

Transformation and Renewal: A sharing circle of Co-Researchers

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Introduction

Aboriginal Research method (Kenny, 2000) frames research as a ritualistic practice, not unlike Wilson's (2008) perspective that research is ceremony. Kenny (2000) describes rituals as being "repeatable forms which make space for innovation" (p. 145) and provide a feeling of safety and stability, even amidst the chaos. In the context of research practice, Kenny suggests that rituals help create a process or a set of procedures to develop research skills and contribute toward positive change in Indigenous communities. There are four stages within Aboriginal Research method and these include (a) Preparation; (b) Engagement; (c) Validation; (d) Transformation and Renewal.

During the final Transformation and Renewal phase Ntutemok,¹ who are also referred to as co-researchers within this research (Wilson, 2008), were asked to reflect upon how the research may provide opportunities for growth and sharing, and how it may give back to them personally. Ntutemok were encouraged to provide recommendations for how the research could be utilized to influence policy development and transform spaces, both within and beyond Indigenous communities. Reciprocity and relational accountability are core values within an Indigenous research paradigm, and therefore it is salient that this last phase of the methodology asks how the research will give back to those who

contributed (A. Marshall, personal communication, December 18, 2015; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Additionally, this research has respectfully attempted to place Ntutemok and their voices and stories at the centre of the writing and sharing. Kenny (2000) suggests that when participants observe their words as occupying the most space when the work is published, rather than the words of the primary researcher, the power remains with them. As co-researcher Nancy Harn shared:

I believe the work that is being done here with this research is important because I, as an Indigenous woman, know my true lived experience. I understand the barriers I faced, the emotions I felt and the effects it has all had on my life. I understand that although my experiences may be shared by other Indigenous people...it does not mean that I speak for all Indigenous people but I strongly feel that my voice, as an Indigenous woman, isn't the same when it is replaced by a researcher's interpretation of my lived experiences. When I shared my experience, it was in the hopes to provide real insight into my experience so that it can result in positive change through genuine collaboration and not just be a research subject or bystander in the research process.

Furthermore, Dr. Karlee Fellner, a Cree/Métis scholar and psychologist, has often provided the reminder that it is “important for Indigenous voice to be represented, at least as much as the voices of our allies” (personal communication, August 2, 2019). The intention of the sharing circle we conducted at the 2018 Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference, which consisted of four co-researchers, and this subsequent article has been to provide a space for Indigenous voice and genuine collaboration.

Within the larger scope of the dissertation entitled *Transformative Learning through Etuaptmumk: ⁱⁱ Piluwitahasuwawsuwakonⁱⁱⁱ in Counsellor Education and Practice,*

three questions guided the final Transformation and Renewal research conversations. The first of these was: How could this research give back to you and contribute toward your well-being? This paper will offer personal reflections related to this question during this final stage of the research from two co-researchers, Nancy Harn and Stel Raven, along with the principle investigator, Jenny Rowett.

Reflections of Transformation and Renewal

Nancy: A Healing Journey. I am a Mi'kmaw woman and I was raised in my home community of Ugpi'ganjig (Eel River Bar First Nation). I recently graduated with a Master of Education in Counselling from the University of New Brunswick (UNB). Although my husband and I now live in our home of Fredericton, and we truly cherish being in the same city as our adult children and our grandson, I believe a part of me will always miss the connection I once had with my community. I made an incredibly difficult decision years ago to move away to pursue an education, and this decision has opened up my life to so many incredible people and opportunities, but it has also left me with much pain. I learned to adapt to fit into the workings of post-secondary education and embraced the educational journey, however, that has left me now disconnected from my home community and viewed as an outsider by many people back in Ugpi'ganjig.

The healing I received through this research process has been invaluable to me on a personal level. As I opened up and shared my experiences, this process allowed me to connect with some painful memories through my stories and some of the negative energy I was carrying. Even though I recognized that the pain is justified, I also realized just how much the negative energy was affecting my ability to truly release and move forward. Since then, there is a new breath of life in me as I am acknowledging the hurt

and anger as an important part of my healing and as a result, I feel stronger. The renewed strength I found has helped me through my counselling practicum because I am once again feeling more confident in my professional abilities. I am able to better connect with clients as I surround myself with people that fuel my passion for my career choice.

In sharing this research, I believe that the insight that comes from our stories will prove valuable on many levels. This research can bring forth an understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. By highlighting the lack of cultural knowledge in counsellor education programs, this research can move into classrooms and shape the way programs and curricula are being developed and delivered. This research is valuable for individuals, communities, organizations, and groups. It will highlight areas where Indigenous knowledges are undervalued or completely overlooked and lend an understanding to the effects that this disconnect has created. Through a gained understanding, this research will open so many opportunities to make the necessary changes where they have the most impact. On an individual level, it can be healing to recognize yourself within the stories, and to learn about the lived experiences of co-researchers.

Prior to becoming involved with this research, I was convinced that research was not for me but now I have already started to consider the potential for research in my future. I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this research and look forward to staying involved as the sharing process takes place.

Stel: Creating Space and Community. I am an Indigenous person who also identifies as queer, trans, and two-spirit. My father is Inuit from NunatuKavut and my mother is Plains Cree. I am blessed with two children who have been my consistent motivation to live a healthy life true to my values. I have a Master of Social

Work, work as a therapist in private practice, am a university instructor, and have a keen interest in sustainable community development.

Isolation is something of which I experience a lot. I work in a community far away from my home. I know there are many others out there doing similar things to me, but the demands of running a business, teaching, and parenting leave little time and energy to do the work of connecting and building a new sense of community. Participating in this research reminded me that there are many ways to develop a sense of community. I have broadened my definition of community and have become more willing to use technology to fill in the gaps.

This research project gave me a space to articulate my intersecting experiences as a queer, trans, Indigenous person. After each of our meetings I found myself needing to take time to process what I shared. It illuminated my lived experiences of minority stress. Meyer's (1995) defines minority stress as the chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups. Minority stress encompasses external and internal stressors. Examples of external stressors are stigma, discrimination, and hostile social environments; internal stressors include hiding identity, internalized racism/transphobia, and negative expectations of future events.

A significant part of my resilience comes from my ability to focus on positives and the elements in life I do have control over. I value this approach, however, the reflective time following these research interviews helped me recognize that I must also begin to acknowledge the personal impacts many oppressive societal structures have on my life. It has pushed me to restructure where I dedicate my time so I now have the ability to connect with those in my community who share similar experiences. At times I seek their guidance and wisdom; often we just share space together over meals

or hikes. Building trust through our shared experiences, we are able to connect with ease. The simple act of sharing time together is healing.

The stiff, lifeless feeling many methodologies possess often deflates my keen interest in research. This is the first research project I have been a part of that utilizes Indigenous methodology. This created a very different feeling. The energy of this project feels strong and genuine. Rather than being viewed as a subject to be studied I am considered a co-researcher. This has made opportunities to be a part of research, presentations, and publications accessible.

Jen: A Journey toward Piluwitahasuwawsuwakon. I was born and have lived as a guest for most of my life on the unceded and unsundered Traditional territory of Wolastoqiyik and along Wolastoq, our beautiful and bountiful river. I have a strong connection with this land and the original and ongoing caretakers who have cared for her since time immemorial. I now have a lens for understanding this as a result of Indigenous knowledge that has been shared with me by Elders, teachers, and friends through stories, during ceremonies, and through the ongoing journey of learning Wolastoqey language and songs. Since its inception, I envisioned that this research would be performed as a ceremony and wholistically by engaging my heart, mind, body, and spirit. I appreciate and relate to Kenny's (2000) suggestion that non-Indigenous researchers may "have landed on this approach to research through their own study or through their intuitive sensibilities" and that she would also "recognize it as Aboriginal research" and "feel related to this person, as a colleague, as a human being" (p. 145). This research was guided by the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (First Nations Governance Centre, 2014), and on numerous occasions I received

validation from Ntutemok that this research was performed in a way that was respectful of Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. As an example, during our final Transformation and Renewal conversation, Wolastoqi Elder Lapskahasit Cihkonage (personal communication, August 6, 2018) reminded me, “I really believe in what you’re doing, and I’m proud to be a part of it.” These meaningful words provided renewal each time I heard them, in different contexts, from Ntutemok.

I am deeply moved that Ntutemok felt that the theme of transformation and renewal was naturally embedded within the research process. While keeping the principles of Kenny (2000) and Wilson (2008) in my mind and heart, this research was performed as a ceremony and it was vital that Ntutemok finished each interview feeling respected, empowered, and valued for their contributions to this research. I also walked away from our research conversations feeling inspired, rejuvenated, and ready to contribute toward piluwitahasuwawakon. I have a deep sense of gratitude for all that Ntutemok have given me including the gifts of their presence, knowledge, time, energy, and friendship. We have collectively envisioned many methods and spaces for sharing this research together, such as within First Nation communities, at Under One Sky Friendship Centre, in post-secondary counsellor education classrooms, and at relevant conferences. I am arriving at the knowledge that this research is only a beginning; that it is the sharing and actions that flow from it that are of utmost importance. To date, we have shared this research together through local and national presentations at academic and professional conferences, and within a community centre.

Mi’kmaw Elders Murdena and Albert Marshall (personal communication, December 18, 2015) advised me that if this research was performed in a good way, I would change throughout the process. When I reflect on how my worldview and heart space

have expanded through all that I have experientially learned and embodied over the past several years as a result of this collaborative research process, I realize that I am both transformed and renewed.

Conclusion

Throughout the four stages of Aboriginal Research method, this research has taken Ntutemok and the primary investigator on a “co-learning journey” (A. Marshall, personal communication, December 18, 2015). Since the completion of the Transformation and Renewal interviews, the research findings have moved beyond the kitchen tables and offices where those conversations were held and are now moving into innovative spaces where they can be shared (Kenny, 2000). There is a mutual feeling of personal renewal, and a recognition that it is possible to perform valuable, meaningful research while building strong relationships during the process. We are eager to share this work, with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in various places such as Indigenous communities, urban Indigenous settings, classrooms, and through methods such as publishing written materials together and presenting together at conferences and community events. Although the ceremony of this research will soon be complete, it is the vision of all who have shared their stories and knowledge that these will be passed on for the benefit of present and future generations.

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ⁱ Ntutemok is a Wolastoqey term transliterated by Elder Imelda Perley as my clan, my friends who are helping me, and describes the individuals who shared their stories and knowledge in this research.

ⁱⁱ Etuaptmunk is a Mi'kmaw word transliterated by Elder Albert Marshall as Two-Eyed Seeing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Piluwitahasuwawsuwakon is a Wolastoqey term transliterated by Elder Imelda Perley as reconcili-action; actions that promote change in a good way toward truth.