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Beyond the Rhetoric: Implementing a Culturally Appropriate Research Project in First Nations Communities¹

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In the fall of 1991, members of the Child and Family Services Research Group, Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba and the Southeast Resource Development Council (SERDC) began meeting to plan a response to a special competition established by the then National Welfare Grants (NWG) of Health and Welfare Canada to conduct research on social service issues. At this meeting, SERDC identified the needs of adolescents as a priority concern because of rising teenage suicide rates, increasing numbers of young people coming before the courts, and possible high rates of adolescent addiction. The groups held further meetings and submitted a joint proposal to NWG in early 1992. Research was subsequently conducted under the auspices of SERDC, a tribal council organization formed by nine Ojibwa First Nations communities in the southeastern part of Manitoba. This article describes the realities involved in such a research project, discusses the efficacy of participatory research with First Nations communities, and illustrates the phenomenon of contracting with First Nations organizations, or structures, that are external to the communities they serve.

BACKGROUND

SERDC has taken a lead role in advocating for the transfer of control of services previously provided by federal and/or provincial agencies (education,

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health, and social services) to First Nations and in developing new regional service structures. A professional staff accountable to a regional board composed of the chiefs of the nine communities, program-specific regional committees, and elders worked closely with university personnel to develop the research proposal.

Southeast Child and Family Services, which has assumed responsibility for all child protective services previously delivered by the province, is an administrative unit of the SERDC developed through the 1982 Canada-Manitoba-Indian Child Welfare Agreement. The research team was advised to take direction from this arm of the tribal council and to negotiate all contact with the communities through the regional board (called the regional committee), the elders, and the regional staff. The regional committee was viewed as the overall steering committee for the project. Research assistants would be hired by the Child and Family Services' executive director with the participation of the university research team. The university and the tribal council signed a research contract and, although this was a tedious process, the final product was considered mutually beneficial. All funding and hiring was under the full control of the tribal council and the university took on an advisory role in these matters. The tribal council agreed to provide work space, translation services, and access to the communities, while the university agreed to provide research expertise, ongoing participation, and research staff direction as well as preparation of the final report to the funding agency. These basic relationships were in place at the outset of the research process.²

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH/CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

Participatory research has emerged as a result of developmental projects in third world countries.³ The term is generally understood to mean an approach to research in which the (human) subjects of the research are accorded some measure of control over all phases of the process. Culturally appropriate research is simply a term used to describe research that recognizes the difficulties that can arise from cultural differences between researchers and their subjects. Culturally appropriate research identifies ways of respecting those differences for the purpose of removing cultural bias. Although the two terms are conceptually separable, the research process reported in this article considers them almost synonymous, since the consultative and partnership arrangements of participatory research are major vehicles for the removal of cultural bias.

The benefits of participatory research in First Nations communities are twofold: it provides a means of communicating with agreed-upon rules for interpretation of data and final decision making, and it affords a method by which to produce socially legitimate collective knowledge.⁴ Participatory action research (PAR), a subcategory of participatory research has been proposed as a means for First Nations communities to gain confidence as they struggle to take control of their future.⁵ T. Hoare and others define PAR as an integrated approach relying on the participation of community members to investigate social reality and build local skills capacity for the purpose of

increasing community autonomy through a process of praxis. The failures of projects conducted under externally imposed guidelines are well documented.⁶ A. C. Macaulay has challenged the ethics of past research in which researchers obtain data from passive subjects. He describes it as “helicopter” research, and identifies the positive trend toward involving communities in all stages of research, from design to dissemination of results.⁷

While critiques of participatory research have focused on the scientific rigor of the participatory process, we would like to focus here on implementation issues that arise due to the complex nature of the developing governance structures in First Nations communities as well as new structures imposed by external research participants.⁸

T. Hoare, C. Levy, and M. P. Robinson and S. Webster and H. Nabigon advocate principles that direct all participants to ensure that the community has control over the project’s research agenda, staff selection, and annual budget.⁹ Hoare, Levy, and Robinson further posit a need to ensure an agreement specific to each region if a multi-community project is planned.¹⁰ Other researchers point to the difficulties of cross-cultural or transcultural research. With respect to First Nations, it has been suggested that there is a need to develop community-based research that empowers communities, respects cultural values and belief systems, ensures informed consent, involves a training component, and recognizes traditional leaders as sources of expertise.¹¹ Specific instructions for working with existing regional structures are absent, since the majority of existing scholarship assumes the development of new structures and systems. Our project required what has been termed culturally appropriate survey research, which is amenable to both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.¹²

Three of the oft-cited principles of culturally appropriate research with First Nations communities framed our contract with SERDC: (1) elder input; (2) the use of traditional language throughout the implementation; and (3) First Nations control. A fourth principle, considered both necessary by the tribal council and ethical by the researchers and the tribal council, advocated an ultimate payoff to the tribal council and the communities by way of local employment, transfer of technological skills, and a useful report.

CONTENT OF THE RESEARCH

The research was divided into three phases, each dealing with a different research question and each building upon the other. The first phase asked if there was an ideal notion of adolescent well-being within the culture. The second phase asked what factors promote such well-being within the family, community, and general environment. The final phase asked what would need to be done to produce changes in the adolescent community. This last phase attempted to focus particularly on the role of the formal services and programs currently extant within the communities, such as the school, the child and family service, and the justice system.

The nominal group process (NGP) is a technique that uses a highly structured small group process to elicit and rank responses to specific research

questions. In the first two phases, data were collected through the use of NGP. Groups were constructed of youth, elders, parents and foster parents, paid care givers (or service providers), and local politicians (chief and council). Specific questions were crafted that held the promise of addressing the more general question with which that phase was concerned. In the final phase, data were collected through the use of focus groups—a method that seemed to lend itself well to more specific discussions around how change in the communities could occur. In terms of findings, the notion of adolescence was confirmed as a distinct period within the culture, concerned primarily with learning. Findings also confirmed that the community environment was not conducive to the promotion of adolescent well-being. The probability for change was both good and bad. At the same time that there seemed a past record of failure (especially in the completion of ambitious capital projects without consideration for operating costs), skill deficits, and burnout, there remained a determination, some hope, and a great deal of creativity within the communities.

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES

Four principles—elder input, use of traditional language in implementation, clear demonstration of benefit to the community, and First Nations control—guided this research process. In the following discussion, we merge the principles of elder input and traditional language use because they were codependent principles in this research. While Ojibwa is the dominant first language, the majority of respondents were comfortable conversing in English. The elders on the other hand, even when fluent in English (many were not), required that their wisdom be offered in the language in which it was generated.

Elder Input and Use of Traditional Language

The choice of language in conducting the research was based on two factors: necessity and respect. Even in the most remote communities, English is the accepted language of business. Necessity featured only in those situations where this was not the case. Apart from one group of junior high school students in one of the most remote communities, the necessity to speak in Ojibwa applied exclusively to the elders. Even though many of the elders were fluent and reasonably comfortable in English and prepared to accommodate the unilingualism of the outsiders, they were more comfortable in Ojibwa, especially given the topics at hand. Thus it was out of respect more than necessity that arrangements were made for translation services in all meetings with elders.

The elders' involvement was threefold. First, a group of elders selected by and known to the tribal council chiefs and staff were assembled for a day-long meeting to consider a draft research proposal that detailed the purpose and methodology of the research. Their endorsement on that day was an important event in building the research partnership and was a part of the

implementation of the principle of First Nations control to be discussed later. While this was a one-shot event, the second role for the elders was ongoing. As part of the research process, elders were sought in each community as key informants. In every community there was always one group of elders, and sometimes two, for each of the three phases of the research. A special effort was made to reach out to and recruit elders for the nominal and focus groups, and on occasion special meetings were arranged with elders who were unable to attend for all or part of the day. Their third role was much smaller, and entailed introducing and closing each day with a prayer or ceremony. The research team did not presume to be involved in the choice of the elder. All we knew was that someone was always available to do the honors.

Immediate Benefit to the Community: Payoff

The project aimed to provide the participating communities with some immediate benefits as a modest payment, or payoff, for their participation. The first payoff was intended to be a transfer of technological skills to train group facilitators in the communities to run the nominal groups. In addition, the process was to be videotaped and the footage later edited and converted into a training tape for exclusive use by the participating communities to aid in future decision-making processes.

The presence of the third stakeholder, the funder, posed difficulties for this objective. The approved budget was about \$25,000 less than the asking budget, which meant that travel expenditures had to be reduced considerably. Of the nine member communities of SERDC, eight were chosen for study. SERDC and the research teams mutually determined to delete the Buffalo Point First Nation, as it had a population of less than fifty. Five of the eight communities were accessible only by air, and two series of trips had to be eliminated. The last two visits were collapsed into one visit of longer duration. The only remaining visit that seemed feasible to curtail was the visit to each community for the purposes of training the facilitators, and so it was. The training videotape was also an early victim of budgetary, as well as transportation and technical, difficulties.

A few other components remained. The first was hiring people in the local communities to assist in organizing the community meetings prior to the arrival of the research team, including inviting and briefing participants. The research team identified the subgroups it wished to participate, including elders, paid caregivers, parents and foster parents, band staff and councilors, and young people. No attempt was made to name the participants. The local organizer was also briefed on the expectations for the meeting so that she or he could in turn convey these expectations to the invited participants. The second component was hiring people to cater the event and to provide babysitting for participants who needed it. Both of these factors had two objectives. One was to ensure that some small portion of the research funds found its way into the economy of the local community and to guarantee that participants were not financially burdened by their participation. The other

was to make sure that local knowledge of what was appropriate, especially in the case of identifying participants, was utilized and respected.

The results of these small measures to ensure cultural appropriateness, while at the same time providing some payoffs to the communities, were less than satisfactory. The use of people on the ground to prepare the way for the consultations was almost a total failure. The local hires went incommunicado in most of the communities and/or assured the team that all was well. Out of a total of sixteen visits (twice in each of eight communities), satisfactory arrangements had been made in only four cases. On several occasions visits had to be extended so that the team could spend a day organizing the meetings. Quite literally, the team members were knocking on doors in the community, inviting and briefing people for the next day's events. Thankfully, our purposive sample was sufficiently encompassing; in all cases there was some representation from the community groupings we sought.

The plan to spend money in the communities on food and food preparation was accepted in only two of the sixteen visits. Ironically, sadly, but also amusingly, the team found itself loading boxes of greasy fast food purchased in Winnipeg onto the small plane. These are foods unavailable in most of the communities and in none of the fly-in communities. Once again the cash did not flow into the communities, but into the profits of a multinational fast food chain. The research team had determined to spend the money in the communities but the local organizers and participants wanted something they could not regularly obtain as their payoff. The tribal council had encountered the request for fast food in the past and viewed the research team's compliance with local requests appropriate.

First Nations Control

The literature refers often to the need for First Nations control of the research enterprise, assuming that the implications of implementing this principle are somehow self evident. Thus the literature does not address these implications and their hazards. Even a simple continuum of control is not identified, the assumption being that anything short of total control is unacceptable. We took the stand that other degrees of control are also acceptable. In this circumstance, the tribal council had total control at the outset in that their willingness to participate made the research happen. But negotiation led to an agreement between two equal parties—a partnership arrangement.

Control in the research design was most evident in the early phases of research. Both parties were privy to the call for proposals, and both parties came together in their mutual interests to submit a proposal. It is true that the university (that is, the research team) had some expertise not available to the tribal council. While the design work was proposed by the research team, it was vetted at every step along the way by the tribal council. In fact, the original dissemination plan was totally rejected by the tribal council as unworkable and antithetical to current First Nations political realities. By the time the proposal was ready for submission to the funders, the following criteria had been agreed upon: (1) the focus for the research (Ojibwa youth); (2) data and

recommendations that would be helpful to the communities and the formal Aboriginal service providers; (3) a design for data collection that was to be composed almost entirely of a series of community meetings structured in nominal and focus groups; (4) a partnership arrangement whereby the researchers were to obtain final approvals and report through a steering committee (this was to be the Regional Committee of the child and Family Service Agency, seen as the lead agency and the one having the most stake in the inquiry); (5) the budget was to be administered by the tribal council and funds were to be authorized in accordance with its procedures—not those of the university; (6) the physical base for the research was to be the Tribal Council Child and Family Agency offices in Winnipeg. We also planned to hire a staff person for clerical and secretarial duties, as well as assistance in scheduling, organizing, and preparing each of the communities for the meetings. The executive director of the agency was to participate in the hiring with preference to be given to a member of one of the communities—a preference which was honored.

These arrangements presented ambiguities from the start. Were veto powers to be vested in the steering committee? What would have happened if the steering committee had vetoed the project after it had been approved for funding? Who was in control? In practice, the steering committee was token and gave the research team approval. Very little was asked of it as a body except for a small piece of time at a few of their regular meetings. It was no indication of a commitment to the content, process, or outcomes of the research.

These early successful negotiations with the tribal council and later the steering committee masked some pending difficulties that concern the various levels at which participatory research has to be negotiated with Aboriginal people. In the case of First Nations, the tribal council organization is imposed by the federal agency responsible for administering the Indian Act, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Tribal councils were organized to provide a convenient way of flowing funds into the communities through an umbrella organization for a variety of services including the child and family service. However, membership is voluntary, the claim to sovereignty and self government continues to reside within each community, and a measure of distrust between the local communities and the tribal council persists. This distrust may be general or, in the case of this research, specific to the child and family service. Notwithstanding the fact that the tribal child and family service employs locally hired, resident front-line workers as well as volunteer committees as an important part of its system of governance, the team discovered that in many instances the service was regarded as something not dissimilar to the former system of provincial delivery it had replaced in the early 1980s. It was seen as remote and bureaucratic, an agency modeled after the INAC administration. The team understood these comments to be more perception than reality given the lengths to which the agency has gone toward promoting local autonomy; in this case, however, the perception *is* the reality. For the research team, the endorsements of the tribal council and the child and family agency in no way guaranteed a welcome in the local community. In all of the communities, the team found it necessary to again work through the

political issues of research before the meetings could proceed. In one community the discussion absorbed most of the day set aside for the meeting. It was here that the literature on participatory and culturally appropriate research came alive. The discussions varied in focus, but threaded through all of them was the need for assurance that this research was something done *with* the community and not *on* the community. Sometimes the debate focused on who was to be consulted about the research; other times it challenged the team to produce credentials qualifying them to conduct research that contained the word *culture*. Mostly, however, it had to do with payoff. Community members often asked, If we give three days of our time, what payoff will there be for us? Since the payoff depended in large part on the quality of the discussion, no guarantees could be given in advance. Participation was sometimes fluid, with people coming and going at different times. Issues would be dealt with in one group, and then another group would arrive with similar concerns.

There was poor participation of chief and council members in all cases. This was noted with some resentment by other participants and cited as symptomatic of the generally poor quality of political leadership in the communities. Without detracting from the community's interpretation of the absence of the politicians in the process, the research team found it inherently difficult to include local communities (and their representatives) in the early design and approval stages.

The idea of partnership—to ensure research *with* (not *on*) the community—also influenced the method of data collection. For the nominal groups, the research team developed two questions to be discussed in the groups to determine the participants' opinions on what constituted healthy adolescence. The questions for the second phase were derived from the responses to the first and thus differed from community to community. The third phase utilized a focus group method in which the questions posed to the group were derived from the responses given in the second phase. These also varied from community to community, although not from group to group within each community. Clearly there were some limitations to this process in terms of the prescriptions for participatory research and control. Although the first set of questions was based on a general agreement with the tribal council staff, they were guided by the judgement of the research team. The subsequent course of the research varied in the next two phases from community to community, and the questions were devised entirely by the research team.

The first stage of each nominal group process entailed putting the question to the group and allowing quiet time for the silent generation of ideas. Paper and pencil were provided, and many participants wrote down their thoughts, while others were less comfortable with writing. The elders often used the time to compose whole speeches in their heads. The point was to allow for the "imported," or academic, process to proceed, while respecting adaptations made either by an individual or perhaps the whole group. Thus a degree of community control was upheld during this process.

A similar point can be made about all the other stages of the nominal group process. For example, the responses elicited during the round robin

generation of ideas (stage two of the NGP) ranged from the very cryptic two or three words to whole speeches. Responses from the youth groups tended to be on the cryptic end, while comments from the elders leaned toward the lengthy end of the response spectrum. In later response analysis it was found that at least 15 percent of the young people's responses had to be discarded because they were so brief that the meanings were not clear. Young people were continuously asked to expand and clarify their answers but they were unable to do so. The longer responses tended to be more useful, although analysis was made somewhat difficult because multiple ideas were contained in one response.

The lesson about participatory research with special regard to Aboriginal people in this case is that the researchers, having committed themselves to the process of participation, had to respect that process as it unfolded, even when the preset rules designed to uphold the process were broken in the researchers' minds. This respect includes, among other things, consideration for ideas, customs, strengths, and limitations. In this case the researchers had to respect what turned out to be a chronic lack of articulation from the younger people, who enjoyed the advantage of higher levels of formal education, and a less surprising insistence by the elders that their way of understanding could not be contained in a series of single ideas, but must be expressed as several contained in one more holistic perspective (one example of this was an elder group that chose not to report on specific elements of a healthy adolescent but on the generic components of an appropriate lifestyle). Another illustration of the same point was the frequency with which the "round the circle" rule was broken, again for the most part with the elders. One of the purposes of this rule was to provide equal opportunity for participation and reduce the chances of more powerful group members dominating. Since this was partly dealt with by composing largely homogenous groups (for example, the youth participants were in separate groups from the elders to avoid the expectation that the young would have to listen to the old), there seemed less harm in allowing the rule to be broken. In fact, in the case of the elders, it was difficult to know when the rule had actually been broken or when "passes" were unspoken but known to all except the outside facilitator.

A second important example of community control over data collection occurred in the final stage of the NGP, which called for a silent, individual voting procedure. This was an attempt to have the group members think about prioritizing the significance of responses, a procedure which implied that not all responses are of equal value. For the most part this was accepted by the groups that enjoyed the procedure and the discussion that usually followed the recording and announcement of the result. However, some groups objected to the procedure as culturally inappropriate as it resembled a majority rule procedure. A related objection was that it was disrespectful to respondents whose ideas were not prioritized (thus conflicting with the rules of the second and third stages). Moreover, concern was expressed that responses given in good faith would be lost by the researchers who would concentrate only on the prioritized responses. This was, of course, true. The researchers could give assurances that raw data would not be lost, and that it would be included

in the analysis, but special attention was given to the prioritized responses in the analysis and reporting. In the end few groups (three) declined to participate in this final stage.

The last stage of the overall data collection process involved the use of focus groups. The day following the second nominal group meeting, the groups reconvened—albeit in modified form because of the inevitable additions and deletions—as focus groups. The questions to be put to the groups were derived by the research team from the responses prioritized in the voting procedures, which concluded the nominal group process of the previous day.

The process differed from market research, from which the technique is borrowed, in one significant aspect. The research team attempted to introduce an empowering dynamic into the research. The phases of the research involved asking the gathered community members what their notions of ideal adolescence were and inquiring what features of community life supported or did not support the youth in the community in living that ideal. These two phases were achieved through the use of the nominal group process. The final phase utilizing the focus groups attempted to generate a more free-flowing discussion concerning the possibilities for implementing some of the ideas generated.

A couple of examples will serve as illustrations. If on the previous day the nominal groups had identified the need to bring elders and young people in closer and more frequent contact, the focus groups were reminded of their conclusion of the previous day and questions were posed as to the implementation of this idea (How can this happen? What can the various actors in the community do to bring this about?). The discussion ranged from wilderness camps during which the elders would be given the opportunity to tell the stories that pass on traditions and values and teach concrete survival skills, to creating curriculum space within the school for the teachings of the elders, to their greater use as consultants in justice and child and family matters. One community, for example determined to build on a successful sentencing circle, which had been held a few months earlier, but for which no concrete follow-up plans had been laid.

Another issue frequently identified during the nominal group process was widespread alcohol abuse resulting in neglect of children. This swelled the caseload of the child and family service workers, and was seen as dismal role modeling for the community's youth, creating and perpetuating a dangerous cycle. Here again, the focus groups were challenged to move from discussing the issue in terms of what the research team called "if only" responses to identifying steps that could be taken to respond appropriately to the problem. Some of the postmortem discussions and discussions in the early stages of the focus groups were characterized by a tendency of the participants (especially the elders) to state the solution to identified problems simply in terms of reversing the problem or its perceived root. Thus, if the perceived problem was the gap between the young and the old, and loss of respect for the latter by the former, the discussion often stopped at "if only" the young people would listen to the elders, then all would be well. All would be similarly well "if only" parents would stop drinking (or going to bingo, etc.). In the case of

alcohol abuse, the focus groups were pushed to identify, in as specific terms as possible, what steps might be taken to begin modifying the problem. One group, for example, discussed the possibilities of using the theatrical talents and risk-taking propensities of the young to have them talk about and act out the impact of parental or community alcohol abuse on them, and then use either live theater or videotape to hold up a mirror to the adults in the community. This would have an additional benefit of empowering the youth of the community, the lack of which had also been identified as a problem.

The foregoing illustrates one of the essential ingredients in any research conducted with aboriginal people, and perhaps any community of the dispossessed, is to engage them with each other in a dynamic process of change. In other words, the research is not just about understanding a particular set of phenomena in a frozen point in time; it is about attempting to be a catalyst for the sort of change identified by the participants. It is in this sense that culturally appropriate research, participatory research, and participatory action research essentially come together as one set of concepts and approaches.

One issue that remained unresolved for the team was further follow-up. The report was placed in the hands of the steering committee and the director of the child and family service for distribution to the communities. This ended the contracted responsibilities of the team, but nevertheless left it with some sense of incompleteness. One of the issues that surfaced in the focus groups was the overwhelming burden to create change felt by the small group of community activists, some sense of pessimism arising out of past failures of community change efforts, and a lack of follow-up, which was both symptom and cause. This gave rise to some pessimism on the part of the research team that the work done in the focus groups and in the report would bear fruit. Improvement in the quality of life for a particular community must surely be the ultimate objective of any research endeavor. No requests for follow-up briefing of or consultations with each community were forthcoming, so the debate within the team was whether or not to offer it—an offer which would likely have been accepted, providing there were no budgetary implications. In the end the team did nothing. This was not so much a result of a principled decision based on the value of non-interference or First Nations control, but because funds were depleted, time was in short supply, and the team had each moved on to other commitments and projects.

CONCLUSION

This initiative presented some instructive ideas about research with First Nations. There was a genuine partnership at the regional level, which was a necessary, if insufficient, first step. Some elements of the data collection process also enhanced the notion of control. The involvement of elders at the regional level as consultants and later as participants in the nominal and focus groups was particularly important. Once the team recognized that the elders' lack of adherence to the preset rules of the research design enhanced the research, their participation was forthcoming and often rich in content.

Language did present a difficulty, but not an insurmountable one. Apart from the smaller concrete payoffs to the communities in the form of funds for child care and translators and in what the team hopes was a useable report, there was payoff in the discussions of the focus groups and the commitments made or renewed there.

The lessons contained in the research reported here are neither the first nor, we hope, the last attempts to move from research *about* to research *with* First Nations. In retrospect, were the team to prioritize the lessons, it would emphasize the need to build into the design more front-end work to involve the communities at an earlier stage and build more back-end time to brief and debrief each community on the report and recommendations. Notwithstanding our beliefs about the value of “pure” research, it is nothing if it is not visibly and demonstrably effecting some improvement in the quality of the lives of the participants and those on whose behalf they give so much of their time.

NOTES

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10. Hoare, Levy, and Robinson, "Participatory Action Research," 43–68.
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