Chapter 12
How Culture Shapes Research

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Abstract I am from Aruba, an island in the Caribbean, and had the opportunity during my Honours degree to conduct research with the community of Ulukhaktok in the Canadian Arctic. In this chapter, I share, with examples, how my Aruban culture and journalism training influenced my experiences building relationships in the community and conducting the research.

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

12.1 Introduction

I arrived in Ulukhaktok in the middle of a blizzard. I remember looking out at the white land, the white sky, the white wind and the white snow and feeling as if I were transported into a movie. After all, for a young man from Aruba, a semi-arid island in the Caribbean, used to timid seas and cacti the size of trees, the only chance I ever got to see snow in my life was through a television screen. The “White Christmas” snow that I knew from the movies could never have prepared me for the brutal, blinding blizzards of the Arctic.

My first few days in Ulukhaktok were split into two introductions. First, I had to get to know the Arctic nature and environment. I didn’t know how to dress, and it was hard to shake the mistaken belief that you could not blink in −30 °C weather without your eyelids freezing shut. In those first few days, I spent more time sweating than shivering, by over-dressing in five warm layers when a parka (a word I’d never heard before for a clothing item I’d never seen) would have been enough. Second, I had to get to know the people of Ulukhaktok and their culture. All I knew of Inuit culture I had either read online or been told by my supervisor who had

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accompanied me and a master's student on this six-week trip and it was mostly about traditional Inuit culture and not so much about today's modern Inuit culture. I was a child, socially and culturally, in this place. And yet, while I got to know the environment and the people (a big task on its own), I was expected to work too.

I got the opportunity to travel to the Arctic through the Nurturing Capacity program of Indspire, an Indigenous-led charitable organization dedicated to raising funds and delivering programs that provide Indigenous youth in Canada with the tools necessary to achieve their potential. During my time in the community, my task was to work with staff and students at Helen Kalvak *Elihakvik* (School) to document and share efforts being made at the school to negotiate an education system that is culturally and socially relevant to Inuit students. At the end of the project, the interviews, photos and other findings would be put together in a report called "School in a Modern Arctic."

12.2 My First Days in the Arctic

I was in Ulukhaktok primarily to work on the project; however, my time in Ulukhaktok ended up becoming a lot more than that. To set it all off, a discussion with the principal of Helen Kalvak School just days after my arrival made it clear that there was a severe shortage of teachers at the school. Three teachers had just left the previous month and no replacements had been found yet. My supervisor, seizing this opportunity for a closer relationship with the students who were to be the focus of the project, spontaneously offered for us to take on the role of teachers and provide a five-week Journalism course for the Grade 10 and 11 students. I remember sitting in the principal's office and staring incredulously at my supervisor, though I'm not sure he noticed. My mind was numbed by the cold and the social interactions of the first few days in the community, and I wasn't sure what I was hearing. Would I agree to do it? Of course, but that doesn't mean I thought it was any less crazy. I never pretended to have any experience as a teacher. In fact, I could count the number of times I'd stood in front of a classroom on one hand; twice during a Geography Immersion Day for high school students, and three times for a university course called "Introduction to Sustainability." Only one out of those five times had I stood in front of the class alone.

Nonetheless, within days of arriving in Ulukhaktok, I was signed up to be a substitute teacher and teaching assistant, something I had not planned for at all. This set the scene for what the rest of my time in Ulukhaktok would be like. Every day was different and brought a fresh surprise with a new and unique set of challenges. Adaptability became the highest virtue. The Arctic Journalism course, as we called it, though it was an intimidating idea to begin with, did allow me to interact with students on a daily basis and get to know them better than I otherwise would have. We also gave back to the community directly by teaching students journalism skills like interviewing, writing articles, photography and video editing, which equipped the students to become the researchers for the project.

The idea was that the Arctic Journalism course would provide the bulk of the qualitative data for the “School in a Modern Arctic” report, while interviews with the principal, teachers and teaching assistants would provide the rest of the necessary data (both qualitative and quantitative). However, the Arctic Journalism class was also an opportunity in itself to make the school more socially relevant and appropriate to its students. To achieve this, we teamed up with hunter-mentors and Elders through the *Nunamin Illihakvia*: learning from the land project, an Ulukhaktok-governed project, funded by the Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program of the federal government, that brings together young Inuit with experienced hunters, sewers and Elders, to promote the learning and use of traditional knowledge, skills and values.

Through our collaboration with *Nunamin Illihakvia*, the Arctic Journalism class (and myself, for which I was very excited for) got to go out on the land and sea ice to learn search-and-rescue skills, how to set up camp, and hunting and trapping skills. Students also got to participate in activities such as cutting ice for drinking water, bannock-making and fox-skinning. Though I have never had to cut ice for drinking water or skin a fox again, I still occasionally make bannock nearly 2 years later.

While several other students outside of the Arctic Journalism class also participated in these activities, the students in the Arctic Journalism class had the extra task of documenting and sharing these activities. Each week there was a focus on a different aspect of journalism, such as writing, photography, or film, and students were tasked with recording the week’s activities with their newly developed skills.

The Arctic Journalism class moved beyond the classroom and took on a life of its own. It felt like we were always working on it as there was no divide between work and community living. Sometimes, my supervisor and I would visit the school after dinner and work into the late hours of the night. And to think, it was my second week in the community, and I was already running on fumes. Some days, it took me as much as two whole hours to get out of bed. The first time the sun came up was halfway through the trip and I wasn’t taking half as many Vitamin D tablets as I should have been. I was taking between one and three in a day, only to find out from one of the high school students that he never took less than five in a day (and his were bigger tablets). Not to mention he was a born and raised in Ulukhaktok, so just imagine what an Aruban who hasn’t even gotten rid of his tan would need!

12.3 Where Cultures Meet

Thanks to my multicultural upbringing and my strong belief in the shared characteristics and humanity of all people, I was not too worried about fitting into Ulukhaktok. I grew up as an ethnically and culturally mixed child, split as I was between Dutch and Venezuelan parents and growing up in neither of the countries my parents were from. I was always acutely aware of my ancestry, though it did not play a large role in my everyday life. I always knew where I came from. The dynamics of my identity

only changed when I left Latin America and the Caribbean and realized that people like me did not identify the way I did in other parts of the world, and it played a large role in my social relations throughout my life, including in Ulukhaktok.

Growing up between two cultures, with friends from many other cultures, taught me some things about what it means to be culturally appropriate. In my life I had experienced first-hand the funny mannerisms of people experiencing culture shock, and I had also read in my academic studies the different methodologies used by social scientists to "fit into" a community. In my perspective, this "fitting into" another culture tends to take two forms. On the one hand, there are those who travel to a community, soak up as much culture and knowledge as they can, and then leave without giving anything back. This seems to me no more than cultural exploitation, no matter what the soaked-up "knowledge" is used for (e.g. academic research). People who behave in this way act like ghosts, people with no culture who are able to consume so much of other people's cultures because they are "clean slates." They come to foreign nations and communities as blank canvasses, so they may draw on themselves with the cultural paints and crayons of the visited region.

On the other hand, there are those who travel to communities with the assumption that they have much to give (often in the way of funding and Western knowledge) and very little to receive. They are more well-known and despised than the previous kind of traveller, because they are more obviously toxic. They act arrogantly and are quick to dismiss local culture for all kinds of reasons and excuses.

I think that to be successful in a foreign culture and especially to be successful as a social researcher, means walking a fine line between these two behavioural extremes. To feel comfortable and accepted in Ulukhaktok, I could not come in arrogantly; I had to come in with an open heart and an open mind. But opening up my heart and mind to Ulukhaktok did not mean erasing the culture and the knowledge that I grew up with, so that I could arrive with a clean slate in the Arctic upon which I could paint a new Miguel, using Inuit colours. Rather, fitting in as a foreigner was about creating a two-way street, a *sharing* rather than a *taking* or a *giving* approach.

As social scientists it is our job, in a sense, to take. That is, we arrive in a place to understand and learn from the local culture; to take knowledge. In the last few decades, it has become very important in the field of social science to also give back to the community, and as social scientists we make sure to do so through, for example, dissemination of our research. But what about giving back at a personal level? At a human level?

To me, giving back at a human level meant the sharing of my culture with others, just as they shared their culture with me. There was no arrogance there, no assumption that my culture was more important or interesting than the local culture. Rather, there was an acknowledgement that both cultures are equal, and though locally specialized, have important lessons to teach people of other cultures. It was with this mindset that I had some of the most heartfelt exchanges of the trip. For example, one day as I was helping to clean the school gym, an instructor asked me what Aruban music was like. We spent the rest of the evening exchanging Aruban and Inuit songs as we cleaned. I also followed Inuinnaqtun language classes and

practiced short phrases with Elders. In return, I shared bits and pieces of Papiamento (the Aruban language) with *Ulukhaktomiut* kids, who relished in yelling the newly learned words at me from across the hamlet. On other occasions, I discussed with Elders the differences and similarities of colonization on Aruba as compared to Ulukhaktok. By sharing my experiences and opening myself up to experiences that aren't my own, and that I will never have, I came back from my trip not just as a professionally developed social researcher but as a personally developed human. I learned so much (and yet only scratched the surface) of what it means to be Inuit in Ulukhaktok; but I also learned so much about what it means to be human, and especially what it means to be human in a changing world.

My studies require me to consistently think about ethnicity as well as language, beliefs and other cultural markers and how these affect people's livelihoods and their abilities to adapt to social and environmental changes in their lives. Inevitably, culture and ethnicity became important, central even, to my idea of identity and what it means to be "human." In Ulukhaktok, there seemed to be a different and refreshing attitude. This was clear, perhaps, in the phrase "we all bleed the same colour," which I heard a number of people say during my time there. Identity was not so much defined through ethnicity and culture (e.g. language, beliefs) as much as it was defined by people's abilities to meet and live up to traditional values. Values such as independence, generosity, and the ability to provide (through food or money) for other people were central to this. Being a fully developed human meant being (among other things) independent, generous, and a provider for someone's family or for the community.

I learned this lesson about humanity in one specific timeslot in one specific community, and I believe that I am only starting to grasp the true meaning of it. Yet, this lesson has had a large impact on my life and the way I think about ethnicity, nationality, Indigeneity, culture, and land, and most importantly, our shared humanity as a species. This lesson wouldn't have been possible without opening myself up to people, nor would it have been possible, I think, if I had been merely a clean slate in this community, a detached observer, or an objective researcher. I can only hope that in the same way, someone's life in Ulukhaktok has slightly expanded through meeting me, and their thoughts and ideas broadened like mine have.

12.4 Combining Work and Play

The most difficult part about working in Ulukhaktok was trying to distinguish worktime from leisure time. With any other job, you would expect to have a schedule to abide by, but with community-based social research, every step you take and every word you speak outside of your bedroom is essentially a part of your job. Even if you're not interviewing anyone, there is the role of participant observation and when you're in a social setting, you are immediately a participant, even if you're filling other roles too (e.g. teacher, instructor, guide, friend, housemate).

Early-on during my time in Ulukhaktok, I wondered how I could have genuine, human connections with people if I had to constantly be analysing their words and behaviour for the research. I disliked the idea of allowing people to open up around me if it was only for the purpose of going home and analysing the information they shared afterwards, and I was disgusted with the thought of not being entirely there while interacting with someone, just because my analytical mind would be observing their every movement in the meantime, recording their every word. I wouldn't want anyone, not even a social researcher whose job it was to understand me, to act and think like that around me, so how could I bring myself to act and think like that around others?

Perhaps because of my own background, it is easy for me to imagine that I or a family member could be playing the role of the observed, rather than observer. My great-grandmother was a Wayuu/Añú woman from north-western Venezuela, and though I did not know her personally, my mother grew up in her household and during my childhood I heard many fond stories about her and saw a lot of photos. I would hate to think that the world would know her as a collection of anthropologically analysed thoughts and behaviours that could be rationalized through history and scientific thought, rather than a friend, a wife, a mother, a grandmother; someone who laughed and lived and breathed. A human.

I believe that every social researcher should imagine, before visiting a community (and continuously during their research), what it feels like to be continuously observed and scrutinised. They should imagine that their every behaviour or spoken word were written down in a journal and questioned at the end of the day, as if they were an equation to be figured out. What would that feel like? Then they should remind themselves that they are the ones holding those spotlights, and that they have a duty to act out of love, compassion, empathy, gratitude, and humility. But the question, the conundrum for every social researcher, is how to avoid analysing a person, and yet to still produce the needed outputs and answer the posed questions. I can't say I have an answer, but I do think it's a dilemma worth exploring again and again.

Another aspect of my work that I struggled with in Ulukhaktok was the fact that, as I was also documenting and recording events and activities to be shared in report and video format, I had to constantly be taking photos and recording videos. All too often I was in the middle of an act, enjoying myself, feeling like a part of the group, when I realized it was a perfect moment to snap a picture or even film what was happening. So out comes the camera or the phone, and the barrier it creates. Once I was photographing or filming, I was no longer a participant, a member of the group; I was an outsider looking in, someone observing rather than participating. "Participant observation" is what some researchers call it, but from my experience, sometimes you can't do both at the same time.

Both of these are things I struggled with throughout my trip. The important thing to remember for me, however, was that even as I struggled with these questions and my role in the community, I was conducting work that was helpful to the community, and that community members were grateful to me for it. At the end of the day, I was in Ulukhaktok to do my job, and actually doing that job gave me a social

standing in its own right, as people respected me for what I was doing. I can't say that this is an answer to my questions, but it is at the very least a comfort.

A contradictory trick that helped me through this dilemma of participant observation was to actively decide when and where I was working, and when and where I wasn't. Contradictory because, as I said, it is difficult as a community-based social researcher to distinguish worktime from leisure time. But this was simply a promise to myself and not something that reflected on the outer world, and it allowed for me to gauge my role in situations and to adapt as needed. If I was acting as a social researcher in a situation, it was my job to analyse and record behaviour. On the other hand, if I noticed that people were welcoming me into a space and/or activity as a person rather than as a social researcher, that's exactly what I was.

I enjoyed weekly drum dancing practice and did not busy myself with photos and videos. I had lunch every day with my wonderful host family and I visited Elders when they invited me. I also filmed people setting fox traps, instead of setting them myself. I held freezing cameras in freezing hands in the freezing wind when all I wanted was to warm up and I conducted interviews with people when sometimes I would have much preferred to get to know them over dinner.

12.5 Departure

On Friday, February 22nd 2019, it was time for me to board my flight back to Vancouver, and from there to the Sunshine Coast in Australia, to finish my studies. The morning started off well and blue-skied, but with a haziness in the distance that seemed fast-approaching. Throughout that morning, the weather deteriorated quickly until finally I got into the taxi to the airport and halfway there, we experienced a total white-out. The three hills Ulukhaktok are named after disappeared in the distance behind a white wind that was worse and more intense than the one I arrived in. The flight was cancelled, and I had no choice but to spend an extra weekend in Ulukhaktok.

Because of this delay I was forced to cancel plans to visit family that I hadn't seen in over a decade, so at first, I was dismayed, but the weather cleared that weekend and I had some of the most beautiful days I'd had there. I went on long walks, was invited to a lovely dinner, and got to see drum dance practice one last time. I played with the children that I had already said goodbye to, children seemingly oblivious to the fact that I was still leaving, and not there to stay. When I finally left the next Monday, on a blue and windless early afternoon, I knew I would miss this community. Like a cactus in the snow, I was not at all in a familiar environment, and yet I had felt entirely at home. I never thought, growing up in Aruba, that one day my heart would long for a bone-chillingly cold, blizzard-prone community with a frozen ocean, but what a beautiful community it is.

12.6 Reflections

I first wrote this book chapter only a couple of months after returning from Ulukhaktok. I was so immersed in the Arctic lifestyle, still, that I couldn't fully imagine what it was like to have never lived in the Arctic, even if only for a few weeks. Now, nearly two years on, I think back to the days in Vancouver on my way back to Australia from Ulukhaktok. In the days between my flights to and from Vancouver, I did nothing but go on long daily walks and observe the life around me. The city was loud and impersonal and so I sought refuge more than once in Stanley Park, crouching down to watch the leaves and snow close to the ground, or sitting on rocks to look out at the ocean.

It seemed, then, that my internal clock had slowed down to a glacial pace. I stood and watched the treetops, remembering one morning walk I'd taken in Ulukhaktok when the snow was thick and I could hear nothing, nor see anything but white all around. I had been worried, then, that I'd wander off too far, to the land of the wolves, and meanwhile, the outside world sped on. In the evenings I watched nature documentaries about the Arctic. I didn't know yet that I would never be able to fully explain this research trip to anyone, but my intuition said otherwise. The conversations I'd had; the friendships I'd formed; the landscape I had both loved for its beauty and dreaded for its deathly cold and silence. It was not anything I could put into words.

My hope is that I might be able to give some advice to someone who is embarking on their first trip to the Arctic. The first thing I would say is to not have any expectations, because you'll be asked to do things you never thought you would. Secondly, forget the "enough clothes will keep you warm" myth; my hands were always cold, and I was one of the outsiders who did impressively well in the harsh environment. Thirdly, take twice as many Vitamin D tablets as you think you need, and fourthly, pace yourself. It is better to do a few things well than to race from one thing to the next feeling like a zombie! Most of all, I would say not to forget that even if you are going for work or research, you are going as a human. Connect with people at that level and you will have lovely relationships, just as you would anywhere else with an open mind and an open heart. Your research will fade one day, but the people who touched your heart and mind won't. Finally: if in doubt, ask an Elder.

Miguel van der Velden has a Bachelor of Arts in Sustainability and Journalism, and experience in international law and climate adaptation governance. He continues to work in the field of international development, especially as it pertains to small island states and Indigenous communities.