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## **Ethical Relationships in Research and Education**

### **Involving Aboriginal People**

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#### **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on ethical issues that are specific to qualitative educational research involving Aboriginal people as research participants. Specifically the research question is, "How can we develop an ethnographic practice that enables research participants to empower themselves and speak for themselves, thereby ensuring protection against the reproduction of colonial relationships?" The author describes the ethical dilemmas that she encountered as a researcher working with Aboriginal children, parents, and community members, and proposes an ethical framework upon which to ground an ethnographic practice that is inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives, and that is responsive to critiques of social scientific methodologies as creating inequitable research relationships.

## **Introduction**

The overall goal of the research reported in this paper is the achievement ethical relationships in education involving Aboriginal students, with special attention to issues of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. The specific purpose of this paper is to report on findings from the first two years of a SSHRCC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) standard research grant project which aims at addressing the need for developing specific research and pedagogical protocols for ethical relationships between non-Aboriginal researchers and teachers, and Aboriginal people and communities, thereby working toward creating equitable environments in educational research.

My specific focus question is “How can we develop an ethnographic practice that enables research participants to empower themselves and speak for themselves, thereby ensuring protection against the reproduction of colonial relationships?” Drawing from research relationships with Aboriginal people in Manitoba, as well as in Nevada, I will focus on ethical issues that are specific to qualitative educational research involving Aboriginal people as research participants. Specifically, I will begin by focusing on ethical dilemmas that I have encountered as a researcher working with Aboriginal children, parents, and community members. I will then explain how traditional research methodologies (also referred to as social scientific methodologies) tend to reproduce colonial relationships. Finally, I will propose an ethical framework upon which to ground an ethnographic practice that is inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives, and that is responsive to critiques of social scientific methodologies as creating inequitable research relationships.

**Research problem**

The problem I address arises from the recognition that “Aboriginal people...had almost no opportunity to correct misinformation or to challenge ethnocentric and racist interpretations” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 235). Examinations addressing the ethics in research involving Aboriginal communities are needed, as is an interpretive framework inclusive of both Western and Aboriginal perspectives. In order to ensure ethical research relationships, it is important for researchers to explore ways in which non-Aboriginal researchers’, teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the relational “other” (Lévinas, 1981) are different from, and perhaps in dissonance with, those of Aboriginal community members.

This paper addresses issues of voice, presentation and re-presentation of voice, with special attention to issues of authority and cultural competence. More specifically, ethical issues involved in research with Aboriginal communities will be addressed, with special attention to the question, “How do we ensure that the way in which we carry out the research is respectful of Aboriginal perspectives, which means, does not harm but rather benefits the people involved in the research?”

This research contributes to the literature which looks at research in cross-cultural situations, taking seriously accusations that researcher’s ethics, rather than those of the researched, often govern research relationships, and that dominant culture researchers assume that non-Aboriginal participants understand the project and can give consent in a communicative code that belongs to the researcher (Piquemal, 2000, 2001, 2002).

### **Research procedure and methods**

The site for this study was an inner city elementary school in Winnipeg, selected because of its large proportion of Aboriginal students. The research team (two Faculty members and a graduate research assistant) worked with a Kindergarten classroom and collected data between October 2001 and June 2002. Research participants included 10 students of Aboriginal ancestry, their parents, their teacher, the school principal, and community members. Free and informed consent was obtained from the participants before starting the research, and continually renegotiated throughout the research. Research participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Ethnographic research was conducted with multiple data collection methods such as video-ethnography, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Children were videotaped during class. Video segments were then selected and shown to parents who were asked to comment on their child's interactions. Each parent was interviewed twice. Interviews were also conducted with the teacher, the principal and community members. Interviews were audiotaped, with the exception of one parent who asked that I take notes. Videotapes of children were used during the interviews with parents except in one case, where the parent asked that her child not be videotaped (in which case notes were taken from classroom observations). Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for "member checks" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

### **Researching and writing about Aboriginal education**

Being a non-Aboriginal researcher working with Aboriginal children, parents and community members, toward a better understanding of what is involved in the education of Aboriginal schoolchildren in terms of interaction patterns, some of the questions that I was faced with were: how can non-Aboriginal researchers conduct ethical research with Aboriginal people? Is it appropriate for non-Aboriginal researchers to research and present Aboriginal perspectives on education?

The issue of authority as it applies to researching and writing about Aboriginal education has been addressed by Swisher (1998) and Champagne (1998). Swisher and Champagne provide competing arguments, thus show the complexities of the debate on the question of who has the authority to write about Aboriginal education.

Swisher argues that Aboriginal people should be the ones to write about Aboriginal education. Her claim is based on the following two assumptions. First, there is a need for a lived cultural experience, in order for the researcher to identify questions and find answers that are meaningful to the community. As Swisher said “How can an outsider really understand life on reservations, the struggle for recognition, sovereignty, economic development, preservation of language and culture? Perhaps they can gain a high degree of empathy and act as “brokers” of sorts, but it takes American Indians and Alaska Natives themselves to understand the depth of meaning incorporated in Indian education to ask appropriate questions and find appropriate answers.” (p.194) Second, there is a need to respect initiatives toward self-determination and empowerment. Swisher argues that in order to be respectful of initiatives toward self-determination, “non-Indian educators who believe in Indian people and want them to be empowered, should demonstrate that belief by stepping aside.” (p.192)

On the other hand, Champagne argues that Aboriginal studies are for everyone. His claim is based on the assumption that Aboriginal groups are human groups part of humanity, and therefore can be compared with other groups in terms of worldviews, history, religions, etc. As Champagne says “To say that only Indians can study Indians goes too far toward excluding American Indian culture and history from the rest of human history and culture” (p.182). What is needed, according to Champagne, is cultural sensitivity, respect for local ethics and issues of protocols and authority, and in particular, ethical steps to ensure that research takes place within consenting communities.

Rather than whether or not non-Aboriginal people have the authority to conduct research on Aboriginal education, perhaps a more important question is how should non-Aboriginal researchers ensure that the way in which they carry out the research is respectful and inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives, in terms of the ethics of the process and in terms accurately representing voices? Having done research with Aboriginal people on research ethics, I needed to keep in mind the importance of developing mutual relations of trust and respect. In particular, negotiations dealing with free and informed consent could not be seen as a one-time event where parents were asked to sign a sheet of paper authorizing me to conduct research with their children.

### **Free and informed consent**

Parents were invited to a dinner at the school where the research team presented the study. Most parents who came gave us permission to videotape and interview their children; two of them requested that we do not videotape their children. However, while

parents signed consent forms, I recognize that this does not in any way mean that I have dealt with ethical issues.

Free and informed consent has to be dealt with as an ongoing process. Indeed, sometimes participants will confide in researchers as they would in friends or relatives and will share personal stories that are not meant to be used as research stories (Piquemal 2001). For example, one day I was interviewing Sylvia, a parent (not her real name) about her child's experiences at school. I was given permission to tape the conversation, so I did. We spent the afternoon talking about Alan (not his real name). I had prepared questions to guide the conversation, such as "What are some of the stories that Alan tells you about school? What does he like about school? Is he exposed to Aboriginal culture? Do you think that it is important for children to be exposed to Aboriginal culture at school?" Sylvia answered each question in great detail. In answering some of these questions, she shared with me some very personal aspects of her life, including some of her struggles when she was growing up, as well as very personal spiritual experiences. I was touched by her honesty and her trust in me. I took the initiative of turning the tape-recorder off on several occasions, as I was under the impressions that these were not research stories; they were stories that were shared because of a special connection that had developed between the two of us. I had similar experiences that I shared with her, and for a moment, we put the research agenda aside. As a researcher who had received free and informed consent from this participant, nothing prevented me from taping and using everything that was shared with me. After all, the participants knew that they could withdraw at any time. Sylvia never asked me to stop recording. I felt that I was granted too much control...

In addition, I found myself in the position of not being able to give anything back. Sylvia never asked for anything, other than to get my perspective on how her son was doing in the classroom. At that time, I felt that I could not even do that, as I felt I did not have the authority to speak about a child's school behavior. This was the teacher's responsibility, not mine. It seemed to me that I was getting more out of this relationship than she was. I felt that there was more I could do. Was I not accountable to her? I am accountable to the granting agency that gave me the funds to conduct this research. I am also accountable to the University's Research Ethics' Board who gave me ethical approval. What about the people who give the research its existence and its essence? Am I not accountable to them as well?

### **The relational other**

I started the process of trying to understand the nature of my responsibilities to the participants by asking myself the question "How can I ensure that the participants feel that they are in control of, and feel comfortable with, what happens to their stories? How can I ensure that this research would allow them to empower themselves?" Is it enough to give them the transcripts of each interview so that they can make some changes, delete some sections? It seems to me that, while this maintains an important level of consultation and ensures that consent is ongoing, a deeper level of collaboration is needed in order to develop an ethnographic practice that enables research participants to be truly empowered in the research process. Surely, it can be argued that the notion of empowerment is complex and that it takes many forms. It can be understood as stepping aside in order to enable the participants to voice their opinion, allowing the participants to

give their input into the research agenda, etc. However, Aboriginal people feel that empowerment not only involves ongoing consultation, but also true partnership and beneficence (Tri-Council, 1996).

Indeed, Aboriginal perspectives on research empowerment seem to focus on the question “How can we avoid research abuse? How can overcome the reproduction of colonial research relationships?” Many Aboriginal people feel that many researchers have been guilty of misappropriation of knowledge (Deloria 1991, 1992, Brizinski 1989, Darou et al. 1993, Bretell 1993, Mihesuah 1998). Aboriginal communities are demanding greater returns from scholars. Today, many Aboriginal communities will not indulge research that does not obviously benefit the community, and will no longer tolerate intrusion by researchers. Aboriginal people and communities are becoming more assertive and in some areas, particularly in Canada’s Northwest Territories and Nunavut, researchers are required to apply for a license in order to conduct research in the north.

Both the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the Tri-Council Working Group (1996) emphasize the importance of “good research practice” which should involve a partnership, and whenever possible, should be guided by the needs of the participants. While I am able to argue that this research will benefit Aboriginal people in general, it is unclear to me how this research is going to benefit Sylvia as an individual research participant. Yet, this was important to me. Surely, her stories may benefit many people. Pre-service teachers will learn about an Aboriginal boy’s experiences in the school system; they will learn about some of the specific cultural negotiations that Aboriginal children go through as they move from their home environment to the more formal environment of the school. Hopefully, Aboriginal children will, in return, benefit

from that, by exposed to more inclusive and culturally sensitive teachers. But how can Sylvia benefit from the sharing of her stories? How can Laura the teacher benefit from this research? She had welcomed me every week, allowing me to videotape her children, to sit in her classroom and watch her teach. She had offered her time to answer some of my questions. Yet, what would she get out of all that?

I realized that I needed to address this question if I wanted to be convinced that the benefits of this research were going to be “equally distributed” among participants. I came to realize that this question of benefiting the participants and the specific community involved in the study, in addition to benefiting the cultural group to which they belong, had become an important concern in Aboriginal communities in which I have been or am presently negotiating relationships: “Tell us how this is going to benefit us, the people from our community. We know that it will be useful for Aboriginal people in general, but parents will want to hear how it is going to benefit their community, their children, and the Elders.” (personal communication with a community member, 2002).

In collecting data from a particular school or community for the purpose of creating better educational environments, I am hoping to conduct research that is beneficial for Aboriginal people involved in education. As I started interviewing people, I realized that there was no direct benefit for them as individuals. I had to conclude that if the participants could not directly benefit from this research, then it meant that I was using them as a means to an end (the end being the achievement of cultural sensitivity), even if this end was an honorable one.

In my view of what constitutes ethical research, the researcher participants had to be treated as an end. They had to be more than the means by which I would be able to

better understand the needs of Aboriginal school children and sensitize pre-service teachers to these needs. Kant (1956) tells us that an ethical relationship is one in which the self always regards the other as an end, never as a means only. Kant adds that the process of being moral involves three components: (1) Goodness of the heart, meaning that it is the motives, not the consequences that determine a good act; (2) Will, meaning a sense of obligation to do what is right; (3) Freedom, meaning the power to legislate for oneself to exercise one's will to be ethical.

Buber (1970) writes about the importance of reciprocal relationships as they apply to teacher-student relationships. He defines such relationships as I-Thou relationships in which there is a dialogue based on a commitment to reciprocity (as opposed to I-It relationships in which there is no reciprocal relationship): "The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation" (p.56). Trust and reciprocity are at the center of Buber's philosophy. Buber's analysis of the nature of the relationship between teacher and student can be applied to the relationship between researcher and participant. Trust and reciprocity should be the main elements in research claiming to be grounded in the development of ethical relationships.

In my research with Aboriginal people, I learned that the ethic of care was important in research relationships. Researchers are asked to conduct their profession with a sense of care, which means ensuring that the research will benefit and in no way harm the participants, and being respectful of local protocols and issues of authority and private knowledge (Piquemal 2001, 2002). In cross-cultural situations, researchers and participants will often engage in discussions from different cultural perspectives.

Researchers who are committed to learn about cultural differences also need to be committed to respect these differences.

Having established that, in many cross-cultural situations, researchers have failed to respect the otherness of the other when dealing with ethical issues, I have chosen to refer to Lévinas' philosophy to support the idea that research relationships ought to be based on a commitment to difference. Lévinas presents the self as a decentered and "humble" subject, and the other as an absolute other, whose alterity is irreducible. When applying Lévinas' philosophy to cross-cultural research, the researcher has the responsibility to recognize, respect, and maintain the other's otherness if the relationship is to be ethical. The centrality of otherness lies at the heart of his philosophy, which centers on the relationship between the self and the other's irreducible alterity. Lévinas' philosophy is grounded in a phenomenology of the face. The act of facing constitutes the first contact with alterity, and this relationship with alterity is essentially ethical, as it commands responsibility, which is the recognition of an irreducible absolute and infinite other. Ethics begin with the awareness of otherness and are a calling into question of the privileges of the self. As Lévinas (1996) stresses, "Before the Other (*Autrui*), the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent" (p.18). Lévinas' account of the approach of the other (the relationship with alterity) begins with the correlation of responsibility and substitution: I have the responsibility of putting myself in the place of the other, even though his alterity is not interchangeable with me.

It follows that an ethical way of doing relational educational research with children, parents, teachers, and community members would involve the following

components: (1) A commitment to beneficence: Treating each participant as an end, never only as a means to an end; (2) A commitment to reciprocity; (3) A commitment to difference; (4) An ethic of caring.

### **Guiding principles for an ethical research relationship**

In the course of my research, I realized that Laura the teacher was eager to find out what parents had shared with me. She said that she rarely had a chance to talk to them, except for a few of them. Likewise, some parents wanted to know more about what specifically happened in the classroom in their child's interactions with the teacher. My first reaction was to carefully protect each person's stories as they were shared with me in confidence and I did not want to break that trust. Upon reflection, however, I found myself facing a dilemma. On one hand, I knew that if I chose to "exchange" stories, this would in some way benefit each person. The teacher would get a more in-depth picture of the children's lives at home, and would get a sense of the parents' perspectives on their child's experiences at school, which could serve to better inform her pedagogy and her interactions with the children. The parents could get a better understanding of their child's experiences in the classroom from the teacher's perspective. On the other hand, if I wanted to ensure confidentiality and privacy, I could not justify "exchanging" these stories. I did not want to take the risk of upsetting Sylvia, Laura, or anybody else.

I started to think about the nature of the relationships that had developed as a result of this research. The children, the parents, and the teacher had a relationship with me, and I had a relationship with each and every one of them. It was clear, however, that this research did not facilitate, at that point, the development of relationships between the

teacher and the parents. The first question that came to my mind was “Does this research have to facilitate the development of such relationships? Is it my responsibility?” The research proposal’s section on objectives did not promise such thing. However, what the proposal did promise was that the research would be respectful and inclusive of Aboriginal concerns about research abuse and beneficence.

Therefore, I thought about ways in which I could address all four principles: beneficence, reciprocity, difference, and care.

### 1) Beneficence

I had established that the cultural groups to which participants (researchers, parents, children, teacher) were members would benefit from the research: the academic community, pre-service teachers, Aboriginal schoolchildren. I needed to ensure that each participant would benefit as an individual. I looked at the literature dealing with teacher-parent or teacher-community relationships. Hammond (1997) for example writes about the challenges teachers face when trying to make the curriculum culturally relevant to students from culturally diverse background. She explains that it is helpful to rely on both parents and children as “cultural bridges” for lessons dealing with cultures that are represented in the classroom. Thomas (2000) writes about building cultural bridges between schools and society to facilitate intercultural reciprocity, thereby “enriching the quality of schooling, alongside the task of making education more culturally relevant in all societies.” (p.201)

The metaphor of the bridge is one that I started applying to my relationships with the participants. I decided that I could help the parents and the teacher benefit from this

research by acting as a bridge and facilitating the exchange of stories, without violating concerns for privacy. I told the parents that the teacher would be interested in hearing their perspectives. Most of them quickly responded that they did not have enough time to come to the school and tell the teacher about these things. I told them that, if they wished and with their permission, I would share whatever they would feel comfortable sharing with the teacher. Throughout the interview, I would periodically ask them “Is this something that you would like Laura to know?” They would either say yes or no. I would take notes if they wanted me to share something with Laura. At the end of the interview, I would summarize those things that they had allowed me to share with Laura, and asked them one more time their permission. I did the same thing with Laura about each child. It became my goal to ensure that the parents and the teacher, thus the children, would directly benefit from the stories that they were sharing.

## 2) Reciprocity

Reciprocity implies that both researchers and participants are involved in a relational dialogue in which they share, give, and receive. Research may become a place for dialogue between participants, directly or indirectly. Aboriginal participants are no longer to be just subjects of research. They need to be integrated into a relational reciprocal dialogue in which they are in control of what they give and aware of what they are entitled to.

One of the ways in which I believe researchers may facilitate a reciprocal relationship with the participants is to recognize that in collaborative research, reciprocal interpersonal relationships are more important than personal power and that research is based on shared beneficence rather than self-interest. If one of the main purposes of

seeking free and informed consent is to promote the participant's right to self-determination, then why do we not rely on the participant's expertise of issues such as what constitutes harmful/ beneficial research? Ethics review policies, in particular, need to rely on a principle of reciprocal empowerment rather than on a principle of personal control, and on an ethic of reciprocity rather than on an ethic of paternalism. In collaborative research, ethical learning is a process in which co-researchers teach one another and contribute to ethical decisions according to their own field of competence.

### 3) Difference

A commitment to difference means that researchers need to learn about cultural differences as an integral part of the research process, before they focus on cultural differences as the subject of their study. As Ross (1992) stated:

The first step in coming to terms with people of another culture, then, is to acknowledge that we constantly interpret the words and acts of others, and that we do so subconsciously but always in conformity with the way which our culture has taught us is the "proper" way. p.4

Building trusting relationships takes time, especially in research involving Aboriginal people who have endured years of oppression and research abuse. It is important to be committed to the participants before being committed to the academic community.

While it is clear that cross-cultural research may lead to a number of misunderstandings due to the interaction of differing communicative norms and differing worldviews, it should also be pointed out that cultural differences in research relationships may also benefit the research by enlightening the issue through different

perspectives. In my research on ethics with a Native American community from Northern Nevada, one of the participants said:

In cross-cultural research, it probably helps if researchers and participants have the same motivation, such as advancing an educational need or preserving something that might be lost. Collaboration would be important to make sure that everybody understands what the motivations are. Of course, it's a little harder when you are coming at things from across cultures, but in some way it is not so bad either because when two people come from the same culture, have the same understanding, and the same common experiences, sometimes you look at it from one perspective only. But if you have two people coming at it from differing cultures, they tend to question each other more. And in some way, the product might be better. (July 1998)

#### 4) Care

Breaking away from an over reliance on “objectivist” models for ethnography, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) argues that caring is an essential component in an ethical research relationship:

It makes a difference whether the researcher imagines her or himself as having an emotional and ethical relationship to the participant and to the inquiry. If the researcher cares about the ongoing relationship to the participants as well as to the ways the research account is read and for what purpose, it will make a difference to the way the research account is

written. These concerns play an essential part in the ethical aspects of the research. p.423

In a similar way, Noddings (1986) emphasizes the importance of the ethic of care as grounded in a relational fidelity: “Fidelity to persons counsels us to choose our problems in such a way that the knowledge gained will promote individual growth and maintain the caring community” (p.506). According to Noddings, a key question is “How is this research going to affect the people involved?” In an educational research context, this might mean “How are the interviews, the sharing of stories, as well as the writing and publishing of these stories going to affect the lives of the participants?” Research practices should be informed by a caring attitude toward the participants. Noddings argues that trust and mutual respect are key to the ethic of caring, particularly when dealing with data. As Noddings states “ the data are not even simple responses given to a researcher who asks a specific question. The data are, in an important sense, mutually constructed by researcher and subjects, and so a genuine question arises over ownership of data and over whose interpretations should be included in any written reports” (p.509). Researchers should be faithful to the participants, by engaging in an ongoing mutual dialogue in which each person is treated as an end. This may imply ongoing negotiation of how the data ought to be analyzed and disseminated.

## **Conclusion**

Cross-cultural relational research in education needs to be understood as a commitment to a relationship. It is this relationship that will shape the telling, recording, and writing of research stories in a way that is ethically acceptable for all parties involved. The question

that needs to be addressed is, “Might caring for the participants happen at the expense of critical research?” Critical research requires that researchers be faithful to the data that is being collected. In doing so, researchers may find themselves in situations where they believe that it is their duty to address racist behavior for example. However, research that is done with and for people rather than on people, and for education rather than on education, requires an ongoing dialogue in which participants address issues together, deal with disagreements, and create a text that is representative of multiple voices and perspectives.

One way to deal with potential ethical dilemmas between care and critical research, is to remind ourselves of the ongoing nature of the process of seeking free and informed consent. The process of seeking free and informed consent is not just a contract; it is an ongoing process of renegotiation. Recurrent confirmation is needed in order to ensure that consent is ongoing, and that the participants feel at ease with the research process.

Many researchers might object to this recommendation, arguing that important information might be lost in this process. However, can these researchers maintain that this information is worthwhile? It is important that researchers be motivated by beneficence rather than scientific curiosity only, when engaging in research activities with humans, and especially with Aboriginal communities who have had hardly any opportunity to correct researchers’ misinterpretations.

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