

Chapter 10

Balancing Research Expectations with Community Realities



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Abstract Research with Inuit communities can be filled with connection between people and place, meaning and adventure, but it can also be difficult at times. Navigating research funding and community-researcher relationships can be especially challenging for an early-career researcher. In this chapter, I reflect on two experiences conducting research with Inuit communities, and discuss some of the lessons I learned navigating the sometimes-turbulent gap between research expectations and on-the-ground realities.

Keywords Fieldwork · Inuit · Positionality · Northwest Territories · Research-relationships · Ulukhaktok

10.1 Introduction

Research with Inuit communities can sound romantic, like working for National Geographic (but with far fewer Instagram followers), and this perception is true to some extent. Doing community-based research can also be difficult, leaving even the best-intentioned researcher and community members pulling out their hair (or losing it). As you have read in previous chapters, becoming aware of some of the challenges that you are likely to encounter as an early-career researcher and learning how to balance them can be a significant part of your learning, perhaps more so than any reading, class, seminar or conference presentation you may do. The applied learning that happens when conducting research with an Inuit community, especially learning to balance the realities of a different culture, can be a hyperspace experience. Your learning may be accelerated in ways that you likely did not think possible and you may not even realize that it is occurring. That is to say, research with Inuit

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communities can be romantic, filled with rich learning experiences, but it is also likely to be profoundly challenging and will offer you opportunities to grow academically and personally.

An unromantic, often challenging and entirely necessary part of my own arctic research experience has been funding. If you have yet to realize, I am sorry that I have to be the one to break it to you, but arctic research is extraordinarily expensive. Booking my first \$5000CDN return flight from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, turned this concept into reality for me. Needless to say, funding is a necessity if you are going to conduct research in the Arctic, and unless you are self-funded, that will come with guidelines and expectations that may often seem in juxtaposition to community realities.

My goal in this chapter is to make this less glamorous aspect of arctic research as digestible as possible and provide whatever insights I can from my own experiences. The first experience that I discuss is from my master's research on climate change vulnerability and adaptation with hunters in Ulukhaktok. I reflect on my preparation before and experiences during my 2-month field season in the summer of 2016. The second experience is from my role as a Research Associate on a multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary polar bear monitoring research project. I reflect on my experience as a social scientist working on a biology research project and the challenges I encountered trying to navigate project expectations with available funding. I finish by describing some key lessons that I learned that may be helpful to you as you work to balance research expectations with community realities.

Before I dive into these experiences, it is worth noting that my reflections are naturally incomplete and biased by my upbringing, education, position in society, personality and a variety of other factors. My memories, beliefs, and what I find important about them do not reflect all the realities I encountered, but rather my interpretation of those realities. I hope that my experiences, including my own biases and blind spots that may be obvious to some of you, but unconscious to me, can also help you to be more mindful and reflective during your arctic research journey.

10.2 Experience as a Master's Student: A Lesson in Positionality

Fishing rod, *check*, insulated rubber boots, *check*, audio recorder, *check*, duct tape, *check*, and portable printer (kind of ridiculous), but *check*. Running down my packing checklist prior to my first field season had me feeling both completely under- and over-prepared. The few hours it took to manoeuvre everything into my 55 L backpack and 80 L Action Packer was the culmination of 8 months of academic preparation and planning, and two more months of logistical preparation and planning. Ten months prior, in September 2015, I began my Master of Arts in Geography at the University of Guelph. My thesis research was designed to build and expand upon previous climate change vulnerability and adaptation research and

established research relationships with the community of Ulukhaktok (Pearce et al., 2010; Fawcett et al., 2018). Once the academic requirements were out of the way, I began planning the logistics of travel, which meant actioning my research budget. Despite reading through past research budgets for similar projects and discussing my budget at length with my supervisor, I was astounded by the cost of arctic research. I was thinking that “I’m not even in the Arctic yet,” yet somehow I had already spent what felt like an exorbitant amount of money on supplies. Others questions that often came to mind were: will I be able to claim this expense? Is this really necessary? And is this a good use of money? These questions were often followed by a sense of guilt, fueled by inexperience of what is actually involved in doing good community-based research. After all, why did I need a fishing rod?

These early expenses, particularly those that I did not fully understand at the time, magnified the weight of responsibility that I felt to do things well. I worried about being able to fulfill my responsibility to the community and to my supervisory committee, and I had many doubts running through my mind. Did I have everything? Did I have enough money? Was I ever going to make it home? How much food should I bring? How much baggage am I allowed to expense? What am I going to do with 200 m of fishing line? It was during this preparation phase that I also felt a sense of shame at my own perceived inflexibility. I understood that community-based research requires flexibility and open-mindedness, which takes time, but I was second guessing my every move. When and for how long I was to visit the community was one of the decisions that challenged me the most. The summer is a very busy time in the Arctic as many people have holidays and are keen to participate in land-based activities like hunting and fishing. This can make the summer a difficult time to do research, particularly if your research involves spending time speaking with hunters who would rather be on the land, or making the necessary preparations or repairs to get back out on the land, than talking with you. I felt as though I had little choice but to go in the summer though, due to the constraints of the university semester system and research funding. Once I actually made it to Ulukhaktok in June, without half my luggage, which was left behind at the Vancouver airport, the waves of nervous anticipation that came with planning, packing and buying supplies, turned into a more constant anxiety. I felt an immense pressure to achieve the perfect sample size and number of interviews, to use my budget *exactly* as I had devised, and to strike the perfect balance between academic expectations and guidelines (including funding) and building meaningful relationships with community members. I aimed to be the perfect researcher: free from the tensions of my positionality and research expectations, and able to balance living in a vastly different culture to my own. I soon learned that I had put an impossible expectation on myself.

My difficulties navigating this chasm became ever-present when I started to participate in community life. To do the research justice, I needed to learn more about community life, particularly the role and importance of subsistence harvesting, and build relationships with the people who would contribute to the research. Relationship building was a two-way street, in which I was learning about the community and people, and community members were getting to know me.

Early-on, I found that the pressure I put on myself about how I spent research funding affected my ability to enter into what I would consider to be authentic relationships. On the one hand, I was able to pay community members to take me on the land as part of the research. On one occasion I spent the entire day travelling down Prince Albert Sound with an experienced hunter who agreed take me with him when I offered to pay him for his time and buy him gas and supplies for the day. Experiences like these are memorable and were incredibly valuable to the research in that they gave context to the things people were sharing with me about the importance of subsistence and changes in the environment during interviews. In this way, research funding allowed me to feel as if the project was able to directly contribute to the lives of the people I was doing research with by financially compensating them for sharing their time, knowledge and expertise with me. There were also opportunity costs that came with the research funding. I came to realize that the relationships I built with community members would always be in the context of my positionality as an outsider to the community and culture, and as a graduate student. My access to research money and the guidelines that needed to be followed (i.e. signatures and receipts) served as a constant reminder of my positionality. When I invited someone for coffee to talk about hunting, or just talk about life, we would make light of me being able to use research funds to pay for it. This was also a reminder that without research funding, there is no way that I would have even had the opportunity to have had these conversations, as I would not have been able to travel to the community, nor could I have expected people to give me their time without some form of compensation. That said, most of the time I wished that I could have stepped outside of my role as a graduate student researcher and build relationships with community members from a personal standpoint.

Navigating the tensions between money and community-research realities is not solely an issue for researchers. Community members formed different perceptions about me based on my position as a graduate student and the expectations that I had access to funding. Some community members had prior experience working with researchers and recognized that any relationship with a researcher would come with some quirks and formalities by which we were bound. They had a sense of humour about these formalities and by me showing a genuine interest in doing research together, it allowed for these formalities to become a minor tedium – a sense of a shared burden for all involved. “Let’s go for coffee on the university’s dime” made us all insiders on the same joke. There was also a general acknowledgement by most community members of my place as a student, and that my personal finances and research funding would be limited. Again, recognizing and embracing the ridiculousness and humour of the opportunities and constraints of doing research proved extremely beneficial to relationship-building.

Looking back at this experience now, I realize that much of my anxiety was caused by me trying to be perfect when perfectionism wasn’t possible nor preferable. Inuit in Ulukhaktok were overwhelmingly kind and generous to me, and were willing to help me with the research and my life in general regardless if they were getting paid. This showed me that my hang-up with research funding and how it could influence relationships was mostly my own and that I needed to step back and

realize that funding enabled the research to happen and it allowed people to be fairly compensated for their time. That said, funding can create power dynamics and efforts are still needed to make the distribution of research funding in the community equitable and fair.

10.3 Experience as a Research Associate: An Exercise in Adaptation

A few years after completing my master's degree, my interest and joy in community-based research in the Arctic pulled me back to it. In August 2019, I started a position as a Research Associate on a multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary research project focused on using genomics as a non-invasive method to monitor polar bears. My role in the project was vague but involved identifying opportunities to use genomics in existing community-based monitoring programs in the Western Canadian Arctic. A few months before starting, a colleague sent me the job posting and information about the project. This included the research budget, which allocated approximately \$110,000CDN to the social science part of the research. This amount may seem large, but was minor within the context of the multi-million-dollar project and was intended to cover multiple trips to do the research with communities. The potential to travel and work with communities was a large part of what attracted me to this position. When I started the position in August, however, nearly 90% (\$98,000CDN) of that planned research budget was no longer available because the project leads were unable to secure matching funding, which the core funding was conditional upon. Rather than 2 years and a \$110,000CDN research budget, I now had 1 year and approximately \$12,000CDN to complete the work.

As an early career researcher, I had never encountered a funding problem like this before. I had previously worked on Federal government-sponsored projects that recognized the flexibility and multi-year security needed to conduct meaningful community-based research. I was operating on the belief that all projects and funding agencies had the flexibility and security that I had during my master's. This polar bear project, however, was much larger and far more complex. My role was to work with six communities (five of which I had never worked with) and with a highly politicized species. Communities and co-management bodies in the region can be wary of research involving polar bear due to the species' political nature and cultural importance. Because of this, the relevant wildlife co-management boards had a keen interest in being involved in all stages of the project.

Considering the priorities of six highly diverse communities is far more complicated and necessitates a more involved pre-research consultation process than working with just one community. It would require collaborating with multiple regional and community organizations to identify their interests in order to establish relevant and achievable research objectives. Here is where I ran into a budgetary dilemma: how could I travel to co-design the research *with* communities, when doing so

would take up the entirety of the budget leaving no funds to actually do the research? I opted to start by working with the regional council that oversees wildlife issues in the region to discuss a possible plan. Even this was made difficult by the cost of traveling to present at the scheduled meetings. The process took months as council members discussed the research ideas with their respective communities and reported back the council. We eventually agreed on a research plan and although I was disappointed that I was unable to travel to meet with each community myself, I was pleased that we had a plan! Circumstance, however, was not to be outdone. Two weeks after getting approval to move forward with the research plan, the world shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel was disrupted and our new plan, which we had worked so long for, was put on hold. We had delayed starting research to take the time to develop the research plan in a manner that was within our research budget, and now travel was not even an option. We could not have predicted that a global pandemic would thwart our research plan. Assuming you too lived through 2020, you will know that at times it felt that whatever could go wrong, did go wrong, and this case was no different.

Several months later, as I write this, we are still left in uncertainty. Even as some precautions begin to lift, and some travel is restored, the Canadian Arctic remains locked to outside travel. The history of pandemics for Indigenous communities across Canada ensures that these may be some of the last places that travel is permitted to, and with it, the ability to do community-based research. We are left asking questions about how, and if, we can still meet some of the project objectives if granted an extension on deadlines. This is unlikely to happen as the project necessitates strong community-researcher collaboration and this is difficult, if not impossible, under the current circumstances – both COVID and lack of funding. But then again, it could be argued that the project’s underlying funding structure was always at odds with the goals of completing meaningful community-based research.

10.4 What Lessons Can We Take Away from These Experiences?

The more I know, the more I realize I know nothing. (Socrates)

What I have learned trying to find the balance between research funding and community realities is that I will always have more to learn. This tension is a natural part of being a researcher and, as such, there is no real panacea that I can offer to overcome it. Acknowledging the inevitability of these challenges and remaining curious as they arise, reflecting and responding as is appropriate and possible, may be the best way forward. If I could go back and give myself advice, I would have several suggestions on how to make the process better. Note that these may have not necessarily changed the realities that I encountered or my actions to a great extent, but they would have changed how I processed them and eased some internally

difficult experiences. Had I accomplished this, I would have likely had even more energy to put into building relationships and my research.

Be More Flexible This could have been in the timing of my fieldwork or what I saw as necessary costs of community-based research. Oftentimes because of my preconceived ideas, I was so caught up in rigid ways of perceiving the journey that I lost perspective of the journey I was on. I could have remained open to whatever arose as an opportunity to learn in different ways about community-based research.

Maintain Perspective This can be difficult, especially if funding or funding guidelines alter your project in ways that disrupt or alter the course of your research. I know that I had extreme trouble with this during the polar bear project. But if your research is going to be truly responsive to community priorities, this is necessary. For example, although it was frustrating to have the ability to proceed with the project disrupted by a drawn-out consultation process due to limited funds, and then completely disrupted by COVID, consultation is an essential part of community-based research that needs to be better accounted for in funding structures. We often emphasize the importance of community priorities in community-based research such as this, but are rarely ready to deal with the consequences that could include project delays or refocusing research on a community priority we had not intended to focus on at all. As with the polar bear project, influences beyond your reach may disrupt your goals and redirect your outcomes, but maintaining perspective and flexibility can keep you moving forward.

Stop Overstressing If you are a graduate student, this should not be something you are too concerned about. Your supervisor is meant to guide you through the entire process, and funding is a formality where they should, ideally, be helping you in some manner. Furthermore, beyond meeting the bare necessities, particularly ethical necessities, funding guidelines can be relatively fluid and malleable. It is quite likely that as long as you follow the most important guidelines (e.g. do not spend your entire research budget helping someone buy a boat), you will not have anyone hunting you down. I had several different “pots” of money to draw from during my research for my master’s, some with very specific stipulations about their uses. In one instance the stress I had about overspending in one category of my budget and the implications related to funding stipulations completely dissipated when the university accounting person noted that several of my expenses could fit into multiple budget categories. If I could go through my master’s again, I would relax more and stress less, knowing that each challenge is really an opportunity to learn and grow.

Lighten Up Allow yourself to fully experience what you are experiencing, not what you think you should be experiencing. Rather than resisting the tension that came with operating in a new culture, I could have embraced their normality (much like we are told to embrace our feelings). Your perspective and how you share it can make all the difference. If you can make light of the formalities that come with

academic and funding guidelines as a burden or even an opportunity, it can change the perception of you as an unknowing outsider, to a slightly less naive visitor who is open to learning and maybe even becoming a friend.

References

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