Indigenous Health Research and the Non-Indigenous Researcher: A Proposed Framework for the Autoethnographic Methodological Approach

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Abstract

As a non-Indigenous doctoral student involved in a community-based participatory health research project with the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC), I endeavour to approach my research as an ally. Yet the role of the non-Indigenous researcher in Indigenous[1] health research is one that is both supported and contested due to conflicting knowledge systems and world views. In this paper, I propose a methodological framework for the autoethnographic approach that provides an opportunity for non-Indigenous researchers to be mindful of their part in knowledge creation, to be respectful and accountable to the communities they work with, and to ultimately contribute to an increased space within health research for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies.

Keywords: autoethnography, Indigenous health research, Indigenous methodologies, reflective practice

Introduction

Indigenous research has traditionally subscribed to a dominant Western paradigm, often treating the people and communities being researched as passive subjects. Under the guise of doing what is "for the good of mankind" (Smith, 1999, p. 2), research has sought to extract knowledge from Indigenous communities, dictating how it is collected, classified, and disseminated, with little regard for other ways of seeing the world. As a result, there has been a growing call to conduct Indigenous research based on paradigms that recognize Indigenous ways of knowing in knowledge creation (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Hart, 2010; Kovach, 2010; Chilisa, 2011). In this transformative movement, the role of the non-Indigenous researcher in Indigenous research is both supported and contested (Louis, 2007; Kovach, 2010; Aveling, 2013).

As a non-Indigenous doctoral student involved in a community-based participatory health research project with the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC) I endeavour to approach my research as an ally. By this I mean uniting with the Indigenous community and people I work with towards a shared goal, respecting the validity of other ways of knowing outside of my own, and bringing my own skills, knowledge, and privilege to the table to support our shared vision. Yet in Indigenous research, Aveling (2013, p. 209) contends

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1   In this paper I use the word "Indigenous" to define those people who possess a shared history of colonization that has resulted in loss of culture, land, voice, population, dignity, health, and well-being. By using this term, I do not suggest that the experience of being Indigenous is homogenous, and I would like to note that I recognize the diversity inherent to Indigenous communities and people, including their experiences with colonization.

the positionality of an ally is invariably tenuous and often accompanied by discomfort. It is a discomfort that is grounded in not being an expert and not being centre stage when working with Aboriginal people.

Being an ally thus means being "willing to make mistakes" and "willing to be uncomfortable" while confronting our own privileges and "remembering that universities are white, privileged spaces" (p. 210). The challenges that result from conflicting philosophical orientations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems at both individual and institutional levels are undoubtedly many.

Despite these challenges, the non-Indigenous researcher has a place, and more specifically, a responsibility "to be uncomfortable" and "to make mistakes" that may ultimately help transform conventional approaches to Indigenous health research. I propose that the non-Indigenous researcher should endeavour to embrace both Indigenous and Western methodological approaches to research "that are in alliance with the ethical and community dynamics of research with Indigenous peoples" (Kovach, 2010, p. 13). Within such an approach, I specifically suggest that autoethnography is a valuable tool for the non-Indigenous researcher. Not only does autoethnography "fit well with an Indigenous paradigm" (Wilson, 2001, p. 177), when used within an appropriate framework, it provides an opportunity for non-Indigenous researchers to be mindful of their methodological approach to knowledge creation; to be respectful and accountable to the communities they work with; and to ultimately contribute to an increased space within health research for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies.

Indigenous Research

Koster et al. (2012, p. 197) state that "Indigenous research has an uncomfortable relationship with the dominant Western research paradigm," too often situating Indigenous peoples as the "other" rather than "equal holders of knowledge or collaborators in the creation of knowledge" (p. 198). Describing research as a "tool of colonization" Smith (1999, p. 1) contends that:

The word itself, 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabu-lary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, and it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.

Underpinned by notions of science and objectivity, research with Indigenous communities has historically subscribed to a Western paradigm that has dictated "what is deemed worthy of researching, what questions are asked, how they are asked, and how the 'data' are analyzed" (Lavallee, 2009). Louis (2007, p. 132) adds that this approach to research has resulted in "false representations [that] propagate a false consciousness hindering Indigenous peoples from discovering as much about themselves as they can or seeing themselves as they really are." As a result of this discontent with conventional research approaches, a growing number of scholars have called for the creation of Indigenous research paradigms that recognize it is as important to understand how knowledge is created as it is to understand the knowledge itself (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2010; Chilisa, 2011).

Indigenous Knowledge and World Views

At the centre of any Indigenous research paradigm is Indigenous knowledge. Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) state that there is no short answer when asking the question "What is Indigenous knowledge?" It is better understood as a way of life that is diverse across communities and people; something that cannot be generalized or categorized "partly because processes of categorization are not part of Indigenous thought" (p. 35). In addition, Indigenous knowledge is highly personal to the user based on social, environmental, and spiritual context.

Hart (2010) identifies a close connection between Indigenous knowledge and world views, defining world views as "mental lenses" that help us make sense of the social landscape. Our world views develop throughout our lifetimes and "usually unconsciously and uncritically take for granted as the way things are" (p. 2). How we see the world thus influences our understanding of what exists. While Indigenous world views vary from community to community, they have many commonalities rooted in the relationship with the environment and the land. McKenzie and Morrisette sum up the essence of Indigenous worldviews well:

All things exist according to the principle of survival: the act of survival pulses with the natural energy and cycles of the earth; this energy is part of some grand design; all things have a role to perform to ensure balance and harmony and the overall well-being of life; all things are an extension of the grand design, and as such, contain the same essence as the source from which it flows (Gitchi-Munitou); and this essence is understood as "spirit", which links all things to each other and to Creation. (McKenzie and Morrisette, 2003, p. 259, as cited in Hart, 2010).

Ultimately Indigenous knowledge and world views are characterized by their relational aspects; they cannot be separated from the people, the land, spirituality, and the universe (Chilisa, 2011). It is this relational understanding of the world that underpins Indigenous research paradigms as they are discussed in the literature.

Indigenous Research Paradigms

For the purposes of this paper, I will adopt Wilson's (2001, p. 175) definition of a paradigm as "a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that goes together to guide people's actions as to how they are going to go about doing their research." Since knowledge is context specific, local, and personal, there can be no one Indigenous research paradigm (Koster et al., 2012). However, there are consistent shared principles of Indigenous research paradigms, including the recognition that there are other ways of knowing beyond the Western paradigm; research goals should be respectful, ethical, and sympathetic; and research should be informed by Indigenous ways of knowing (Koster et al., 2012). The purpose of Indigenous research paradigms is not to reject existing paradigms, but rather to conduct research that produces authentic results without oppressing and misrepresenting Indigenous peoples and culture (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Hart, 2010; Koster et al., 2012). At the foundation of all Indigenous research paradigms is the relationship between ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

Chilisa (2011, p. 20) defines ontology as "the essential characteristics of what it means to exist." Similar to the constructivist research paradigm, Indigenous ontologies may embrace multiple realities. The difference lies in the relationality of Indigenous ontologies; where "rather than the truth being something that is 'out there' or external, reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth" (2011, p. 73). In this sense, Hart (2010, p. 7) contends, "how people see the world will influence their understanding of what exists, and vice versa." Closely tied to ontology, epistemology seeks to understand the nature of knowledge, its sources, and its truth (Chilisa, 2011). Unlike Western epistemologies which tend to compartmentalize knowledge, Indigenous epistemologies are holistic, intuitive, and introspective; recognizing the relationship between the land, the animate, and the inanimate (Hart, 2010; Louis, 2007). Indigenous epistemologies therefore reject the notion that knowledge is an "individual entity" (for example, between researcher and subject), instead believing that "knowledge is shared with all creation" (Wilson, 2008, p. 74).

Emerging from the relational foundations of Indigenous ontology and epistemology, Wilson contends "Indigenous axiology is built upon the concept of relational accountability" (2008, p. 77). In this regard, "being accountable to your relations" is the most important ethical and moral aspect of research, trumping "right or wrong; validity; statistically significant; worthy or unworthy" (p. 77). Hart (2010, p. 10) adds that relational accountability in Indigenous research can be demonstrated in a number of ways, including listening and hearing with more than your ears, being reflexive and nonjudgmental, understanding that logic and feeling are connected, and being aware that one brings one's subjective self to the research process.

Building on Indigenous axiology, methodology emerges as a process of being accountable to your relations (Wilson, 2008). Inherent to this process are the 4 R's: relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriations, and rights and regulation (Louis, 2007).

In describing the 4 R's, Louis defines relational accountability as sharing dependence with everyone and everything, both animate and inanimate. This suggests that all aspects of the research process are related, from the initial idea to sharing findings. The researcher becomes accountable to everyone involved, including "all our relations." Respectful representation is about listening to others, being humble, generous, and patient, and accepting that Indigenous peoples will ultimately decide what knowledge can and cannot be shared. Reciprocal appropriation is the recognition that both Indigenous peoples and the researcher will benefit from the research process. Last, rights and regulations recognize that the research must be "driven by Indigenous protocols" (2007, p. 133) that clearly state the purpose and goals. This ensures that research is collaborative and nonextractive, and that the community has control over their knowledge and the dissemination of findings.

In summary, Indigenous methodologies are processes by and for Indigenous peoples, drawing on their traditions and knowledge to create techniques that reject notions of objectivity and reductionism while situating the researcher within the "Indigenous experience" (Evans et al., 2009, p. 4). Despite not being a "wholly Indigenous" method (Kovach, 2010, p. 13), autoethnography is often identified in the literature as a conventional qualitative approach that fits well with Indigenous paradigms and methodologies (Wilson, 2008).

Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) define autoethnography as:

> Autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations.

Similarly, Ngunjiri et al. (2010, p. 1) describe autoethnography as a qualitative method that combines ethnography, biography, and self-analysis to "utilize data about self and context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context." Thus the researcher becomes both the subject and object, with autoethnography providing "a window through which the external world is understood" (p. 2). Rooted in postmodernism as a reaction to the privilege of researcher over subject, autoethnography allows us to situate ourselves in the context of others and their social situations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). As a method, it is friendly to both researchers and readers, providing an opportunity to enhance and transform our understanding of culture (Chang, 2007). Chang (2007, p. 1) adds that "autoethnography should be ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation," postulating that any self-reflective writings that do not have all three are not actually autoethnography.

Autoethnography is not immune to criticism. It is often perceived as unscientific and lacking credibility, placing excessive focus on self at the risk of marginalizing others, overemphasizing narration at the cost of analysis and cultural interpretation, and plagued by ethical challenges. This is compounded by the fact that the autoethnographic community itself seems divided into two camps: the evocative vs. analytical autoethnographers (for more, see Ellis, 1999; Anderson, 2006). Despite these criticisms, I agree with Ngunjiri et al. (2010) who argue that autoethnography is a powerful tool to connect with others and social context. By allowing the researcher to reflect on and contemplate their methodological approach in the context of the knowledge system(s) of the community or people involved, autoethnography has the potential to broaden the discussion about what is meaningful and useful research. It is further able to accommodate any researcher's level of understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies, allowing for variations "in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 740). In this regard, where the researcher falls within this continuum exists in a state of flux depending on the goals and context of the research project (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). The autoethnographic process itself evolves over the course of the research; changing organically as the researcher learns and grows. However, regardless of where one situates oneself in this process, it is important to acknowledge that autoethnography is merely a tool. Its potential lies in how it is employed. In documenting the subjective self, one runs the risk of becoming self indulgent and narcissistic, perhaps losing sight of the end goal (Atkinson, 1997). Therefore "we must be cautious, though, that we do not adopt new approaches in an uncritical fashion ...let us proceed wisely" (Wall, 2006, p. 158).

Autoethnography and Indigenous Health Research

According to McIvor (2010), the autoethnographic method fits well with Indigenous research in two ways: its ability to recognize a central place of "self" in the research process while rejecting the separation between researcher and the subject, and its embrace of the use of storytelling as a method. In this regard "self reflection moves beyond field notes to having a more integral positioning within the research process and the construction of knowledge itself" (Kovach, 2010, p. 33). In the literature related to Indigenous research, autoethnography is often embraced by Indigenous scholars, or what Evans et al. (2012, p. 1055) refer to as "double insiders" seeking to practice respectful research in their own communities while conforming to conventional academic and rigorous research standards. Among non-Indigenous researchers, and more specifically non-Indigenous health researchers, there appears to be a lack of journal articles citing the use of autoethnography. I speculate that the reason for this may perhaps be rooted in health research's long tradition of embracing a biomedical approach that values objectivity and science over subjectivity and qualitative inquiry. A search of the terms "Indigenous," "autoethnography," and "health" in the Web of Science Social Science Citation Index and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index reveals only one article that employs the autoethnographical approach, with a focus on the role of the "double insider" in offering new insights for frameworks in community-based research (Evans et al., 2012). In response to this gap in the literature, I suggest that when applied in an appropriate framework, autoethnography is a valuable and underused methodological approach in Indigenous health research.

A Proposed Framework for the Autoethnographic Approach to Indigenous Health Research

Guided by the four common principles of Indigenous methodologies (relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriations, and rights and regulation), Wilson (2008, p. 77) builds on the work of Cora Weber-Pillwax (2001) to suggest that in an Indigenous research paradigm, researchers must ask themselves the following questions:

1. How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic I am studying and myself as researcher (on multiple levels)?

2. How do my methods build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?

3. How can I relate respectfully to the other participants involved in this research so that together we can form a stronger relationship with the idea that we will share?

4. What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?

5. Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to other participants, to the topic and to all of my relations?

6. What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal?

In Indigenous health research, I argue that these six questions provide an appropriate framework for the autoethnographic approach. While certainly applicable to all researchers regardless of their indigeneity, I suggest that this framework is especially valuable to non-Indigenous researchers seeking to open their mind to other ways of knowing and creating knowledge while acting as an ally to the people and communities they work with. At every step of the methodological approach, researchers should ask

themselves these questions, and reflect on them in their autoethnographic writings. This challenges researchers to consider whether or not their actions and decisions reflect an Indigenous methodological approach, encouraging them to be reflexive while opening both their mind and the research process to decolonization. In doing so, this approach has not only the potential to ensure that researchers are respectful and accountable to the people and communities they work with, but also to inform best practices that push the boundaries of conventional academic research, ultimately increasing the space for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies in health research. The goal of the autoethnographic process is not to speak for the Indigenous peoples and communities participating in research, but to challenge the conventional paradigms of knowledge creation held by the non-Indigenous researcher. It's about the practice of being an ally through personal reflection and sharing. This requires surrendering to the fact that one cannot turn off one's context and privilege, and contemplating how one can use this context and privilege to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and methodologies are inherent to the process in Indigenous health research. As an example of this reflexive process, I share the following excerpt from my own autoethnographic journal. This entry reflects a conversation I had with Liz Akiwenzie, a friend and traditional healer at SOAHAC whom I have come to know over the past two years.[2] In one of our conversations, I mistakenly referred to the regalia worn by Pow-wow dancers as "costumes," thus detracting from their sacred and ceremonial value:

> Today I was speaking with Liz and mentioned that I attended the Chippewa of the Thames Pow-wow on the weekend. I told her how much we enjoyed the dancing and the costumes. Without hesitation, Liz corrected me "Don't call them costumes...." My heart immediately sank realizing the mistake I made. Yet the way she corrected me was so kind and non-confrontational; she stated the facts and moved on as is she were simply reminding me to shut the door behind me. It caused me to reflect on the fact that I am so lucky to have this relationship with Liz where she understands that I am on a journey of learning, and that I will sometimes make mistakes and say the wrong thing.

As I reflect on this conversation, I am reminded that being a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous people and communities involves a journey of learning that may be both uncomfortable and rewarding at the same time. Along this journey, it is vitally important that I form authentic relationships with the people I work with. We cannot be afraid of saying the wrong thing or asking the wrong question. I remind myself that there will be times in the research relationship when I am the student, and times when I am the teacher. We all bring something to the research process, and the sharing and growth is reciprocal.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous health research by the non-Indigenous researcher is most certainly challenged by conflicting philosophical orientations and world views. Despite these challenges, Kovach (2010, p. 169) states that the non-Indigenous researcher can support the application of Indigenous methodologies in the academy by decolonizing self and institution, starting with

> decolonizing one's mind and heart ... by exploring one's own belief and values about knowledge and how it shapes practices. It is about examining whiteness. It is about examining power. It's ongoing.

The autoethnographic method provides an opportunity for the non-Indigenous researcher to embark on this ongoing journey as an ally to Indigenous people and communities.

By employing the framework of the 4R's, autoethnography not only "disrupts the traditional academic voice" (Pathak, 2010, p. 1), it also has the potential to inform best practices and ultimately increase the space in health research for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies.

Certainly the historical relationship between the dominant Western research paradigm and Indigenous research has been "uncomfortable" to say the least. However it is encouraging to witness a growing movement within the academy that calls for a new philosophical approach to Indigenous health research that better reflects the needs and knowledge systems of the communities involved. Funding

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bodies such as the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) now offer guidelines recognizing Indigenous methodologies as a necessary component of health research in Indigenous communities (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010), although how these guidelines are interpreted is often left up to the researcher (Lavalee, 2009). As an example, the Tri-Council Policy for research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada is replete with "shoulds" and "shalls" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010), yet how and who is ultimately responsible for governing these guidelines is far more ambiguous, often deferring to institutional ethics boards that lack representation from the communities being researched. Clearly we have come a long way, yet there remains much room for improvement.

In her discussion of the need for Indigenous methodologies in research with Indigenous peoples and communities, Louis (2007) offers

> these are exciting times.... Indigenous methodologies can invigorate and stimulate geographical theories and scholarship while strengthening Indigenous peoples' identities and supporting their efforts to achieve intellectual self-determination.

She adds "we need help ... we need allies." I believe that the project of increasing the space for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies in health research is large, and we all (Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers) have a responsibility to do it together. It will be an uncomfortable journey at times. It will require making mistakes. Along the way, I suggest that the autoethnographic method provides but one opportunity for non-Indigenous academic allies such as myself to be a part of the ongoing and exciting transformation of how research is done with Indigenous communities.

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2   Verbal consent was obtained from Liz Akiwenzie to include the autoethnographic journal excerpt.

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