Cultural Missteps and Ethical Considerations with Indigenous Populations: Preliminary Reflections from Northeastern Ontario, Canada

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Abstract Within this submission the authors share their experiences as a blended research team with Aboriginal community and mainstream academic researchers. The team has collaborated since 2004 on several externally funded research projects. Initially, the team engaged in research through mainstream methodologies. In the process, the community co-researchers and participants were silenced through mainstream cultural practices that were unfamiliar and meaningless in Wikwemikong culture. More recently, the team has employed a community conceived de-colonizing methodology, developed from within Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve. Within this submission, the authors will highlight their initial cultural missteps, followed by more recently utilized culturally relevant approaches. It is proposed that what might be ethically sound research with mainstream participants and among mainstream researchers can silence and subvert practices among those from marginalized groups/cultures. Provisional suggestions are offered for researchers interested in co-researching in Aboriginal communities.

Keywords De-colonizing methodologies · Aboriginal · Ethical research

Mainstream researchers have slowly gained an appreciation that research ethics standards are culturally informed. Many Canadian researchers are well aware of the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Within this statement, the Tri-Councils have provided guidelines for how researchers are to proceed ethically in their/our work. The core Principles of *respect for persons*, the *concern for welfare*, and *justice* are at the heart of the new draft policy (TCPS

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Draft 2nd Edition, 2009). Within each of the aforementioned guiding principles, there is a growing emphasis on cultural safety. For example, *respect for persons* requires an appreciation that each participant's autonomy is achieved within a social context, informed by cultural dimensions such as race, ethnicity and religion. When one considers the *concern for welfare*, there is also an intersection with culture given the importance of physical, and in relation to the immediate contribution, to a larger degree, psychological and spiritual health. The latter two aspects (psychological and spiritual health) can be enhanced through the active protection and also the promotion of welfare, achieved through research as knowledge and also research as a process. Finally, *justice* also binds with culture when in matters of fairness the researcher moves away from a race blind approach (see Butryn 2002), instead of recognizing that being treated equally as a participant differs from being treated the same. One might be treated the same in terms of access as a research participant, although when researchers lack in awareness and practice of culturally safe methods through the adoption of a mono-cultural approach, and the research methodology reflects mainstream practices, the rights of a participant from a minority group are less than equal (see Ryba and Schinke 2009). Consequently, when Canadian mainstream researchers consider working with Aboriginal participants, governance is through principles that in some ways diverge from, and extend, standard research ethics requirements. Expectations are not just to commit no harm, but rather, to protect and promote the rights of these human participants and their affiliated Aboriginal communities. As Schinke et al. (2008) have noted, the expectation is not just to step thoughtfully with Aboriginal participants, but rather through the research to engage actively in non-maleficence. When working with Aboriginal participants, benefits to the participants and their respective communities become an inherent part of the work, written into projects and their results. Partnerships, cultural guidance, community leadership, participatory action research, advocacy, long-term relations and self-governed outcomes and transformational validity (i.e. quality being assessed by what is achieved through the project; Cho and Trent 2006; Lather 1986) are each important potential aspects of the research. Through progressive collaborations with Aboriginal co-researchers and participants, mainstream co-researchers are encouraged to work as part of a team, on projects that are important in the eyes, and through the words, of the communities from where they seek knowledge. At the forefront of research, where Aboriginal and European paradigms intersect, are strategies that value the Aboriginal member / community's worldview and place in the background, the ontological and epistemological backgrounds of mainstream researchers.

In principle, our co-authors agree that during research involving human participants, especially when that research is undertaken with people who are marginalized, scientists should collaborate closely and thoughtfully using techniques/strategies that are culturally inviting and sincere. However, when it comes down to it, many scientists commit cultural missteps during, and as a result of, research even when they have the best of intentions. One might propose that the objective when co-researching with marginalized people is to bring to the foreground the silenced voices, and then progressively step back and eventually away from projects once those who have been disempowered regain / re-assert through research, empowerment. Our co-authors from the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve and Laurentian University continue to work together in applied research on topics that are meaningful to Aboriginal youth on and off reserve as well as the geographic region. Hence, we have decided to co-develop research applications, build an infrastructure to sustain governance, and then move to a new research project. What follows is a story of sorts where white mainstream co-researchers from a Canadian university (Laurentian University) learned from Aboriginal co-researchers from one reserve (Wikwemikong) through first-

hand experiences. The reader will find that many mistakes were made through the research process, with new mistakes being made and subsequently corrected, as the authors move forward and learn over time.

Our research team is comprised of mainstream academics, mostly from Laurentian University in Canada and community co-researchers from the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve (see Manitoulin Island 2005). Added to the authorship herein also is an ethicist from the area of sport to broaden the submission and also a new member to the team. Our team members have worked together since 2004. The research team began our work together in progressive stages. First, after being approached by the first author about the possibility of conducting research with elite athletes on the reserve, Duke Peltier, the Sport and Recreation Director from Wikwemikong, wrote a letter of support for our research project, which accompanied the overall application to the granting agency. An additional letter of support was garnered from the Sport and Recreation Director from a second reserve, who also resided in Northeastern Ontario, Canada. The lead author conceptualized the initial project to seek out the views of 23 Canadian Aboriginal elite athletes about what they believed were suitable sport psychology (i.e. motivational) practices. Through earlier applied work of the lead author, it was found that conventional approaches to motivational practice learned in the academy were not always well received by aspiring athletes from Canada's Aboriginal population (Brant et al. 2002).

When the researchers were awarded funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, work (and growth) among the co-researchers began. Both supporting reserves were notified that the collaborative grant was accepted for funding. The Wikwemikong members led by Duke Peltier were enthused by the prospect of collaborative sport research, though the second community chose not to continue its participation in the project due to a change in their community leadership. Upon reflection, the academic researchers among the team learned early that there are degrees of support, with engagement serving as the most important endorsement in culturally inclusive research teams. From Wikwemikong, the lead academic co-researcher was invited to present the sport project to a group of community members. The mainstream academic entered the Wikwemikong Council Chambers and presented his idea of a research project, to at least 15 community members. The members were seated in a circle, and included the Chief, a few elders to his right and left, and various former athletes, sport coaches and sport staff. The presentation of the project was conveyed through PowerPoint slides and the academic researcher overviewed the slides similar to how he lectured in a university classroom. No questions were asked throughout the presentation. After the presentation was completed, some questions were raised, first from the Chief, then from the elders, and subsequently from the younger members within the circle. There was a clear order to the circle, with elders being regarded as the most learned, based on lived experience. The academic researcher at the time was only 36 and although he held doctoral and post-doctoral training, he lacked in life experience and cultural safety from the perspective of the Wikwemikong co-researchers and community. Hence, it became clear that there is a distinction between formal education gained in the academy and education gained through life and cultural experiences from within the community. When the meeting ended Wikwemikong voted in favor of the project and community co-researchers were formally assigned as guides within the project. Far too often mainstream researchers believe they are engaging in Aboriginal research when they seek, and operationalize, the views of Aboriginal participants. There is a distinction between research on Aboriginal peoples and research with Aboriginal, the latter comprised of active engagement of co-researchers, in carefully designed projects, where culturally safe and suitable methodologies are employed.

White Research on Aboriginal Participants or Aboriginal Research?

Mainstream research is an approach taken among many scientists, often correctly chosen to match with a project. Such research is value-laden, with an individualistic orientation, where the experts on the topic of knowledge can often be found within academic institutions (Hanrahan and Schinke 2010). White knowledge is often objective, top-down, tidy, and reductionist. In contrast, Aboriginal research is community conceived and affirmed through collective decision-making, community researchers with contextual and cultural expertise, and manifestations that contribute to immediate community betterment (see Smith 1999). Aboriginal research in some ways resembles research as praxis (see Lather 1986), proposed by feminist scholars. The intent is to bring to the forefront and re-engage voices that have been silenced systematically through socio-historical practices, and also through research. Like Aboriginal research, feminist research is often of a collective orientation, likely because activism requires a collective to push subverted voices forward. Similarly, feminist research and Aboriginal research are also steeped in community values (CIHR 2007). However, Aboriginal research is research where space in the foreground is made for Aboriginal customs and values. Examples in terms of methodology transcend participatory action research (PAR; Minkler 2000) to culturally informed practices that serve as a means of empowerment / de-colonizing (Blodgett et al. 2008; Schinke et al. 2009). Recently, the first author was asked to peer-review an ethics protocol from a research team, where it was claimed that the team were engaging in a de-colonizing methodology. The project was entirely a mainstream methodology and there was no clear benefit gained by the Aboriginal participants. Colonizing research practices happen when mainstream researchers believe, through a lack of understanding, that research practices acquired through conventional classroom teachings can be employed rigorously to understand the views of human subjects across mainstream, minority, and marginalized cultures alike (Forsyth and Heine 2010). This approach is inconsistent with de-colonizing research, which seeks to involve the marginalized group in the process of developing research questions, research design, data collection and presentation of results in an attempt to control potential biases that may exist and decrease the perpetuation of common misconceptions. When de-colonizing research practices are not used, conventional research practices can unintentionally perpetuate silence among those at the margins, when such practices are unfamiliar and exotic in the eyes of the participants and community co-researchers. Hence, when a culturally informed researcher is asked to peer-review a project where there is mention of a de-colonizing methodology, or for that matter when the intended participants are a vulnerable population, care must be taken to ensure that wrongs committed through earlier research are not re-committed through silencing practices such as individual interviews among people with a collective orientation or with a distrust of mainstream researchers. Linda Smith (1999) articulated how mainstream research is regarded among Indigenous communities best:

> The word itself 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful… The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. (p.1)

Mistakes, committed by even the most experienced of applied researchers, happen when there is a limited (and limiting) appreciation of relevant cultural practices among the

intended participant(s). Within our early collaborations, there were both strengths and weaknesses in terms of culturally safe research practices. The strengths included seeking out community support for the initiative and also including community co-researchers in the development of interview questions, analyses, and co-authoring. The integration of community co-researchers in the field of sport psychology was regarded as innovative. Consequently, the university and community researchers co-authored six published papers, all accepted in high impact peer reviewed journals. The team's contributions to knowledge were arguably important, as from the project a new trajectory was created internationally termed "cultural sport psychology". From the initiative, sport scientists are now beginning to realize that research and consulting practices require a culturally safe approach.

In a conventional sense, one could argue that the benefits gained through the initial project might have outweighed any short-term harm as the academic researchers stumbled through typical silencing practices in their work. However, there are degrees in terms of how a mainstream academic researcher might collaborate with community co-researchers. Our team's early work likely meets the bare minimum standards of the *Canadian Institute for Health Research Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People* (2007; see also Castellano 2004), where suggestions are made regarding the importance of community collaboration, shared voice, shared ownership, among other aspects of inclusion. However, when one reflects upon the published contributions and excavates beneath their surface, the methodology is inherently mainstream. Methods such as individual interviews and versions of thematic analysis, though sound qualitative methods, reflect a post-positivist top-down epistemology, founded upon the ontology of realism (Ryba and Schinke 2009). In contrast, the argument in de-colonizing methodologies is that multiple truths exist, with the experiences of those marginalized often serving as counter-points to a mainstream white perspective. When the participant holds a collective orientation, wherein the community's values are placed at the forefront, methods that bring to the forefront individual over group might not align. Finally, when considering the practices in Aboriginal communities and among Aboriginal participants, it should be noted that mainstream researchers must allow for community, and within community, differences in cultural practices to enhance cultural safety. Such nuances can allow for an individualistic participant originating from a collective culture and also its contrary.

There is within some Aboriginal communities the belief that non-interference is an important part of how each of us (the white co-researcher included) learns our life lessons (Martins-Hill and Soucy 2007). Through engagement in the world, we each step and misstep, adjust accordingly and become progressively more aware over time. Time is not measured in terms of minutes, hours, or even in relation to a calendar year. Rather, co-researchers are sometimes provided latitude to gain our wisdom through experiences, with each of us entitled to acquire those experiences as part of a life path that hopefully leads to wisdom. As an example of this, near the completion of the team's first collaborative project, the community lead and academic lead co-researchers met for lunch. During the meal, it was voiced by the community lead that projects with elite athletes were interesting, though somewhat disconnected from the challenges encountered by community youth on reserve. At that moment, the academic lead learned that his moment of non-interference through research had passed. This was a subtle indication that the academic researcher had been allowed to forge ahead with the initial research project even though aspects of it were considered culturally insensitive, and silencing.

Based upon learning experiences from the past, our research team has learned to employ progressively better culturally informed research methodologies in our work. The conventional methods we now employ are conventional within Wikwemikong but not

necessarily among many mainstream academic researchers. The general approach we now employ is a culturally informed community based PAR approach that we regard as de-colonizing. There are no quantitative assessments in our work, no descriptive statistics as part of the qualitative analysis, and no projects that are disconnected from Wikwemikong's immediate needs. In addition, we now include community-based discussions (Blodgett et al. 2008), talking circles led by community members (see Picou 2000; Running Wolf and Rickard 2003), the active voice of the Wikwemikong co-researchers written into scholarly contributions (Schinke et al. 2009), Aboriginal students to bridge views from our two cultures (Schinke et al. 2010), community co-authored narratives of empowerment (Blodgett et al. 2010) and projects that result in self-governed programs / initiatives (Ritchie et al. 2009). One case example is an ongoing project that includes week-long youth training opportunities through an adventure leadership experience. A second project currently in submission to a granting agency includes the development of a role model program for aspiring youth sport participants by accomplished athletes from within their own communities and regions. The intent through our forthcoming projects is not only to produce ethically sound research in the conventional sense, but also to build progressively stronger bridges amongst Aboriginal and mainstream members in the team through the research. This research serves to develop mutual trust, build lasting friendships, and promote a more effective (i.e. shared) cultural understanding amongst the groups. Through strong relations, candid discussions ensue, where well-established expertise is developed and affirmed within Wikwemikong. The mainstream researchers in exchange continue to learn a considerable amount regarding how to work as research supports, where mainstream voices become the background—not the forefront.

Reflections and Conclusions

The reader is hopefully left with the impression that collaborative community research partnerships amongst Aboriginal and mainstream academics can be rewarding. Using similar research strategies, the rewards experienced by the current authors could also be experienced by mainstream academic researchers working with other marginalized groups (e.g., protected class, low income, different ethnicity groups) in society. There are opportunities for meaningful projects, where blended research teams can collaborate and seek out solutions with practical applications through their work. When research teams are initially formed, there is the possibility that members from both cultures lack a full understanding of how to proceed in their collaborations. Among the Aboriginal researchers, as indicated in the *CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People* (2007), research can serve as an emancipating activity. The rights of the Aboriginal co-researcher, the Aboriginal co-participant, and their respective communities of origin are meant to be at the forefront of the work, visible within research projects. Possibilities might include community led projects, community created questions, and the engagement of community members within all aspects of the research from inception, through dissemination, onward to self-governance and intellectual ownership. Such research not only helps the marginalized group understand and possibly solve social problems within their communities, but also provides the group with a sense of ownership and personal responsibility for the topic and provides additional information for mainstream academic researchers to better understand and collaborate with the marginalized group.

Through the aforementioned research, the rights of Canadian Aboriginal members are slowly being learned, endorsed, and practiced by co-researchers from both cultures. When

collaborative research partnerships develop into a holistic experience with short- and long-term benefits among the intended population, the research gains in potency, leading to expanded opportunities for both the mainstream and community co-researchers, and the community. Through effective collaborations, research becomes a rewarding activity for all involved. There are clear—tangible benefits that community members become enthused about. Mainstream academics also gain from the exchange, as the enthusiasm of community members is contagious.

Beyond the strong potential positive outcomes related to these experiences, the authors would be remiss if they did not also refer back to the words of caution that started this article. Our co-authors have found that partnerships amongst two diverging cultures are not always easy. There are instances when mainstream co-researchers might expect to lead the research activities, believing that research expertise is derived within the academy. When such an approach is taken in community research with any marginalized / minority population, the mainstream co-researcher chances silencing people who already have been silenced and disempowered. Within such instances, research can subvert or perpetuate subversion of a vulnerable population. When mainstream co-researchers first engage in collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal co-researchers or researchers from any community of marginalized individuals, they must first take the time necessary to learn from their community partners and listen carefully. It is important to realize that while each group will continue to learn about the other, this learning never ends. As an example, in the latter stages of our second project, the first author was reminded whilst at an academic conference that priorities sometimes diverge among Aboriginal and mainstream co-researchers. The co-researchers were on their way from their hotel to the academic conference to deliver a speech. The team was running late, so the first author drove with zeal to make up time. The third and fourth authors of this paper were in the lead car and pulled to the side of the road to appreciate the beautiful landscape. When the first author remained in his rental car, refusing to look at the landscape, his Aboriginal co-authors insisted he leave the vehicle for a few minutes. Those few minutes were an opportunity to take the time and enjoy the moment (the example is referred to as a teaching). The experience was an excellent example of cultural practices colliding between our two cultures. In those moments, the inclination of mainstream co-researchers will likely be to push forward their view and frustration. Within partnerships amongst two divergent cultures, where concepts of time might vary, the voice that is meant to be at the forefront of the research is that of the marginalized co-researchers and not the voice of a mainstream co-researcher. While the majority of this paper has been spent identifying issues and considerations for conducting research within an Aboriginal community, readers are also encouraged to look at the broader picture of conducting research with marginalized groups. When working with other marginalized groups, many of the same principles and suggestions made within this article apply. Therefore, the authors will conclude this article with some basic suggestions for researchers working with marginalized groups based upon the guiding principles from the Canadian Psychological Association's (2000) *Code of Ethics for Psychologists,* and supported by previous discussion points from this article.

When researchers conduct research with marginalized groups, using an appropriate research method is not only important, it is also an ethical responsibility. When considering research with marginalized groups, researchers should consider the four core Principles within the Canadian Psychological Association's (2000) Code of Ethics. Principle I; *Respect for the Dignity of Persons*, focuses on the maintenance and protection of the moral rights of those with whom psychologists serve. With this in mind, researchers have a responsibility to those who are most vulnerable and have been consistently marginalized by

society. Therefore, when working with marginalized groups whose perspectives and rights have often been ignored, it is essential that researchers develop safeguards to help promote and acknowledge their rights, needs and perspectives to help protect them and increase their autonomy. Such a focus by researchers is intended to promote a sense of self-determination amongst research participants. To do this, researchers should promote active participation from the community and participants in the study, so as to make appropriate decisions on issues that ultimately affect them.

Ethical Principle II, *Responsible Caring*, provides guidance for researchers working with marginalized groups, and prompts psychologists toward maintaining high levels of competence. Ethical psychological researchers must be competent with their methodology, and take steps to remain knowledgeable about the populations with whom they work. To maintain an appropriate and non-biased knowledge base, researchers should utilize self-reflection of their personal "values, attitudes, experiences and social context" (p. 15) to help them understand how their actions (e.g., research methodologies) are affected by these personal perspectives.

Principle III; *Integrity in Relationships*, promotes the use of the highest integrity in ones professional interactions. Researchers are again strongly encouraged to utilize self-reflection so that self-knowledge can be used to promote integrity (i.e., accuracy, honesty, straightforwardness and openness) in ones work. Heightened self-knowledge makes it possible for researchers to more accurately represent themselves to the marginalized group and promote a more open and honest dialogue of trust and respect.

Principle IV; *Responsibility to Society*, acknowledges the need for psychologists to work towards the benefit and greater good of society. As stated within the description of this principle:

> In carrying out their work, psychologists acknowledge that many social structures have evolved slowly over time in response to human need and are valued by the societies that have developed them. In such circumstances, psychologists convey respect for such social structures and avoid unwarranted or unnecessary disruption. (p. 28)

Therefore, when working with marginalized groups, academic researchers need to be willing to form a partnership with the community members, develop self-knowledge, and be open to suggested changes when working with others. If academic researchers are truly willing to be responsible to a marginalized community, they will strive to work with the community members to better understand and be sensitive to those issues and problems encountered within the community and use this information to jointly determine appropriate and important research questions and methodologies. Finally, researchers need to ensure that the results emerging from their collaborations will be used appropriately by those who may read them, including law makers, psychologists, and the public.

In closing, mainstream academics conducting research with marginalized groups take on a great responsibility. Not only must they be competent to conduct community research, but they must also be aware of their own thoughts and biases and how such biases may affect the research process, including the trust and rapport among those previously silenced. Further, academic researchers need to use this self-knowledge to communicate openly and honestly with the groups with whom they work. Further, researchers working within these communities and with a desire to conduct de-colonizing research need to be open to extensive collaborations with community members, and not only superficial partnerships for the purpose of gaining external funding. In fact, collaboration with community members may be best when community members serve as co-researchers on the projects and in turn

develop a sense of autonomy through the process. Imbedded within the intended and unintended behaviors of mainstream researchers is the potential to support community empowerment or further alienate marginalized co-researchers. This is an enormous responsibility for researchers, and one that must be taken very seriously. Therefore, it is essential that researchers take the necessary steps to gain competence within the research context, and consequently, a thorough embracing of the community's strategies and techniques at the forefront of partnered co-research.

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