

BEING A NATIVE RESEARCHER IN YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Research is about knowing and understanding. It is about re-examining issues, problems or questions of which we seek further knowledge or answers (NWSK 3555 Class Notes, September 18, 2001). First and foremost, First Nations research is a different way of knowing which involves understanding people and their perspectives. Who would understand better these “ways of knowing” than someone from the same community? Hiring Native researchers from outside one’s own community has, in past experience, resulted in lack of a trust relationship and poor (or skewed) research results. A vital aspect of any First Nations Researcher is to obtain community permission. What needs to be addressed from the outset may include western ethics of “doing” research but not to the neglect of community and cultural-specific ways of “finding out things.” An effective and culture-based approach to research ought to be grounded in a holistic methodology. By holistic, I mean understanding the concept of the topic from the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects, not only from the researcher’s point of view, but also from the community members themselves. Personal attributes of the researcher also ought to be taken into consideration. Allocation of time and place is another important aspect of consideration when it comes time for interviews. Face-to-face interviews, in my experience, seem to work best in First Nations communities, likely due to the lack of trust issue.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As a summer student in 2001, there were four of us who did research in our First Nation community for the Sudbury Health Centre. Out of those four, two of us were conversationally-fluent in our Native languages. During the first week, we had an orientation. I should mention that you should get a better understanding of what happened in a community’s history and what affected the people who you are going to do the research on in order to better grasp an understanding of the values and beliefs of

the people, but also to prepare yourself to answer questions regarding motivation of the research. My grandfather used to say, "You have to look back to get ahead, and it is also in our medicine wheel in the West. With Respect, look twice." During the orientation we reviewed the Health Centre Policies and signed a confidentiality form. We were asked to maintain professional behaviour in the community throughout our employment period. After the formalities were done, we were introduced to the project. First, our supervisor told us about her involvement with the Health Centre and her qualifications, then about how the project came to be. The introduction to surveys and health reports was next. We went through each question, why it was asked, how the data was to be used and the types of data, types of other surveys and some examples of how the questions asked would reflect other questions in the survey presented. We had to examine Western ethics of doing research. At the same time we did some brainstorming to add on anything that we thought should also be included, based on our own values and beliefs and that of our communities. We brainstormed about different topics of the project, such as "What is health?" The students defined "health" in a holistic manner – community and individual well-being, which includes the mental, emotional, and spiritual as well as the mere physical. We also brainstormed about the issues of the community and things that we thought should be included in the surveys. Determining what was appropriate research for our community, we came up with a holistic approach to well-being that included, again, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. This was all done so that the researchers would be able to answer questions posed to them about the motivation of the project and how it came to be, not only by the community members but also the working committee and the Chief and Council. By the end of the week, our supervisor had to go and speak of our research project to the working committee for Chief and Council. At the time, the working committee consists of five councilors. This was the crucial time to "sell" the project and defend its main purpose. After the working committee was satisfied and all their questions answered, they proceeded to make a motion to support the project. We worked with a random sample that had previously been made and the list of names of Band members already picked. Everyone was given a quarter of the list and then, from that list, we made switches of names where the Band member was only a fluent speaker and traded names with the researchers who could not speak the language. The names on the list were the only ones we were able to do. We could not do other people whose names were not on the list, except that first weekend when we took the surveys home and were asked to try some sample practices. Our supervisor went over the preparations for doing face-to-face interviews. When she went over the best times to call, she said working people should be contacted in the evening, 7:00-9:00

p.m., or on the weekend. We started laughing; we told her that the people working especially in the offices around town would really not appreciate being called during working hours and doing the interviews during their working hours. At first we were supposed to conduct interviews only during the week from 8.am. to 4p.m.; we thought that we would not get many interviews during that time. Nevertheless, we tried it for a couple of weeks and, sure enough, we had to go back to the working committee and let them know that it was not working and that we had to work evenings and on weekends if this project was going to be successful. We were also told that we should call first to set up interviews, ask them what time would be good and let them know how long the interview would take. That worked only for some people. I told my supervisor, the best way I can deal with the interviews is to make them into social calls. With the people I know real well, I am just going to call them up and say, "Hey, I am coming over. Put a pot of coffee on." And that was exactly what I did. I also found that if I was in an area and there were other people on that list in the same area, I would just go over and let them know that I had them on my list to interview and asked if it would be a good time to do the interview now. Most times, the Band members were aware of the interview taking place as there were flyers sent out to everyone on the reserve about it and also neighbours telling other neighbours or friends calling friends. Most times I was told, "I knew you were coming around. I heard you were coming this way. Come on in and let's get this over and done with." Most times some people were a little discouraged about the length of time the interview took, as they had heard from others that it was really long. I assured them that it all depends on the people; some people are real quick with the questionnaire, others take longer, and everyone is different. Field notes and journals were also to be kept and handed in at the end of each week. We found that the best time to do these field notes were right after the interview or at the end of the day. If we were able to jot down a few things that we found really stood out in the interview, then in the evening we could do our notes. I found myself using a lot of the face-to-face interview techniques. For example, I would allow the interviewee to sit wherever they felt most comfortable. I did my best to help the interviewee understand the relevance of the interview. I respected the interviewee by not answering the questions for them or leading them. I would adjust my vocabulary to match that of the interviewee. I would be conscious of mine and the respondent's eye contact, posture, body gestures, and facial expressions. I spent more time listening than I did asking questions, especially when it came to the Elders in the community. I found that the Elders enjoyed telling stories that would incorporate the answers to the questions. Then there were others who just enjoyed having company and being listened to and shown respect for their answers. Others encouraged everything to be written

down; they wanted to make sure that their voices were heard. Building rapport is an attribute that the researcher should possess. I had worked on the Reserve for 25 years at various establishments, such as the local store, where I had built up a lot of rapport with the customers, most of whom were band members in the community. I remember asking questions even then, even as a young child, and then at various places I worked, who people were, what are their names, and where do they live. Especially when I was working in the store, I always wanted to know, so I could speak in the language to my Elders and out of respect call them by their first name. Actually, it was an Elder who reminded me to speak my language. He would speak to me in the language every time he came to the store, and that was pretty well every day. Then one day he asked me if I spoke my language and I told him, "Yes I do," and he said, "Well, you should speak it, then." From then on I made sure I spoke to the Elders in my language and also other customers who I knew spoke the language. I would also speak in the language to my kids and my co-workers and friends, and I still do that. I also built up rapport sitting on the Housing Committee for many years. That would be the place where I saw all the new young faces, and I wouldn't turn anyone away who wanted my help in something. I would advocate for them and inform them of other things that they can do to better help their situation, such as obtaining support letters from other agencies. When I received my job as Property Management Officer, the community saw what I was capable of and that I was a strong person. For the first time in the history of our community, the band members saw an eviction arise out of non-payments of rent. But I also helped that person move to a new location, so there the band members saw that I had empathy for the band members in our community. Band members also saw my compassion in my work and how they could easily approach me. Working in the community for many years, I had developed trust and honesty with the band members and they knew that I spoke the truth when I was asked anything. When the time came to go out and actually do face-to-face interviews, I was already set with connections to many band members. There were some people who I never actually visited but communicated only in passing, but they knew me. Some had already been told I was coming by with the interview and that they agreed to do it because they felt comfortable with me. I went out of my way to help the interviewee with anything that they were having a hard time with and made the calls right then and there to help them. Some of them did not understand the procedures that took place to get things done and a lot of times I would explain to them how the process worked. Usually at the end of the interview they were very grateful that I came to visit them. Some of them were grateful because they were lonely and wanted to just talk to another adult who would listen to them, and others were grateful because of a service I mentioned during my interview

that they were unaware of and that they could benefit from. One of my fellow researchers could not get into the door of a possible interviewee. The researcher had tried twice and both times the gentlemen there said that they were too busy. I asked him if I could try and do that interview and in return my fellow researcher could take any one of mine. We checked it out with our supervisor and everything was okay. I went over one afternoon. Since they did not have a phone I could not set up an appointment. There were two gentlemen there when I arrived and I stated my business and spoke to them in the language. The older gentlemen shrugged his shoulders and said, "I will do it, I guess." I was there for two and a half hours just listening to him talk about the past. His wife arrived shortly after we started the interview and at the end she said, "You could probably write a book with that much information," and we all laughed. A lot of research work is based on trust. If they trust you, you will find little resistance and if you can take as much as you are putting in, the rewards are most satisfying. Miigwetch!