all participants in the research are part of analyzing the relationships of ideas and concepts in the data.²⁹ As such, it was my goal to interact with as many participants as possible to go over my analysis and to hear their thoughts and ideas, which I did after each interview and talking circle.

Simultaneously throughout my research, I attended to my own spiritual process by offering *asemima*—tobacco in Anishinaabemowin—asking for guidance with my analysis, and holding onto my *asin*. I also avoided working on my analysis with negative energy. Anishinaabeg believe that when we create, we are creating with our spirit and conveying positive vibes to whoever receives our work. To ensure this, I walked away or stopped working on my research when upset, frustrated, or otherwise discomposed. I departed, smudged, reflected, and then returned to my work with a positive perspective. I was also intentional about writing only where I felt like I belonged, such as my home office, work office, coffee shop, vacation destinations, and (my favorite) at our family vacation cottage. When writing in the woods at the cottage, I sat in the basement, where I could watch the river flow. Water is life and connects each one of us together. Water is healing.

From an Indigenous perspective, consent is not merely seeking mainstream practice and interpretations of informed consent and copyright, but the need for the research community to expand boundaries of knowledge production and research practices to stop further abuses of fundamental human rights of research in historically colonized societies.³⁰ Accordingly, the rights of consent should include the opportunity to have a say on whether one's words can be written about, what can be written about, and how it can be written and disseminated. For me, this also included group consent: before each talking circle, I asked for verbal consent to discuss as a group, as a sign of respect and to ensure the participants' comfort levels. Chilisa said the ethical principle of consent should accommodate individual, community, group, and collective consent.³¹ Therefore, an opportunity was offered to each participant to read the transcriptions of their interview or talking circle. There is a double responsibility ignited by both an Anishinaabeg research paradigm and the ethical practices of checking in with participants regarding their transcripts as well as the use of Research Ethics Board approvals. I believe Anishinaabeg researchers have to navigate both systems when using an Anishinaabeg research paradigm. From an Anishinaabeg perspective, that means inviting people to be part of the process. It is also manifest in the many relationships each of us has with our participants, which we should respect and uphold. During my study, no one rescinded their story being shared. However, as an ethical researcher and Indigenous researcher, it would be my responsibility to respect their wishes. Looking back at Indigenous history, it is imperative to recognize when our words, thoughts, and ways of being are being exploited without consent. For this reason, we must respect people's wishes to break this cycle.

REFLECTION

I found joy in indigenizing my research. Many Indigenous scholars have pointed out that research is ceremony as ceremony is life.³² What I mean by this is that we are always in ceremony together, and we should practice our teachings whenever we can do so. Some examples include smudging, using ceremonial objects, and using Indigenous languages, among others. As stated previously, we are a community of sharing. We believe in sharing our way of being, and this is how I can do so.

I have been a person who often felt I did not belong anywhere, especially in places of higher education. Students' sense of belonging can affect many aspects of their achievements, as well as their academic and social life.³³ Vaccaro and Newman contend that only by understanding the process can one develop a sense of being as students navigate welcoming and unwelcoming campus environments, engage in curricular and extracurricular activities, develop relationships with peers and members of the faculty, and achieve academic success and mastery of the student role.³⁴ By indigenizing my research, I have found a sense of belonging. Throughout my doctoral journey, I found who I was along the way, and found confidence in my academics and personal life, and what it means to me to be a student affairs professional again.

Sense of belonging is relational, and thus there is a reciprocal quality to relationships providing a sense of belonging. I suggest to all folks who are planning to indigenize their research to hold tight to their current relationships, but also to be open to the ones they are about to create. I found joy in the new connections I have made in this journey. Within our Indigenous communities, there are so many who want to see us succeed and want to help. Letting these people in, talking with them, connecting with them, and reaching out to elders are just a few examples of how we can keep our culture alive and help create space in education for us. Support is everything throughout a doctoral journey, and we need to lean on each other.

Acknowledgments

I titled this article "creating joy" because that is what happened on this journey. I found a love and passion for being my whole authentic self within this research journey. However, I would not have been able to do this without the many Indigenous scholars who have come before me. I thank the people who have guided me to find this joy. Kamewaunkiw, Paula Rabideaux, Tricia McGuire-Adams, my family, and many other people validated how I was feeling, encouraged me to be my true self and to share my Indigenous teachings, and taught me that we are a community of sharing. Bringing my whole self forward was an attempt to decolonize myself, an effort to show other scholars how to create more space for us in research contexts. This journey has been inspiring, emotional, and sacred to me. I am not the same person as when I started this journey, and I thank my supporters for aiding me in the process.

NOTES

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