Aboriginal Communities and Social Science Research: Voyeurism in Transition

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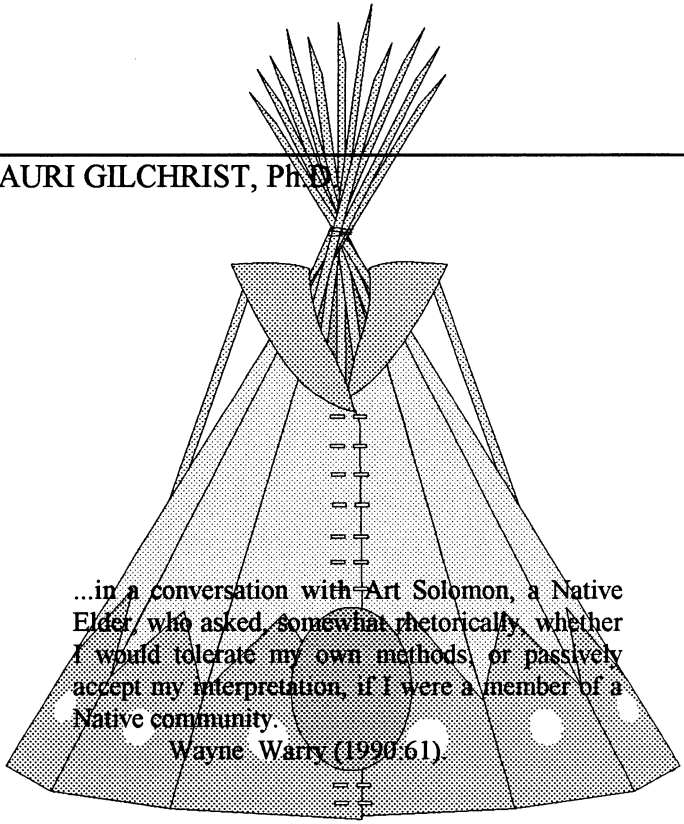

...in a conversation with Art Solomon, a Native Elder, who asked, somewhat rhetorically, whether I would tolerate my own methods, or passively accept my interpretation, if I were a member of a Native community.

Wayne Warry (1990:61).

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Introduction

Examination of the relationship of research to Aboriginal peoples reveals a curious paradox. Volumes of research have generated data and theory on Aboriginal people in Canada, and yet there is little research which Aboriginal peoples have been able to determine themselves. Chrisjohn (1986a):

> Specifically, [if] I were charged with designing an "Indian" educational system from the ground up, there would be no body of data I could refer to for guidance...The problem is that the research making direct reference to the children of the various Indian nations is overwhelmingly flawed, conceptually and methodologically (7).

Hampton (1986) describes the present state of affairs, "It may not be a shortage of research that hampers but a shortage of research that is useful from Indian points of view" (21).

In February 1992 a meeting sponsored by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, brought together a delegation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. In her presentation Kim Scott stated:

> ...most statistics do not accurately represent the reality of Native communities. Although indigenous communities have been studied, health data are collected by federal officials with little consistency in collection methods. Cultural barriers often complicate data collection and interpretation. In addition, urban Natives are either not identified or are not part of mainstream research (McAffee:1, 1992).

The researchers agreed that Aboriginal control of all aspects of research in their communities is necessary.

Although these researchers came from different disciplines, they articulated the words of many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. Clearly, in recent years, the desire to reappropriate knowledge and knowledge production has been articulated by

oppressed peoples on a global level (de Souza, 1988; Gaventa, 1988: Tandon, 1988; Jackson et al., 1982). This paper begins with a critique of "scientific method" and ends with calls for more collaborative and participatory methods of theory development and local action.

Chrisjohn (1993) writes about the ethical considerations in research such as: the right to privacy; the right of informed consent; the right of information access; and the right to valid research. Aboriginal people should not be coerced into participation in research, and, once participation has been initiated, they should have the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Closely connected to the rights of participation is the right to be included in research that is relevant. The ethics of participation also include the right of anonymity, confidentiality, and information security. The right of informed consent refers to being fully informed about the purpose of research, the process to be followed and its intended uses. Access to information resulting from the research is the third right that Aboriginal people possess. This aspect shows that Aboriginal people are equal participants and co-owners of the research endeavour. Finally, the right to valid research entails explicitly knowing all of the processes and the basis for choosing particular methods of inquiry involved in the project from start to finish. Chrisjohn states that Aboriginal people would logically be more motivated to generate valid results from research in their communities and that Aboriginal people ideally should conduct their own research (Chrisjohn, 1993 pp 4-9).

Kirby and McKenna (1989), list six tenets of research for marginalized groups: knowledge is socially constructed; social interactions form the basis of social knowledge; different people experience the world differently; because they have different experience people have different knowledge; knowledge changes over time; differences in power have resulted in the commodification of knowledge and a monopoly on knowledge production.

This discussion uses Chrisjohn's rights of Aboriginal communities and Kirby and McKenna's tenets of research from the margins as a point of departure. The violation of these rights and the disregard for these tenets by the researchers is the reason for this papers' critique of the research methodology that has often been used in research about Aboriginal people.

This paper reviews concerns about social science research with Aboriginal communities in Canada. The task begins with a brief comparison of two different paradigms of research, using the

quantitative scientific method and qualitative participatory research as examples. This is followed by an examination of two contrasting approaches within the same paradigm research, using the example of conventional ethnography and critical ethnography. This is done to show that ethnography, the study of cultures, can be done in a manner which empowers, and that ethnography can also be used in a critical manner to emancipate and to actively work for social change. This will illustrate how critical science can be more appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal communities in their movement toward self determination. This paper concludes with a discussion of some of the issues that must be considered in conducting research in Aboriginal communities.

Quantitative Research and Qualitative Participatory Research

The scientific method or quantitative research, also called empirical research, is based in positivist philosophy. The four tenets of positivism are: neutrality of the researcher, value free findings, observability through the senses, and generalizability of results (Borg & Gall, 1989:18-20). This system "excludes everything from its consideration except natural phenomena and their interrelationships" (17). It is deductive in nature, which means that general laws are used to infer particular instances (17). The subject under study must be observable and the results verifiable (Babbie, 1979). As a result the researcher must retain maximum control over subjects and the environment so that extraneous variables can be eliminated. When the conditions of the scientific method are met, research results ought to produce a generalizable theory. This is the belief that general laws may be applied to individual situations.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in many ways. Qualitative researchers expect reciprocal influence to occur between themselves and the participants through the use of open ended processes rather than standardized instruments. Qualitative methodology is more flexible with regard to sampling, research design, measurement and analysis of data, and research findings, which are not usually expressed in numbers, are usually more holistic in nature. The "theory down" deductive stance of quantitative method contrasts with a "from the facts up" type of exploratory study. For example, a quantitative researcher might start with the statement: Youth are less likely to re-offend if they are in school. And then set

out to test the hypothesis. Finally, qualitative method is less inclined to worry about making generalizations in favour of accessing more depth and detail of the research question (Tutty, L. M., Rothery, M.A. & Grinnell, Jr. R.M., 1996).

Participatory research, which is one application of critical ethnography and an example of qualitative research, came about as a result of the critique of classical research methodology (Tandon, 1988:6). Although participatory research became popular in the 1970s, it is closely related to the idea of action research of the 1940s (Ryan & Robinson, 1990:57). Inductive in nature, participatory research methods derive general laws from particular instances.

Participatory research uses experience and experiential knowledge as the base of research, bringing theory and practice closer together (Tandon, 1988; Small 1988:89). "The central commitment of participatory research is empowerment, through knowledge or action or both" (Mellor, 1985:75). A second commitment is the reduction of the power differential between researcher and participant (74). Hence, participatory research seeks to empower the participants in the research process. Gaventa (1988) states that in "confronting" mainstream knowledge monopoly, we acquire "experience that can help to develop consciousness of how the power structure actually works" (21).

This review of quantitative and qualitative research methods demonstrates the value of participatory methods for research in Aboriginal communities.

The Approach Debate: Ethnography

Let us take an example of a qualitative type of research and demonstrate how it can be applied from a conventional approach and from a more critical stance. Ethnography is a fieldwork research process in which the researcher enters the day to day life of culture, observes, records and later writes interpretations in descriptive detail. This process includes research techniques, ethnographic theory and many cultural descriptions (10). Within the discipline of ethnography, two approaches have developed: conventional and critical ethnography.

Thomas (1993) states that the term "critical" describes both an activity and an ideology. As social activity, critical thinking implies a call to action that may range from modest rethinking of comfortable

thoughts or it can be done with a more direct engagement that includes political activity (17). Critical ethnographers have chosen to question some of conventional ethnography's central principles. The critical ethnographer takes oppression and structural arrangements into account. Thomas explains:

> The critical [approach] directs attention to symbols of oppression by shifting and contrasting cultural images in ways that reveal subtle qualities of social control. The critical [approach] also provides hints for reconceptualizing behaviour, values, or social institutions into meanings from which to 'read off' deeper structural characteristics such as ideology, power, domination and structural logic (20).

The following table shows the difference in approach between a conventional and critical stance in ethnography (19-25).

Conventional Ethnography	Critical Ethnography
Researcher as expert in design, implementation and policy recommendation	Community ownership and participation in all aspects of process
Monopolizing knowledge production	Removing credentiality
Keeps the status quo and mediates between powerful and less powerful	Deconstruction (inverts hierarchies of power and authority) and subversion of conventional ways of thinking
Rigor	Relevance
Reforms	Structural changes

Critical ethnography can be used in "political action, participatory research, applied policy research, community organizing or one can observe from the sidelines by critiquing culture and its

symbols" (22). Although the characteristics listed are not exhaustive, it is the absence of the conditions in the critical research column that have created problems for Aboriginal communities.

Research Issues in Aboriginal Communities

Chrisjohn (1986 b) discusses many of the technical criticisms of quantitative research which are too numerous to summarize here (see Chrisjohn, 1988, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Poortinga, 1983; Horn, 1979; Irvine & Carrol, 1988; Seyfort et al., 1980; Ryan, 1980). This paper leans more to a sociological criticism of scientific research method and its implications for the Aboriginal community.

The value neutral stance of the researcher, which Max Weber argued for, meant that the researcher ought not go into the research endeavor with prejudgment or to impose interpretations (Borg & Gall, 1989, Thomas, 1993). This premise is problematic in that the decision to use a particular approach to research, or the way in which questions are asked, is value-laden (Thomas, 1993; Bernstien, 1982). Western social science methodology used in Aboriginal communities is not value free. To whom are Aboriginal people being compared? Do the researchers know the culture or history of Aboriginal people? Thomas indicates that the supposed value free characteristic of research methodology is almost impossible when one considers significant cultural differences.

> A non-distorted communicative experience would require symmetry in which no communicants possess a culturally defined privileged position because of role, power imbalance, status, or other attributes that create an advantage concealing, expressing, or disputing the message of the other. The conservative characteristics of culture, however, militate against symmetry of power, knowledge, or skills, and the potential for distortion exists prior to any speech act, because interpretations are pre-patterned in a variety of ways that prevent understanding (15).

Objectivity is the effort to eliminate bias or distortions in perception in reporting the results of research in order to make the best possible generalizations. The question arises whether anyone socialized in Canada can produce genuinely objective research for or about Aboriginal people without confronting prevailing racial attitudes, and replacing them with an accurate critical history of Aboriginal culture and oppression. Personal attitudes and socialization are implicitly expressed in the choice of question, the method of data collection and the interpretation of results.

Regarding the objectivity claim vis-a-vis culture, Trimble et al., (1983) states: "This objectivity, however...has created the many measurement problems introduced by culturally diverse groups" (262). Again, what is not taken into account is how colonization and oppressive social policy have impacted on cultural expression.

The fact that much research does not confront ideologies of oppression prevents the application to research results of critical knowledge regarding traditional culture, colonial history and racist structure. This results in research which does not use appropriate concepts as variables and defines one culture using the cultural beliefs of another. Chrisjohn (1988) names this problematic "insufficiently critical" (11). Kaulback (1984) provides an example of this decontextualization in a literature review titled "Styles of learning among Native children: a review of the research".

One of the results of conventional research methodology is that the Aboriginal experience is filtered through another cultural value system, usually that of Western Europe. La Framboise & Plake (1983) call the strict adherence to non-Indian interpretations or theoretical frameworks "cultural myopia". They argue that positivist methods based on manipulation and control produce data that works against the principles of self determination (also see Gumbert, 1981; Lockhart, 1982; Feit,1985). Cultural relevance is hard to come by if extra-cultural paradigms, communication, prejudgment and interpretation are part of the research process.

Hampton (1988), Colorado (1988), and Mishra (1982) describe the uniqueness of the Aboriginal world view. Interpretation of Aboriginal cultural phenomena from a non-Aboriginal worldview produces distorted and incorrect results.

Access to technical knowledge is a concern addressed by Trimble (1977) and Chrisjohn (1993). For instance, Trimble states, "Explanations of theory, hypotheses, technique, and analytic

procedures are infrequent since the Indian community participates in just the data collection procedure" (159). Therefore there is no mechanism which would alert the community to culturally irrelevant research results. Further, lack of community ownership of results may lead to the translation of inappropriate research into policy and media headlines. Survey or questionnaire research, where the researcher develops the format, the questions, and the interpretation criteria are the most problematic in this area. The Aboriginal voice is minimal or effectively eliminated. Castellano (1986) states that the:

> participatory researchers frequently act as catalysts to stimulate awareness of common interests, to introduce communication techniques that facilitate analysis, and to provide information on organizational strategies employed in similar circumstances elsewhere (25).

Community participation and ownership at all levels of the research process, from problem definition, participation in data collection and analysis, to complete control of results of the research effort is integral to the research process (Ryan & Robinson, 1990:59; Jackson et. al., 1982; Warwick, 1980; Warry, 1990). Castellano (1986:24) asserts that "ordinary people are capable of generating the knowledge necessary to guide their action" (also see Tandon, 1988 and Armstrong, 1988). It is the sharing of power and community ownership inherent in the process of participatory research and the critical approach that distinguishes it from the complete control of the scientific method. The power of knowledge production, that is, the veto on use and publication of results must stay with the community.

In Canada, to supplement the catalytic and emancipatory function of the participatory method, researchers must forge links with Aboriginal socio-political movements.

There is a need for the community to express and define their own needs (Warry, 1990; Weaver, 1983 & 1984) and to produce and implement culturally distinct theory and methods for solving problems which result from colonization. Maynard (1974) lists the characteristics of critical anthropological research:

- A commitment to the community controlling the process, from setting the research agenda, through consultant and trainer selection and project development, to budgeting and annual project review.

- A commitment to community ownership and control of all research products and their use. This means that copyright is retained by the community.

- A strong and continuing reliance on the capability of committed adults as trainee researchers, teachers, writers and project advisors.

- A shared commitment to advocacy on behalf of the community on issues of its choosing.

- A commitment to a group dynamic and consensual process of decision-making and a feminist inter-relational approach.

- A commitment to working oneself out of a job within a specified time (Ryan & Robinson, 1990).

True community control of the research process by Aboriginal people is threefold:

- Control requires that research is community initiated: its need is recognized by a significant proportion of members of the community, it is planned and executed with the participation of whatever members have the time and interest, and it is explained in terms intelligible to whomever asks.

- Control requires authority over data collection, storage, and analysis. When, for whatever reasons, non-community members are approached to assist in these tasks, their involvement should be within circumscribed and agreed-upon areas, and they should undertake to impart their specialized skill to community designates.

- Control requires the power of decision over implementation: the conclusions reached, the recommendations developed, and the determination of what (if anything) to do must ultimately reside in the Indian community (Chrisjohn, 1988: 17)

While much has been written about the value of community participation in and ownership of the research process, many research funding agencies prefer to fund projects which rely on more conventional and positivist methodologies. Funding policies perpetuate imbalances by regarding Aboriginal control over process as inappropriate special consideration. A memorandum attached to "Community-Based Research" Report from SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada) dated March 20, 1984 states:

> Two recommendations caused members particular concern. On the first, that native groups should have veto over publication of research results, Council decided that research supported by public funds must be public property and be made available to other researchers. The guidelines relating to the release of research data that apply in all Council funded programs must also apply in any program to support native research.
>
> The other issue was the recommendation that the adjudication committee always have a majority of native people. Although sensitive to the need for native representation on the adjudication committee, Council is not prepared to institute quota systems for the composition of committees in any of its programs (Fox, 1983).

Last but not least, is the problem of conflicting interests in research with Aboriginal communities. Chrisjohn (1989), states "that to date, data has been generated by mainstream institutional representatives for their own purposes and not for First Nations interests" (iii). Mawhinney (1983), in his work with the James Bay Cree, writes about community resistance to outside academic research resulting from research fatigue and revival of traditional culture.

Community leadership is beginning to ask very hard questions of those approaching them to do research in their areas.

We cannot blame the individual for underlying racist assumptions acquired through socialization and education. However, it is not unreasonable to expect researchers, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike (McNab, 1986), to bring with them a thorough background on the history of colonialism and a broad based knowledge of Aboriginal cultures when engaging in research with our communities. Researchers must have a critical interpretation of colonialism and western domination embedded in research methodology. They must be prepared to engage with community representatives so that their research methodology more accurately reflects an Aboriginal point of view.

Conclusion

Factors such as cultural difference, degree of isolation, size of community, complexity of economic activity, quality of leadership, vitality of culture, cohesiveness of the community, existence of resources, nature of social problems and intensity of the divisions within the community (Hudson, 1982) make it impossible for any one research methodology to be suitable for all research. We do, however, have a common struggle -- that is to decolonize ourselves and our knowledge production. We need to change research methods to end the objectification of Aboriginal communities, and to encourage action based knowledge that is useful on the road to self-determination. We need to recognize and forge ahead with Aboriginal based research paradigms even as we engage in critical research. It is essential that orality be recognised as a legitimate transmitter of a theoretical knowledge base (Cruikshank, 1989:26). Ultimately powerlessness must give way to as many choices as we have nations about which theoretical framework and analytical methods we wish to use for the betterment of our nations.

When we have overcome the myths of value neutrality and objectivity; when we insist on historical contextualization and cultural acknowledgment, and when we have complete access to technical knowledge and ownership of our research; we will improve the quality and value of research concerning Aboriginal people. Only then will we fully realize the rights of Aboriginal people and construct our own reality. De Souza, (1988) puts this succinctly in his statement: "A new

popular culture that overcomes the dichotomy of popular wisdom versus scientific knowledge is needed. " One caution, however, in our critique of the remnants of colonization and in our collective movement toward authentic Aboriginal paradigms, we must take care not to "foster an ideal image of First Nations community" (Wong, 1982:70) which would render us helpless to confront real problems. I end with a quote that answers the question posed by Art Solomon at the beginning of the paper.

> Among us, traditionally the scholars are the servants of the people. The "People" reign supreme, by virtue of their right to approve or disapprove actions in all areas of life, and by reason of their perogative to protect individual and tribal rights. And let the scholars spend "their very lives" and energies to the service of their people.
>
> Costa (1970) in La Framboise & Plake (1983).

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