EXPLORING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Traditional ethical principles regarding the conduct of research have been criticized for not going far enough in the context of relationships between researchers, institutions and Aboriginal communities. A set of principles are presented, aimed at guiding the researcher in negotiating the multiple levels of relationship, which provide both challenge and opportunity. Issues which proved challenging in a recent community-based research project are presented. They are used to explore the complexity of typical issues of ethical concern including informed consent, confidentiality and ownership of knowledge.

Exploring Ethical Principles in the Context of Research Relationships

Conducting ourselves in an ethical manner is important to most of us in both our personal and professional relationships. Yet finding just where that ethical path is located can be challenging. The process of picking our way between the expectations of research institutions, our personal values, and the collective interests of research communities can be complex. In the western academic tradition, the ethical conduct of research has been influenced by three overall guiding principles. They are:

1. *autonomy* or independence of choice making,

2. *non-malfeasance* or doing no harm, and

3. *beneficence* or maximizing the good (Weijer 1999).

In the context of research partnerships with Aboriginal communities, these principles are considered incomplete (Piquemal 2001, Weijer 1999, Weijer et al. 1999). This has led to the development of relevant codes of ethics by professional organizations and research communities (Gibson et al. 2001, Macaulay 1994, Macaulay et al. 1998, Mihesuah 1998, Weijer 1999). Indigenous peoples have been leaders in this discussion as they work to regain control of how their communities' history, cultures, behavior and aims have been and will be portrayed by western research (Henderson 2000, Macaulay 1994, Mihesuah 1998, Smith 1999, Weijer 1999, Weijer et al. 1999).

All too often, Aboriginal communities find they do not recognize themselves as they are presented in research reports completed by "experts" (Deloria 1982, Henderson 2000, Smith 1999). These frustrations are compounded when this same material is given greater legitimacy than their own voices, turned around and used by western institutions to teach their own children in schools, colleges and universities or used to establish government

policy and programs, thus negating the words and practices of communities and elders (R. Beaver 2002, Deloria 1982, Cruikshank 1993). As Deloria (1982) noted, "this is not only a travesty of scholarship, but it is absolutely devastating to Indian societies." Thus, communities are now emphasizing their role not only as potential decision-makers concerning research questions and activities, but as joint holders of knowledge and as recipients of the benefits or harm of research. The traditional principles of autonomy, non-malfeasance and beneficence must be reexamined in this light. In this article, these issues will be explored, a set of principles proposed, and examples that proved challenging in my own experience presented.

SOURCES OF CONCERN

The discussion involving the ethics of researcher/researched relationships with and within Aboriginal communities has been described as a response to the following factors:

> First, aboriginal communities are often geographically isolated and possess histories, cultures and traditions distinct from the dominant culture. Second, there is an evolving political consciousness and aspiration to self-determination in aboriginal communities. Third, aboriginal peoples are increasingly concerned that research may adversely affect them and their values. (Weijer et al. 1999: 277).

Indigenous scholars present this issue in even stronger terms, raising issues of disempowerment, bias, appropriation, political and academic control and the need for decolonization of research efforts (Battiste 2000a, 2000b; Flaherty 1994; Henderson 2000; Mihesuah 1998; Smith 1999). In this context, Martha Flaherty, of the Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, reminds us that control of research is not simply a matter of courtesy or respect for local interests but one of rights (Flaherty 1995). As such, Indigenous organizations are currently addressing the conduct and ownership of research in many contexts including the draft Declaration on Indigenous Rights proceeding through the United Nations (Battiste 2000c, Venne 1998).

BACKGROUND

In my own experience, I have received mixed community reaction to current research involving work with Elders on community history as they experienced it. I have received much support as a researcher and a longtime non-Aboriginal community member. I have also been reminded that the community will no longer tolerate the misuse of information provided or

research results. In another discussion, a community leader noted that while he expected more from the current project,

> No researcher that has ever come here has really tried to get the peoples' side of it, as it really was. They don't want to really listen and learn from what we know. We need this if we are going to get information to our young people about what really happened, how these things affected us and where we are today. But we need it to be the truth. (R. Beaver 2002)

In the context of this particular community, this response is a reaction to local biological research that takes a species management rather than a holistic approach to ecosystems, minimizing the value of traditional ecological knowledge. This experience has left behind much bitterness as the lives of people, animals and forests have been affected by national park and other government natural resource policies developed or justified in response. In addition, government-generated health and social service research that is produced, mediated or shelved in response to changeable political concerns and priorities is a common occurrence (Ruttan 1998).

Input from Aboriginal organizations and individuals is typically requested in the development and data gathering phases of both government and academic research. However, it is often neglected when it comes to interpretation of data or decisions regarding if, when and how any implementation will occur. Particularly, responses and issues not in line with government policy or agendas all too often end up "on the shelf," causing resentment amongst participants who freely gave of time and knowledge in the hope for change. The proliferation of research by government departments is often understood to be a stalling game that holds off decision making.

> Whenever we want to start a new project the government constantly tells us, let's wait until the research is complete before making any decisions. (R. Beaver 2002)

This approach negates local knowledge holders by privileging research-based knowledge and undermines local self-government by using the research effort as a mechanism to forestall community action.

The failure of academic researchers to provide research results in plain language in a timely, practical fashion where results can be easily used in response to urgent applied issues has also been criticized (Flaherty 1995, Aurora Research Institute 2001). Academic research has been criticized as often too

cursory, biased and flawed by the assumptions underpinning the practice of western science and by the influence of the agendas of government and funding agencies (Henderson 2000, Smith 1999). At the same time, given the time and commitment required to do research in a more responsive fashion, university researchers often find themselves in a time, process and funding crunch. These factors can result in an outcome that is experienced by the community as less than promised, reinforcing the perception of exploitation or one-sidedness to benefits (Lapadat and Janzen 1994).

Resentment also develops in response to the availability of funds for community research only along the lines of specific government or institutionally controlled agendas (i.e., through government programs or through university-administered research institutes funded by federal money). Even if those agendas are said to be on 'behalf of' Aboriginal peoples they nevertheless squeeze community needs into specific categories and limited time frames rather than addressing them in a truly responsive and holistic fashion (Flaherty 1995, E. Beaver 2002, R. Beaver 2002a, 2002b, Michel 2002). Consequently, Aboriginal communities and organizations are now both more critical and more proactive in working directly with researchers than in previous years.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

I have experienced another view at work in terms of the research relationship and the researcher's learning needs. For many Aboriginal peoples, the focus of research ethics has not been on boundaries but on connection and relationship (Smith 1999). In this context, the search for knowledge has traditionally been guided by personal readiness, relationship, proper protocol and maturity (Deloria 1999). Conducting yourself in a good way is then the most essential element of the research. From this perspective, preparing oneself to do research properly is essential and is in many ways like preparing oneself for ceremony. In a similar fashion to how one may ask one's spiritual grandfathers for help, to take pity on us, we may also ask knowledge holders for help in our ignorance, to teach us as we carry out research.[1] From this perspective, acknowledgement that we carry out our projects because it is part of what we need to do, part of our own personal journey, is essential as a starting point (Paulette 2001, Simpson 2000). The maturity gained from this process then adds to our ability to understand the answers we have been given. If we foster our development in this way, while respecting the gifts given to

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1.   Integrating spirituality with research inquiry in a respectful way is an ongoing opportunity, although one with many challenges.

us, we will bring a balanced approach to the research that may indeed return gifts to others.[2] In this context, this meant that as I began the research process I was encouraged to engage in ceremony, to "keep my feet on the ground" in order to maintain balance and importantly, to laugh often.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Even those of us who believe we think a great deal about ethical issues are often blinded by the screen of assumptions and decision-making processes which fail to acknowledge, foresee or take into account the full range of consequences for all involved. With experience, sensitivity to these issues grows but it is never complete. As in any interaction, balance must be sought when competing norms are an issue (Beauchamp and Childress 1995, Wong 1997). In the context of cross-cultural research, part of this balancing process includes acknowledging the impact and validity of varying world views. Recognizing the inherent difficulties in translation and the dangers of trying to synthesize perspectives rather than simply respecting what each has to offer is also important. Given the complexity of these issues the following principles may be useful as a starting point in carrying out community-based research.

❑ *Research is always contextual.* The political, historical, economic, geographic, socio-cultural and environmental contexts of research are not incidental. Our views, as well as those of research participants, are shaped by experiences within contexts in ways that are often taken for granted. Yet these factors are highly influential on the interaction of the researcher and research participants and must be acknowledged.

❑ *The ethical conduct of interpersonal interaction is essential to research success.* Respect for participants for who they are, the knowledge they hold, their ownership of that knowledge, what their life experiences have been, and the values they hold is essential. While acknowledging the nature of societal, economic, cultural and relationship differentials as occurring in both directions, attempts should be made to bridge these factors by conducting oneself in a respectful and human manner while not ignoring or minimizing the real impact of these factors. Researchers also need to be

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2.   The role of spirituality as not *separate from* but *central to* Aboriginal conceptions of respect. Relationship and accountability to self, community, all beings and the Creator is understood as essential. Therefore it is necessary for one to engage in traditional Aboriginal learning processes in a good way. This means that the role of spirituality and the relationships involved are acknowledged as an integral component of Aboriginal learning and thus of all research processes.

aware of and follow the appropriate *protocol* for who, what, where, when and how knowledge is shared within a cultural or group context.

❑ *Participants must be informed of the nature of the research* and the possible implications of involvement. The self-determination of participants, both as individuals and as communities, including their right to participate or withhold participation at any stage of the research process must be respected. A process of informed consent comfortable to the participants should be followed involving not only initial consent but also ongoing discussion. Discussion of mutual expectations and plans for the conduct of the research should take place at the start of any community-based project in a collaborative manner and any differences in expectations discussed both at the start and as they occur (Gibson et al. 2001).

❑ *The principle of reciprocity must guide research.* Carrying out protocol relevant to the particular community at the outset is an essential first step. As well, appreciation for assistance received and of the contribution made by research participants to the success of the project needs to be recognized on an ongoing basis. Acknowledging the assistance received by returning that respect in kind is important. Returning research results in ways that allow community members or organizations to use the material developed or act on results as they see fit is also an aspect of reciprocity.

❑ *The researcher uses reflexive knowledge of self to sensitively interact with research participants and research data*, while maintaining awareness of his/her own reactions in the context of the research aims. The researcher's own experience is often the frame for interest in the research topic. Understanding and openness regarding the impacts of these experiences is required. As a researcher, reflection on and examination of one's own values, practices, agendas and assumptions must be ongoing. Sharing these experiences with academic and community colleagues, teachers and elders is helpful. A commitment to self-awareness and continued personal and professional development is essential.

❑ *The researcher needs to be conscious of the social and political implications of research results* and the uses or misuse to which it may be put. Collective responsibilities as well as those to individuals and the social and political implications of one's work should be considered first and foremost. Consultation with research partners about the implications of these issues should be ongoing.

Given these guiding principles, the researcher has a responsibility to carry out activities with integrity and to address issues as they arise. His/her own needs as well as those of participants and sponsors need to be acknowledged and any conflicts in these needs and expectations addressed with all involved and a reasonable balance sought (Gibson et al. 2001, Wong 1997). Conflicts in interpretation of research results may benefit from reporting both sides of the issue and the resulting dialogue. Ongoing reflection on and discussion of these ethical principles and of their impact on process may help avoid potential challenges (Gibson et al. 2001, Piquemal 2001).

Challenging Issues

As I began my own work in the mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community where I had lived for many years, I expected that there would be many ethical challenges ahead and that at least some would be difficult. Facing these issues within the context of my network of community relationships, I believed, would help to avoid at least some of the potential mis-steps along the way.

I expected that one of the ethical issues that might be particularly challenging would involve the handling of sensitive, personal emotions regarding interactions between community members. The community is a mixed community made up of Métis, two First Nations and a non-Aboriginal population. A government and mission centre throughout most of the twentieth century, the community has struggled with many of the dynamics that result from this experience. Based in often cross-cultural, competitive and highly charged political interactions, components of bias and conflict may be present. As well, challenges inherent in the Indian Act and Band governance policy, with its continuing colonial legacy, often complicate decision making and internal political processes in Aboriginal communities leaving residues of hurt and anger. However, I also knew there was much good will, a rich sense of community history and futures and community members who were interested in working together.

In this context I struggled with how to "decolonize" or at least attempt to explore the impact of my involvement on the current research effort. As a former non-Aboriginal professional in this community I had experienced the privilege that went with that status no matter my own views on this. During the initial phases of preparing for research I remember having a dream that clearly indicated I was struggling with these issues. In an attempt to deal with this I read, I listened, I talked and I worked on self and spirituality. An additional concern was that in seeking to understand the situation the researcher

needs to be very careful not to stir things up and then disappear leaving the community to handle any tensions or misunderstandings themselves. The researcher also needs to be aware of the potentially divisive group dynamics not infrequent in "post-colonial" settings. This may mean that participants are looking for allies on contentious community issues. While I knew I would eventually go ahead, some of the potential pitfalls were intimidating and I stalled beginning until I felt ready to handle these complex issues.

INFORMED CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Another concern focused on how to handle issues of informed consent in order to respect participants and still act within the requirements of the university. The university placed great emphasis on a lengthy series of written questions developed to ensure participants' awareness of the uses of the research and also stressed confidentiality. I expected, however, that given the focus of the research on the historical and culturally based knowledge of community elders that participants would want me to use their names, they would not want confidentiality. I also believed that withholding their names would minimize acknowledgement of their importance to the research as knowledge holders.

The role of informed consent, or consent received from the subject after he or she has been carefully and truthfully informed about the research (Fontana and Frey 1994), is important. Researchers have typically struggled with how to provide sufficient information for participants to truly understand the research, its focus and possible consequences for individuals and communities. Yet, at the same time, the researcher must be careful to avoid any forms of pressure or influence that might affect research results (Aull-Davies 1999). Given that Aboriginal research participants often agree to participation based on relationship, finding the proper stance that reflects both University and community settings can be challenging. An additional dynamic that may increase the complexity is the question of collective knowledge, where the consequences of misuse of information may impact an entire community.

Given the context of the experience of Aboriginal peoples as research "subjects," informed consent needs to go beyond simply signing the required form or meeting only minimally with community leaders. The researcher must ensure that this consent in truly informed and that it is an ongoing consent (Piquemal 2001). In this context, what is important is not simply the contractual nature of consent but rather the processual nature of continued consent (Piquemal 2001, Weijer et al. 1999). Based on her experience with

Aboriginal communities in both Canada and the United States, Piquemal recommends that we address not only the collective aspects of consent with communities of knowledge but as well that we engage in a continuing process of confirming consent with participants.

> Confirming consent implies the participants have an opportunity to review the research process, to reflect on what they have said, and to suggest corrections. The process can be characterized as a circular process in that the researcher always 'goes back' to the source of information to confirm its accuracy and to confirm his or her right to use the data. In this way, the researcher ensures that participants feel comfortable with the ways in which their stories have been used. (Piquemal 2001: 76)

Other researchers working with the life stories of Aboriginal elders have also recommended this process of ongoing reconfirmation with participants as an aspect of research partnership (Cruikshank 1990, 1999; Simpson 2000).

Issues of confidentiality must also be considered within the guidelines of University ethics committees. The issue of confidentiality remains a sensitive one in relationships between Indigenous knowledge holders and academics. Issues of credit, appropriation, ownership and joint production of knowledge must be addressed up front (Gibson et al. 2001), often challenging the traditional academic approach to confidentiality. Confidentiality is traditionally seen as protecting individuals from potential harm. Baez (2001), however, questions this assumption. He holds that in emphasizing secrecy, and thus in many ways silencing the knowledge holder, we may fail to challenge the status quo with the power of voice, therefore in some ways role modeling disenfranchisement (Baez 2001). Indeed some research participants may wish to decline confidentiality or to decline it in some areas of knowledge ownership (such as traditional ecological knowledge or TEK) while maintaining this confidentiality in terms of personal situations. These issues must be negotiated sensitively in light of individual, community, political and institutional dynamics (see Evans in this issue). The following section which uses illustrations from my own experience illustrates the need to explore the complexity of these issues further.

Post Script

Louis Beaver looked at me perplexed when I asked him to sign the two page informed consent form approved by my University ethics committee. I had given him tobacco, he had accepted it, so what was the issue? He went

on to say,

> There is no problem, what would the problem be? I am
> sharing my father's knowledge, it is not about other peo-
> ple. I don't need to sign something. This is mine to share
> and not bothering anyone else.

Worried about my responsibility to both Louis and the University I tried to discuss the issue again the next time I visited him. Looking at me he signed his name and then asked me to write the following on the consent form:

> Hereby I give my knowledge to you, what I have seen here,
> stories about the history of this place. [You] should be
> able to use it any way. It is without any lying. It is a true
> story — what I seen, how people used to live here. All what
> I seen myself and stories about the old time and what my
> dad seen.

His uncle, Arthur Beaulieu, when asked about consent said, "Why do you think I'm giving you these stories? I want you to write them down so people will know how we took care of ourselves, how we knew things." And Frank Laviolette started his account by saying that what he was sharing with me were "honest, hand down stories." In other words they were true, they were handed down to him and he had the right to hand them down. He went on to indicate that of course he wanted his name and those of the people whose stories he shared used: it was his knowledge or knowledge given to him wasn't it?

Other participants indicated that while they did not want to sign a form it was their knowledge to give and of course they wouldn't be giving it to me if they didn't know I would use it. Worried about my responsibility I ended up asking those who were uncomfortable signing to discuss the issues with me on tape and to indicate their consent in this form. This proved to be un-problematic except for two participants who preferred that I take down their words by hand, as the audiotape made them uncomfortable, followed by their signature.

What is important here is acknowledging the differing perceptions re-garding knowledge transmission, privacy and ownership between University and community. This resulted in the need for flexibility in process. In no case was anyone unwilling to have their words used. They were well aware that that was what we were about. In many cases these old people indicated they

were consciously doing so given that young people no longer sit and listen to their elders as they had done and that our work together would at least mean these words would be passed on, albeit in a less than perfect form. They were very clear it was their right to do so. Additionally, in this community all participants wanted their own names used as a matter of respect and ownership.

POLITICAL DYNAMICS

A more difficult challenge proved to be related to political instability in local institutions. The politics of relationship and who decides for community were encountered in a heightened manner in this context. In this case, although I had received support for my research during the previous year by local Aboriginal organizations, I was denied continued support following a bitter band election that eventually resulted in a court challenge. I believed in and tried to use a community-based approach to research. However, as a member of the community my personal relationships with community members, including former band councilors, became a factor in a way I had not anticipated and I was denied the support by the new chief and council required to renew my research license. This meant I could not pursue research activities while the situation was unsettled. Although I continued to visit with Elders, I could not carry out formal interviews during this time. While frustrated, I tried to be patient and worked on other things during this period.

However, the situation raised issues for some of the Elders who were anxious to get on with audio-taped interviews and believed the First Nation administration had no right to restrict their independence. One Elder was particularly concerned that he might die before we got a chance to record what he wanted told. Thus, who speaks for whom, who has the right to give consent, whose knowledge it is, what the balance is between individual and collective rights proved to be a multi-sided issue in this case. Eventually, following an eight-month period, this situation sorted itself out enough that I could begin formal work again. The experience raised complex issues about the nature, control and role of relationships in contexts such as this one. Further, putting principles which I believed in into the context of real life community dynamics raised complex issues regarding my involvement as a within/without member of the community and on the ownership of knowledge.

Given these dynamics, the importance of reflexivity and of sensitivity to the power relationships involved in community based research were heightened. While I understood intellectually what was occurring, I initially felt

discouraged personally. Wishing to 'do no harm,' I fought any inclination to seek sympathy for my predicament from research participants. Instead, I looked for support in dealing with what was occurring in collegial and personal relationships in both the research and academic community. This experience was stressful. Patience and increased involvement in activities leading to personal, academic and spiritual growth and balance were needed to manage these issues.

Reciprocity

As noted earlier, reciprocity in research relationships is important. As has been described by scholars working with Indigenous communities, it is important that data involving community issues be returned in forms that can be used by the community (Gibson et al. 2001, Lapadat and Janzen 1994, Smith 1999). That means not simply sending a copy of the final report to local communities but developing research summaries and reports in user friendly language and meeting with groups involved throughout the process.

In my own work with Elders, at the base of good information was relationship. This involved not only the participants sharing who they were but opening the door for them to ask me to do the same if they wished. For many of the Elders I interviewed knowing who I was, who my relationships were with and something about my personal life was important. They were not simply curious about me but needed to place me as someone with particular types of life experiences and relationships before beginning our work together.

Protocol proper to this community was involved in beginning the interview process. As well, I often took people on errands such as shopping or to the doctors and visited them if they were hospitalized. Treating the Elders now living in the community's chronic care facility respectfully meant showing respect for them as individuals not just as patients. This might be just little things like going and getting them coffee or bringing a special treat to share while we talked. For those living in their own homes, respect was shown by my making myself at home. However, most important was the respect they knew I had for their words and ensuring a proper understanding of those words.

Conclusion

Autonomy, beneficence, and non-malfeasance are still important concepts for research relationships no mater where they occur. However, in the context of research involving Aboriginal communities and community mem-

bers what that means has to be placed within a cultural interpretation and socio-political context of past relationships. This can prove difficult given the historical context of research as something done 'to' rather than 'with' Aboriginal communities. However, as discussed, the nature of relationships, questions of ownership and political factors are complex and must be negotiated in each setting as it exists.

As Gibson, Gibson and Macaulay (2001) suggest, in the context of participatory action research, exploring ethical issues at the outset while negotiating research agendas is an essential starting point. While codes of ethical guidelines have been developed to assist us (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies 1998, Canadian Archeological Association 2000, Tri-Council 1998) there are always decisions that must be made in muddy waters as best as possible (Korsmo and Graham 2002). Consideration of principles such as those presented in this article may assist in clarifying these issues. As well, getting the advice of mentors or of elders whether in the research community or at the research institution may be quite helpful. Listening to the rumblings within oneself and in interaction with others may alert one to issues that need to be addressed more thoroughly, both intra-personally and interpersonally.

The conduct of research is a journey, one involving important issues and holding much opportunity, yet it also contains the potential for harmful personal and political consequences for both one's self and others. In my case, as in all journeys, learning from my mistaken assumptions meant that efforts at seeking balance were a constant companion along the way. Further, in seeking to carry out research in an ethical manner we accept that our own interests are not greater than those of anyone else. An ethic based in mutual respect, reciprocal collaborative exchange and an awareness of the personal, political and cultural consequences, particularly in light of past relationships, should guide our actions.

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