"Oh No, We Are Just Getting to Know You": The Relationship in Research With Children and Youth in Indigenous Communities

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ABSTRACT—This article describes important elements in the process of engaging with tribal communities in research with children and youth and their families. In particular, it emphasizes the need to understand the research relationship with tribal communities through the lens of kinship relations. Such an approach requires a reexamination of the nature of research and the researcher, with important implications for the research processes, including design and organization, project timelines, recovery from errors, and dissemination of results. This approach also calls for a reexamination of certain canons of research methods and research ethics, along with a willingness to address new challenges, to share control of the research process, and to be open to new conceptual perspectives, including alternative research strategies. Its repercussions hold promise for a deepening of the research relationship with, and the role of researcher in, the community.

KEYWORDS—Native American; Alaska Native; Canadian First Nations; community-based participatory research; tribal participatory research; youth; children

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produced by the research; (c) establishment of community trust; (d) ethical responsibility to the tribe collectively, in addition to individual-based ethical considerations; and (e) an open and receptive attitude regarding innovative qualitative (e.g., photovoice, videovoice) and mixed-methods approaches, which, with more traditional qualitative methods such as ethnography and participant observation, can assist in the development of deeper understandings of the many intersecting contexts of child development in tribal communities (Baldwin, Johnson, & Benally, 2009; Burhansstipanov, Christopher, & Schumacher, 2005; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2007; Manson, Garroutte, Goins, & Henderson, 2004; Mohatt et al., 2007; Smith & Davies, 2006; Strickland, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2009). Common to all these descriptions is engaging the community as co-researcher in all phases of the research process (Allen et al., 2006; Mohatt et al., 2004).

Community engagement, including building and maintaining community trust, has become a recent focus of the literature on CBPR (Christopher, Watts, McCormick, & Young, 2008). In this article, we describe important elements in the process of engagement based on this author group’s collective work experience with Native American, Alaska Native, and Canadian First Nations tribal communities. We believe it is helpful for the researcher to recognize ways in which CBPR in tribal communities can often be kinship based. Appreciating the unique dynamics of the kinship structures that form tribal communities can enhance understanding of how and with whom to collaborate, how to create a shared decision-making process, and how to establish trust, which can be a long-term process (Mohatt et al., 2007). We describe some elements of working in tribal communities, beginning with a delineation of CBPR as defined by kinship structures. The implications of this approach are discussed relative to defining research questions, utilizing indigenous theories to guide research processes, managing timelines, and recovering from research errors. We conclude with comments on the dissemination of findings.

We also wish to emphasize that we do not presuppose that research work in a tribal community involves becoming “family members.” Instead, more subtly, in noting that the social organization of many tribal communities is traditionally kinship based, we believe it is important for researchers to understand how relationships are patterned in these communities. The researcher’s entry into tribal communities often involves the development of a sense of relatedness to a system of social organization defined in kinship terms. Kinship determines responsibilities in relationships and frames the presence and interactions between the researcher and tribal members. A limited appreciation of this can lead to a lack of grounding with no sense of mutual responsibility, negating the initiation of CBPR. The kinship roles help the researcher to understand the tribal system of relatedness. We are not experts on all tribal communities, and each community is different. Our goal here is simply to draw from our personal experience to highlight some of the ways that kinship structures influence CBPR in indigenous communities and to suggest how to navigate effectively within these structures. We believe that understanding the considerations associated with kinship relational structures are crucial for the development of culturally competent research relationships in Native American, Alaska Native, and Canadian First Nation communities. Such understanding is necessary because engagement with tribal communities in research on youth involves their most precious elements, their children.

CBPR IN A KINSHIP STRUCTURE

Before considering the research implications of CBPR in a kinship structure, we need to outline the multiple meanings of kinship. Most indigenous groups live in families in which expected behaviors are defined by kinship roles, with kinship in these societies ultimately serving as a core feature of cultural identity and a central organizing principle (Horse, 2001; Weaver, 2001). These kinship roles are reflected in the linguistic terms used to define relationships (Hymes, 1974; Mohatt & Thomas, 2006; Trimble & Mohatt, 2006), which, in turn, contain implicit expectations for the fulfillment of kinship responsibilities (Garroutte, 2003). In some tribes, relationships defined by clan are as significant as those defined by close biological relationships and can be the major force in shaping a child’s familial and social environments (Hoxie, 1996). A child learns to identify others linguistically as older or younger brothers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and teasing cousins. Cousins in Western kinship terms may become brothers or sisters in indigenous terms. Words for these relationships may also vary by gender. Rules for interactions are often carefully specified in terms of to whom one can speak, as well as when and how to speak to them. In many traditional tribal settings, a younger person may not speak first with an Elder or ask a direct question. Most critically for researchers, kinship communities can always locate a person within the kinship network. An individual within the network will have had a long history with the person and the person’s family. This includes a temporal point in a generational relationship and an expectation of continuity into the future.

Outsiders to the community—including researchers—have specific kinship terms applied to them as relationships evolve. As the researcher moves from the status of “stranger” and “different” to becoming embedded in the nexus of community, acceptance follows—as when an Alaska community member and Elder whom we have known for only 3 years says “Welcome home” when we return to the village. The desire to establish kin relationships is illustrated by the experience of one of the present authors who, while on leave on the Navajo Nation, was assigned the nickname of “the in-law” by Diné College students as a way of relating to her as kin. In some communities, gaining an understanding of outsiders (including researchers) not only in terms of professional roles but also in terms of their identities within their own familial, historical, and geographic contexts is a
standard cultural practice. This way of understanding relationships requires researchers to talk about themselves in personal ways not typical in mainstream research. Indeed, such sharing and the ultimate acceptance of being identified in kinship terms by research partners can present real challenges, as the canons of research ethics would seem to consider it an ethically inappropriate dual relationship to work with one’s own family as research participants (Trimble & Fisher, 2006). Again, what is critical to understand is that being understood and accepted within kinship terms is an integral part of the research process itself, because it is only through the development of a strong, trusting relationship with an Native American, Alaska Native, or Canadian First Nation community that ecologically valid research can be conducted.

In addition to understanding kinship connections in the present day and the kinship quality of his or her relationship to the community, the researcher must also be aware that core kinship values can reach back to ancestors and forward to future generations and extend to the surrounding animate and inanimate creation (e.g., Brown & Cousins, 2001; Cooper, 1998; Markstrom, 2003). As a source of creation stories, this dimension of kinship often finds expression in ceremonial practices, and may have implications for the research process. For example, many Native peoples speak of making decisions today while being mindful of the seven generations to follow—an ideology originating from the Gai Enesah Go’ Nah, or Iroquois Great Law of Peace (Chief Oren Lyons, Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper, as cited in Ewen, 1993). Researchers should consider the implications of communities’ weighing the potentially pervasive impacts of their research activities beyond the here-and-now.

These kinship distinctions in the research relationship call for an understanding of how research and researchers are contextualized in community understandings. Research-related tasks are only one aspect of a broader, long-term relationship between people. Whereas the researcher often views publication and theory as the endpoint of research, communities tend to view things in quite different ways, starting with an understanding, and an expectation, that the relationship will continue beyond the conclusion of a particular study. Similarly, community members, especially parents and caregivers, may be much more interested in new knowledge as a means of serving immediate needs in their community than as a means of developing generalizable knowledge or advancing the researcher’s goals, and they may even be interested in addressing questions different from those of the researcher. Once trust is established, researchers may also be approached for the unique skills they have to offer the community. One researcher was asked to review a tribal member’s college application essay, with the comment, “We heard you know how to write these kinds of papers.”

Researchers must be responsive to such concerns and requests and approach their role in the community in flexible and adaptive ways. Beyond the time duration of the research relationship, we have found that there is also an expectation of consistency in contact, and of giving back to the community through research products of practical use to community members. Many of our research projects start with a steering committee consisting of community coresearchers, whose first task is often to develop guiding principles for the project largely focused on the commitment to a collaborative relationship, continuity, and local needs. This defines the contexts, processes, and expected outcomes; it also defines a set of roles and expected behaviors for the researchers.

**IMPLICATIONS OF CBPR IN A KINSHIP STRUCTURE: THE RESEARCH QUESTION NEGOTIATED WITHIN A KINSHIP STRUCTURE**

One of the important implications of CBPR as a kinship-based process is that it requires recognition that when researchers are outsiders, the community will expect to become involved in the formulation of the research question in a way that addresses local community needs and concerns. It also requires acknowledgment that generating research questions often involves long negotiations, which may result in changes to preexisting research protocols. These negotiations involve developing close, power-sharing relationships with a community’s most trusted members, typically Elders or other cultural knowledge bearers. This requires a substantial time commitment to building relationships, listening to varying opinions and expressions of needs and concerns, and developing a mutually determined research process. In two of the authors’ works developing a community-based prevention trial for youth and their parents, 15 years were spent generating research questions, identifying methods that came out of and made sense to an oral-based culture, and engaging community members and participants in reinterpretation of the data (Mohatt et al., 2004).

It is critical to determine with the community their decision-making preferences, including areas where they want input and areas they want to control without researcher involvement. Because we are not naturally members of the kinship network, and cannot presume to always know the rules of the structure, this is something we must negotiate.

**INDIGENOUS THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT TO GUIDE RESEARCH**

This essential issue of the relational world in which children from indigenous cultures are embedded raises the fundamental question, what theories of human development underpin the investigator’s research planning? Indigenous cultures possess developmental theories that bear some similarity to Western theories, replete with concepts such as lifespan stages and critical periods of development (Markstrom, 2008). These can be accessed in indigenous and anthropological writings, as well as in the cultures’ oral traditions. For example, Begay (1983) articulated stages of development among the Navajo, including
Honitsukees Nilenii Hazi’ or “One Begins Thinking,” in which the child demonstrates advancement in logical thought processes corresponding to those of early adolescence described in Western theory. Life-cycle beliefs of a Native culture find expression in particular rituals and ceremonies. For example, one of us was visiting with a Navajo friend who pulled out her infant daughter’s “first laugh party” photo album. The researcher was perplexed, being unaware of this important ceremonial event in the life cycle that celebrates and affirms the child’s emotional potential for human relationships and connections to a kinship network. Indicators of pubertal maturation and growth in boys and girls in many Native cultures are likewise recognized and ritualistically celebrated first and foremost by the kin group to ensure continued success in life-cycle endeavors.

Similarly, as two of the authors have grown to understand Yup’ik concepts of development, indigenous theory has come to guide interventions. In one community, the point of departure for developing the intervention was a community-wide meeting in which members of three age cohorts spanning youth to late adulthood answered certain questions about their life experience. The focus of this meeting was on understanding the context of development so that resulting intervention activities could address the realities youth face today while also remaining integrated with traditional Yup’ik cultural values and practices.

Researchers must make efforts to understand the meaning and significance of recognized developmental milestones of a particular culture. They must also ascertain specific values for desired outcomes of child and adolescent development and for the perceived mechanisms for achieving such outcomes. For example, the role of rituals and ceremonies in Native cultures as mechanisms for fostering optimal adolescent development should be considered (Markstrom, 2008). As researchers strive to develop and implement successful interventions, it is important that they consider the implicit wisdom of desired socialization practices that are internally consistent to a culture and incorporate traditional rituals and ceremonies within intervention efforts. One of the authors worked with a Southeastern tribe for several years to meld traditional tribal concepts and rituals with Western-based psychotherapeutic approaches, achieving an important synthesis of Native and non-Native concepts of child development and healing processes (Novins, 2010).

MANAGING TIME: RESEARCHER AND COMMUNITY TIMELINES

We have clearly learned how research priorities, including research timelines, are not necessarily community priorities. For example, one of the authors returned to a community after the death of a respected Elder and was informed that no data collection could begin until after the Elder’s burial. Research plans are dependent upon relationship events that occur within the defined kinship structure. In our experience, the critical issue in timelines is to understand their contextual relationship determinates, which leads the researcher back to the crucial dimensions of sharing power through negotiation of relationships. The suicide of a young person may delay work in one community, yet in another community, we were requested to come immediately to begin the work so people could, as they put it, go “beyond our grief.” For all circumstances, we have learned never to assume and to always ask when it would be permissible to engage in research activities.

Researchers also need to be sufficiently flexible in their approach to timelines to allow for important rituals and events in the everyday life of tribal communities that can become key parts of an ongoing research project. This became apparent when a large number of beluga whales came into the bay in a tribal community that was the site of a prevention research project. Adults and youth immediately gathered to hunt, to help land the whales onto the beach, and to process the meat. This unanticipated event took precedence over a planned prevention-program activity that went unattended. The experience taught us that it is crucial for researchers to see that such culturally significant events can be serendipitous opportunities for serving the goals of the research. The arrival of the belugas could have served as an opportunity for the project leader to change plans, participate in the hunt, and then integrate the event into a later activity and debriefing.

RECOVERING FROM ERRORS AND RESEARCH “FAILURES”

As should already be apparent, researchers should expect to make errors that can often define the research relationship in positive ways that move the project forward or, alternatively, foreclose possibilities. We have made errors and frustrated a community, but over time, were able to reestablish trust.

After the beluga whales incident, the director of the youth prevention project responded to the timeline setback by abruptly leaving the community, frustrated and angry, without discussing the issue or notifying local project staff. The principal investigator contacted the leadership of the community to consider options. The project manager was willing to resign or be fired. We asked the community leadership what they wanted us to do. Following a discussion among the leadership, the community reported they had a relationship with this project manager and felt that the current difficulty would resolve itself over time. The project manager had developed a trusted relationship with their youth, had given much, and was liked and respected. They wished to repair the trust. After an agreed-upon break in the project director’s work, he returned and completed the project, emphasizing that a sense of shared comembership (Erickson, 1975) can facilitate recovery from these types of cross-cultural miscommunications and errors.

We have also received complaints from community members about the exclusion of someone or some group from the research process. For example, one of the authors formed a solid research
partnership with key community members only to discover that long-standing divisions within the community had led to the exclusion of several key tribal members. Because we take such things seriously, a complex set of discussions ensued to collaboratively create a carefully thought out response.

We are thankful for the graciously understood and correction of our Native friends. For example, while conducting research, one of us was closely observing the building of a structure for an Apache girl’s puberty ceremony. An Apache female acquaintance explained that this was men’s activity and women (including the researcher) should keep an appropriate distance. Correspondingly, there are activities in which men should not be involved, such as the pubescent Apache girl’s construction of her wickiup. A further consideration for the female researcher is to be aware that if she is experiencing her monthly cycle, or “her moon,” she may not attend certain ceremonies. These illustrations underscore the importance of acquiring knowledge of the protocol of a particular culture and/or ceremony and following the family, community, and tribal processes of social interaction.

These illustrations suggest just how important it is to consider what constitutes an “outsider,” as well as the fact that mistakes will be made. The researcher, even one who shares ethnic or tribal group identification, must always understand that he or she is entering a community where people know each other as kin. Community relationships are complex and require a balance of interests that extend back generations, and that occasionally involve ongoing intracommunity conflicts. Leaving some people out of important aspects of the research process, or taking shortcuts in seeking permission, gaining access, or making decisions, inevitably backfires. As ethnographers know, it is essential to understand community structure and dynamics to ensure that all community stakeholders and power brokers are consulted. In our own work, we have found it helpful to keep daily field book entries of questions that arise that should be addressed in collaboration with our community co-researchers. This open process reveals the strength of tribal communities in accepting our struggles and shortcomings and their willingness to work through them once trust is established.

**DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS WITHIN A KINSHIP STRUCTURE**

Research results can have an impact on an extended kinship community in unique ways—the results of research, after all, are about relatives. This is an important issue in understanding community sensitivities regarding reporting of results as well as the history of negative research experiences that tribal groups have often endured. Community collaborators must be consulted to determine the nature of dissemination and the degree to which anonymity of the indigenous community should be maintained in reporting results.

Another key area for research within a kinship structure is publication and authorship. In our work, we determine what level of review the community wishes for publications and presentations. We also discuss with the community the question of ownership of data. In one seemingly minor example of the myriad of complexities that can arise in data ownership, Institutional Review Boards typically require data storage for a set time, after which data are destroyed. In one of our studies, Elders regarded it as “odd” that we would destroy data once it had been analyzed. We have found that Elders often view researchers as stewards and feel that the words they have imparted to us are for the benefit of communities. So why, they wonder, would we violate this role and destroy their words, perhaps making them inaccessible to future generations? This example reflects the keen sense of kinship responsibility, encompassing all activities, that is embedded in a forward relationship to grandchildren and to future events, perhaps long after we are all gone.

**DEEPENING THE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP**

All of us can attest to the quality of relationships that we have formed with community partners and coresearchers while doing our work. Native researchers in particular may seek to return to a community where a certain degree of connection exists, fulfilling an important role as a bridge between the indigenous culture and the mainstream research institution. On the other hand, this form of community embeddedness raises concern about what may be relinquished through sharing control over the research process and findings. Is basic objectivity compromised, increasing risk of bias and threats to internal validity? Depending on the nature of the study (e.g., experimental vs. ethnographic), control may or may not be of key importance. We believe that, done correctly, this process enhances both external and ecological validity. Recent methodological literature highlights this conclusion, through techniques such as member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), in which interpretations of findings are scrutinized by those who are being written about, yielding interpretation that includes culturally informed perspectives.

In summary, conceptualization of tribal participatory research as kinship-based allows for deeper understanding of tribal communities and of the nature of research itself. This can require rethinking of some of our research ethics and a willingness to address new challenges, share control of the research process, and be open-minded to conceptual perspectives outside our own. The end result can be a broadened understanding of research and our role as researchers, as well as the provision of greater service to tribal communities.

**REFERENCES**


