OUTSIDER RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK:
THOUGHTS, CHALLENGES, EXPERIENCE

A Practicum Article

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Social Work
University of Regina

by

Helen Lynn Bzdel
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
June, 2012

Copyright 2012: H.L. Bzdel
Outsider Research in Social Work: Thoughts, Challenges, Experience

Abstract

I wrote this article to address the question of whether or not non-Aboriginal researchers can be involved in conducting research with Aboriginal people. Most of the literature on this topic over the last decade argues that such research should be conducted by an Aboriginal person. I based this article on my experience as a non-Aboriginal person joining a research project with Aboriginal youth and Aboriginal researchers. I facilitated two sessions with the youth on topics related to their identity. In the first session, I had a discussion about working with a non-Aboriginal person and led them through a therapeutic laughter session. In the second session, I asked the youth to choose a song that they identified with in regard to their identity and we discussed why they identified with that song.

After I participated in this project, I concluded that a non-Aboriginal person should be cognizant of certain factors in order to effectively engage in research with Aboriginal participants. Then they can assist participants in creating knowledge by telling their story in the manner in which they wish it to be told, even though the researcher is not Aboriginal. I identified the following factors as being important: acting as an ally; learning to walk beside/work in conjunction with Aboriginal participants; working with Aboriginal mentors and researchers; recognizing personal privilege; following Ownership, Control, Access, Possession (OCAP) principles and being involved as a learner.

Keywords: outsider research, community-based research (CBR), Aboriginal, First Nations, Canada, identity, Aboriginal research, Aboriginal youth/adolescents, Social Work practice, Social Work research

1Acknowledgements: The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Willie Ermine, Raven Sinclair, Bonnie Jeffery, and Madisun Browne for their contributions toward research with Aboriginal people and OCAP. The author also wishes to thank the following for their assistance with this research: Dr. Brigette Krieg, H. Monty Montgomery, Willie Ermine, and special thanks to Marlene Bear and the group of Aboriginal youth from Prince Albert for their contributions and for welcoming me in my research.
Introduction

This article addresses the topic of a non-Aboriginal researcher being involved in research with Aboriginal people. Most recent literature argues that such research should be conducted by an Aboriginal person. Those advocating this argument point to years of marginalization, oppression, colonization and active suppression of Aboriginal cultures and identity caused by non-Aboriginal people conducting research in Aboriginal communities (Brant-Castellano, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Pidgeon and Hardy-Cox, 2002; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). The knowledge was typically taken out of the community with the researcher owning the knowledge obtained. The community rarely benefitted from participating in research and they typically did not have a say in what happened to their knowledge.

Recently, community-based research with Aboriginal communities has started to follow the framework of conducting research in an ethical and respectful manner, and empowering the community by relinquishing the community’s knowledge and information and leaving it with the community it was collected from. The Aboriginal community has the right to be empowered, and there should be a gain, rather than a loss, from the research. The community participating in the research must receive direct and positive benefits as a result of opening their doors to the research (Ermine, Sinclair, & Browne, 2005; Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004; Schnarch, 2004; Sinclair, 2004).

This article outlines my experience as a non-Aboriginal person joining a community-based research project with Aboriginal youth. The youth used digital story-telling (photographs and digital media) to communicate their sense of identity. I facilitated two sessions with the youth that were connected to identity in order to understand the role of an outsider in creating knowledge. These included leading the youth in a therapeutic laughter session, as well as

---

2In Canada, the term Aboriginal typically refers to registered and non-registered First Nations, Metis and Inuit Peoples.
discussing with the youth how they felt about having an outsider conducting research with them. I also asked them to pick a song that they connected with in regard to their identity. I kept a reflective journal on my experiences, thoughts, and my learning related to being an outsider in this research project. I reviewed literature on outsider research, location, and identity, as well as literature on ethical research with Aboriginal people, privilege, and anti-oppressive practice.

I embarked on this learning journey as part of my Masters’ degree program in Social Work at the University of Regina, Saskatoon campus in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I was interested in becoming involved in a research project with Aboriginal people because many of the clients I work with are of Aboriginal descent. As a result, I gained a better understanding of working with Aboriginal youth, how they identify as Aboriginal youth, and a clearer understanding about engaging in research with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal researchers.

**Literature Review**

There is limited literature on the topic of outsider research, and in particular, about non-Aboriginal people conducting research with Aboriginal people. The literature that is available, however, points to several important areas to consider when engaging in research with Aboriginal people. These include: the impact of outsider research, ethical practice, the ethical space of engagement, Ownership, Control, Access, Possession (OCAP) principles, identity, location, anti-oppressive research, and privilege.

**Outsider Research**

As identified in numerous sources, most literature on outsider research over the last decade argues that research with Aboriginal people and their communities should be conducted by Aboriginal people (Brant-Castellano, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Pidgeon & Hardy Cox, 2002; Schnarch, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999). Advocates of this argument refer to years of
marginalization, oppression, colonization and active suppression of Aboriginal cultures and identity. These were caused by non-Aboriginal people conducting research and then taking the knowledge obtained out of the communities. Communities did not benefit from their participation in the research and their knowledge was now owned by the researcher. The community did not have any control over how their knowledge would be shared or used (Brant-Castellano, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Pidgeon & Hardy Cox, 2002; Schnarch, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999).

Western researchers have historically intruded into Aboriginal communities, showing little regard for Aboriginal worldviews or their self-determination in human development (Ermine et al., 2004). Similarly, Aboriginal people around the world have experienced similar intrusions and displacement as a result of Westernization. Westernization is the process where Aboriginal society was expected to adopt Western culture in areas as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, lifestyle, diet, language, religion, philosophy, and/or values. Westernization has forced Aboriginal societies to make changes to cultural practices, language, religion and lifestyle. Colonialism is a direct result of Westernization. The result for many Aboriginal communities has been a familiar “pattern of cultural and psychological discontinuity” (Ermine et al., 2004, p. 9).

Most of the historical research on Aboriginal people and communities is ‘outsider’ research conducted primarily by non-Aboriginal researchers on Aboriginal people (Ermine et al., 2004). Society has benefitted from past research; however, many Aboriginal communities have had numerous negative experiences as a result of outsider research (Ermine et al., 2005).

Ermine et al. (2004) reported a development towards research being conducted by a member of the target population, referred to as ‘insider’ research. This involves Aboriginal
researchers engaging in research with Aboriginal people and communities. More recently, research has moved toward insider research and/or collaborative research with Aboriginal people and communities. These research teams are often formed with at least one or more people from the target population, and the Aboriginal community is involved in designing and delivering the research. Research with Aboriginal populations is primarily qualitative, participatory, collaborative, and community–based (Ermine et al., 2004).

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) report that because researchers collect and analyze the data they have explicit and intimate involvement in their research. The researcher must be cognizant of the relationship they have with their research, whether they are an inside or outside researcher because this relationship affects how they view it (Dwyer & Buckle). Serrant-Green (2002) asks researchers to reflect on their own position within the research process, particularly in research that explores race and ethnicity. Serrant-Green indicates that there are arguments for and against outsider research, as well as arguments for and against insider research.

**Ethical Practice**

Ethical practice in research is of utmost importance. As part of my learning experience, I assisted in writing up the ethics application submitted to the University of Regina for this research project. This was an important experience because I was able to apply knowledge that I had learned in my first graduate studies class on qualitative research. I also assisted in writing the consent forms for the youth and had to be cognizant that some would need parental consent because of their age. I was reminded that meetings with the youth could not occur until after the ethics board had granted us approval for the project. There are many ethical considerations when conducting research, however, there are even more points to consider when doing research with Indigenous people (Ermine et al., 2004).
Ermine (2007) and Kovach (2009) expressed concern that Aboriginal people lost the freedom to be themselves as a result of outsider research. Aboriginal people were silenced and controlled, and Aboriginal existence became a meaningless and marginal part of broader Canadian life (Ermine, 2007). Kovach refers to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) guidelines, which include discussion about protecting Indigenous knowledge, community control, sharing benefits of research, recognizing cultural protocols, and involving participants in the interpretation of findings (p. 146). Kovach explains that the CIHR needs to be read with an Aboriginal worldview in mind and this involves honouring elements of relationship, reciprocity, collectivism, and sacred knowledge. Researchers are expected to respect these qualities and values, and when this document is affiliated with local protocols, there are clear standards for research practice. These are guidelines rather than policy, however, and as a result, their effectiveness depends upon how well they are monitored and whether or not researchers choose to follow them (Kovach, 2009).

Ermine et al. (2005) discuss Elders who explain that research must benefit communities in order to be considered acceptable in their communities. The research should promote the ideas, values, and professional development of the Aboriginal community. The results of the research should be beneficial, such as enhancing the community members’ lives or providing information on how the people in the community can have a better life (Ermine et al., 2005). Pidgeon and Hardy-Cox (2002) report that research is a Western world term and the research process has caused centuries of disrespect, violation, and prejudice for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal knowledge is referred to as individual, verbal, holistic, and factual. It is typically communicated through descriptive language or narrative (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Smith, 1999 as cited in Pidgeon & Hardy Cox, 2002). Aboriginal knowledge is
as diverse as the cultures of those who hold the knowledge, and is a product of traditional teachings, empirical observations, and revelations. Researchers working with Aboriginal communities must be cognizant of and respectful about the discussion of Aboriginal knowledge as practical, personal, and contextual (Battiste & Henderson, 2000 as cited in Pidgeon & Hardy Cox, 2002). If this shared knowledge is taken out of this context, it could lead to misinterpretation and mistrust.

Social Workers working with Aboriginal people need to reflect on the practices and guidelines that apply, regardless of the culture in which they are working (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006). Once they recognize and accept this diversity, they can modify their approaches to social work practice, enabling the profession to move forward in cultures from around the world in a more meaningful way. Social work will then be in a better position to move past restrictions, such as individualism, dualism and determinism, and move toward proposing policies that could lead toward effective and beneficial social changes (Coates et al., 2006).

Community-based research allows the Aboriginal community to know who is doing the research, how the research is being done, and the purpose of the research for the community. Researchers need to be prepared to explain who they are and what interest they have in the proposed research before they are allowed to proceed when working with Aboriginal people and their knowledge (Absolon & Willett, 2005).

In Western academic research, confidentiality is of utmost importance and must be part of the research design. Researchers and participants must ensure confidentiality in writing. Confidentiality is usually viewed as positive; however, Ermine et al. (2004) explain that the focus on confidentiality continues the pattern of silencing Aboriginal voices rather than
recognizing and empowering them. Confidentiality can actually place the focus on the researcher’s voice when it would be more appropriate to acknowledge the views of the participants and their knowledge system as the information source (Ermine et al., 2004). Western academic rules and regulations about confidentiality directly infringe upon the sharing of Aboriginal knowledge. Co-authorship or a similar method of acknowledgement might empower Aboriginal people who share their knowledge for research purposes (Ermine et al., 2004).

**Ethical Space of Engagement**

The ethical space of engagement is a concept that is becoming more recognized in the literature about work with Aboriginal people. Ermine et al. (2004) explain that the space in between is relative to cultures, and is created by recognizing separate realities of histories, traditions of knowledge, values, interests, and social, economic and political directives. A neutral zone is created out of how the two existences are positioned, which is identified as the ethical space (Ermine et al., 2004). Ermine (2000) in his M.Ed. thesis *The Ethics of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples*, explains that two objectivities are declared. Each claims their own independent and specific worldview, and each possesses a contrasting interpretation of what they see across the cultural border. This in turn actualizes an urgent need to understand what this cultural divide is comprised of (Ermine et al., 2000).

Ermine (2007) creates an analogy of a space between two entities, a space between the Aboriginal and Western worlds of thought, each consisting of different and diverse human communities. Each existence is influenced by a distinct history, knowledge tradition, philosophy, and social and political reality. The diversity of identities causes each to have their own explicit and independent worldview, and a theoretical space (the ethical space) is opened between them. This ethical space is formed when two societies with contrasting views of the world are
positioned to engage each other (Ermine, 2007). Contrasting human communities do not share a common vocabulary or a familiar view of human nature within our universe (Ermine, 2007). This concept of universality remains in the West and influences social systems and institutions in this country intellectually, politically, economically, and culturally (Ermine, 2007).

Ermine et al. (2004) describe this ethical space as a sacred space where humans can advance, human potential can find a safe place, and future possibility can happen. Ermine (1999) postulates that relational knowing, from both inner and outer space, leads to Aboriginal knowledge. The outer space refers to the physical world and the inner space is where you find the knowledge that is intellectual and philosophical (Kovach, 2009). Ermine et al. (2005) indicate that in this ethical space, assumptions, biases, and misrepresentations about the ‘other’ are exposed in order to recognize ethical and moral principles in the communication between cultures. The space offers a setting where allegiances can be set aside, and the confines of mental worlds can be eliminated to allow human to human dialogue. The ethical space offers an arena where cross-cultural conversation can take place in the hopes of ethically engaging diversity and dispersing claims to power.

Ermine (2007) explains that the dimension of this dialogue might appear overwhelming. Language is involved in this dialogue. Histories are diverse but specific. Traditions of knowledge, values, interests, and realities deal with the social, economic and political realms. There needs to be dialogue about how these issues affect an agreement to interact, as well as the consequences. A level playing field is needed where ideas such as equality of nations replace those of universality.
Ownership, Control, Access, Possession (OCAP)

Ownership of collective knowledge and the data obtained from Aboriginal communities is a controversial issue in research involving Aboriginal Peoples (Ermine et al., 2004). Any research involving Aboriginal Peoples must ensure that the people or community involved benefit from the experience.

Ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP), is referred to as self-determination that has been applied to research (Schnarch, 2004). OCAP came about as a political response to the historical colonial approaches to research and information management with Aboriginal communities. OCAP has become a powerful tool for Aboriginal communities and it offers an ethical way of conducting Aboriginal research and approaching the ethical dilemmas that are involved. OCAP principles apply to research, monitoring and surveillance, surveys, statistics, and cultural knowledge. The principles are extensively applied to all aspects of information, including producing and managing information (Schnarch, 2004).

Ownership refers to the relationship of an Aboriginal community to its cultural knowledge, data or information. The community or group collectively owns the information, just as an individual owns their personal information (Schnarch, 2004). Control refers to the ability to maintain and regain their information and data which is collected during the process of research. The principle of control asserts that Aboriginal People, their communities and representative bodies, are within their rights to pursue control over all aspects of research and information management processes which impact them (Schnarch, 2004). Access refers to Aboriginal people being able to access the information and data about themselves and their communities, regardless of where and by whom it is being stored. Aboriginal communities and organizations also have the right to manage and make decisions in regard to access of their collective information.
Possession refers to protecting and possessing their information and data and is tied to ownership. When data owned by one group is in the possession of another, there is a risk of breach or misuse, and in the case of Aboriginal communities, there can be a lack of trust in regard to the owner and possessor of the data (Schnarch, 2004). OCAP is pro-active, focusing on empowering Aboriginal communities by providing opportunities for the expression of self-determination and self-governance in the areas of research and information and provides hope for positive change in this area.

Identity

Research methodology that focuses on narrative is fitting for Aboriginal communities because storytelling has played an essential role in communicating culture. Narrative is respected as a source of knowledge, wisdom, and affirmation of identity (Kirkmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011). Anderson (2008) is clear about struggling with her identity, much like many Aboriginal people. Issues such as racism, cultural genocide and policies have encouraged Aboriginal people to relinquish their heritage, with many Aboriginal people experiencing confusion, shame and embarrassment about identifying themselves as Aboriginal. As a result, there is a struggle to understand what this changed identity means.

Mullaly (2010) explains that identity refers to the circumstances or distinguishing features that characterize or identify someone. A person may be identified by their name, history, social status, gender, race, personality, age, physical appearance, and religion (Mullaly, 2010). When people possess characteristics that are undesirable or of little value, they become socially excluded. Then they are subjected to discrimination and marginalization (Mullaly, 2010). Typically, in the Western world being “White” or affluent is seen as desirable, therefore many Aboriginal people are the ones being excluded. Anderson (2008) defines herself as a Cree/Métis
woman. She explains that the language of identity is intricate and constantly changing for Aboriginal people and as a result, she might change her definition of her own identity. The history of Aboriginal people contributed to their naming being politically and emotionally loaded. Anderson states that Aboriginal people have been misrepresented by outsiders, both historically and repeatedly.

Mullaly (2010) states that identity is both the development and the creation of a person's interactions with the physical and social world. Our history, family, and the dominant ideology at the particular time in history when the person is going through the process of identity formation are all influences. Our history and culture make up a portion of our identity; who we are, where we came from, and social status and other characteristics of our family and/or social group (Mullaly, 2010). Interactions with others, and the influence of the dominant culture and ideology of society, have an impact on a person’s identity. A person’s position of dominance or subordination in society is formed according to the individual's class, gender, race, age, and sexuality (Mullaly, 2010). Societal views and influences impact how people form and internalize a picture of themselves, largely by how society views them, and largely determined by stereotypes, ideologies, and myths (Mullaly, 2010).

Identity processes generate several goals. First, a distinct or unique individual identity. Second, continuity of this identity for life. Third, feelings of individual worth and social value (Mullaly, 2010). Apter (1983) suggests a fourth goal as forming identity, including guiding the processes of identity and the desire for autonomy (as cited in Mullaly, 2010). These goals advise that a healthy identity is comprised of its own unique and individual nature and character, is relatively consistent over time and in different social contexts, reflects the individual’s positive self-image and a sense of value to society, and allows the person to be self-determining and able
to act on his or her own behalf (Mullaly, 2010). Learning and knowledge of our language, culture, and traditions strengthens self-identity and challenges the cultural discontinuity and dispossession that resulted from colonialism and its consequences (Kirkmayer et al., 2011).

**Location**

One of the most essential pieces of Aboriginal research is location of the researcher. When the researcher can identify their location, they can better ensure that they are studying, writing and participating in the way that Aboriginal people would. This assists them in being accountable for their position (Owens, 2002; Said, 1994; Tierney, 2002, as cited in Absolon & Willett, 2005).

Absolon and Willett (2005) believe that research is neither neutral nor objective, since research is administered and viewed through the eyes of humans. Location of the researcher is essential to Aboriginal methodologies and Aboriginal research, as well as the view of the world and epistemologies. When a researcher locates themself, then they exemplify their own truth and their individual reality (Absolon & Willett).

Wilson (2008) indicated that Canada’s Aboriginal people recognize that it is important for storytellers to inject their own life and experience into the telling. They also recognize that listeners will filter the story being told through their own experience and then adapt the information so that it is relevant and specific to their life. Wilson stated that when the people listening know where the storyteller comes from and how the story fits into the storyteller's life, it makes the knowledge easier to absorb. This is the premise of Aboriginal Australian oral traditions as well (Wilson, 2008).

Each time we locate ourselves, our representations change. Depending on the context in which we locate, we may or may not emphasize certain aspects of our realities. As we locate, we
must account for the relative aspects of who we are and represent ourselves honestly and precisely. Location is more than our name or where we originate from (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Locating ourselves asserts our identity and states who we are, our race and gender, where we come from, our investment and what our research intentions are. By putting ourselves forward in this way, we give ourselves a voice, and claim our position in the research (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Valid and ethical research with Aboriginal people will not happen without researchers locating themselves (Absolon & Willett, 2005).

For the purposes of this article and my involvement with research with Aboriginal youth, I located myself. When I thought about how I would locate myself, I felt stuck. I do not know much about my ancestors and my roots, which never used to be much of a concern to me, however, since becoming involved in research with Aboriginal people and hearing the many ways they locate themselves, I feel the need to find out more. All I know is that relatives on my father’s side are originally from Scotland and on my mother’s side they are from England and the United States. Pursuing information about my heritage has become a goal.

I am a Caucasian female in my forties. I am happily divorced and I single-parent a teenaged boy a little over half of the time. I am a daughter, an auntie, a sister, a girlfriend, a friend, a co-worker, a home owner (even though it will take a very long time to pay the mortgage), a roommate, a vehicle owner. I was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and for most of my childhood I grew up on a farm in Southwestern Saskatchewan. I moved to Saskatoon to go to University when I graduated from high school and have lived here ever since.

I practice in a number of settings. I am a Clinical Social Worker in a forensic treatment centre. I also practice as a private practice counsellor with my own business in the community, with most of my clients being Aboriginal. I recently gained casual employment as an Addictions
counsellor at an in-patient treatment facility for youth and adults. I am a Certified Laughter Leader and the Canadian trainer for WLT. I am able-bodied, but was diagnosed with a mental illness many years ago. I noticed symptoms prior to becoming a teenager but I have been able to function in life with the aid of some medication. I struggle with chronic neck and back pain as a result of a number of whiplash injuries, but I am able to walk, talk and drive.

I came to be involved in this research and learning process as a result of completing a Master of Social Work degree, a desire to learn more about conducting research, and the continued interest in working with Aboriginal people. My research is in collaboration with Aboriginal people and researchers.

Privilege is connected with location, and how I see my privilege relates to my purpose in this research. I don't want to speak for other people, but hope that I can find a way to raise awareness and create knowledge about identity of Aboriginal youth. What I do with my privilege will, I hope, be of benefit to my work with Aboriginal people and will expand my own learning and understanding. I never considered my privilege much before participating in this research project.

I am privileged in a number of ways. I have listed some of them. I am Caucasian. I have completed high school, as well as several university degrees. I was able to give birth to a child. I was taught social skills growing up and I am able to communicate verbally in the language of my choice without needing an interpreter or having to explain my accent. I have a permanent part-time job (I chose to move from full-time hours to part-time hours), a casual job, and two part-time small businesses. I am a home owner and I own a vehicle. I live in a neighbourhood that is considered to be fairly safe. I am confident and independent (characteristics that my parents
helped me build). I have a computer at home and I know how to use it. I have many supports and easy access to community resources, healthcare, and other necessities.

**Methods**

I carried out my research in conjunction with a research project that Dr. Brigette Krieg (2012) conducted with Aboriginal youth in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The project occurred between September, 2011 and May, 2012, and involved Aboriginal youth using digital storytelling to communicate their identity.

The research outcomes of the main project (Krieg, 2012) included: (1) challenging externally defined identity for Aboriginal youth and replacing those definitions with those inclusive of the Aboriginal youths’ voices; (2) capacity-building, research training and mentoring opportunities for Aboriginal students; and (3) knowledge mobilization and sharing, as well as development of policy in areas of concern to Aboriginal communities and other stakeholders. The researchers intended to contribute to knowledge development by disseminating the project findings in the form of peer reviewed manuscripts, conference presentations, and to Aboriginal researchers, community members, and others in a workshop format. Ermine, et al. (2004) discuss principles that were adopted to the extent that the community assessed as appropriate. These are referred to as OCAP principles.

The youth participated in two-hour meetings almost every Sunday for approximately seven months in order to identify and discuss relevant issues and develop ways they could use their experiences to promote change. The researchers asked the youth to create digital stories based on their personal experience around identity, and educate the community about the identity of Aboriginal youth. Participants were Aboriginal, aged 12 to 18 who accessed youth programs through P.A. Women of the Earth, Inc. The researchers used key informant and snowball
sampling and invited 12 to 15 youth to join the project, with a core group of eight youth remaining for the duration. The youth used digital storytelling to share their stories and experiences. Food was provided at each meeting, and participants were given a $25 honorarium and were reimbursed for expenses related to participation. At the completion of the project, the youth and researchers travelled to British Columbia where the youth presented on their experience in the project and talked about their identity as Aboriginal youth at a conference.

I joined this project as part of my learning journey and carved out a small piece of the larger project for my own research. I had two short, informal sessions with the youth involved. In the first session, I had a discussion with the youth about how they felt about working with non-Aboriginal researchers and I led a therapeutic laughter session with the youth. The laughter session provided an opportunity for the group and I to relax and participate in something fun. The laughter was also connected to my own identity, since I lead laughter sessions with many groups. During this session with the youth, I discussed with them how they felt about me, an outside researcher, coming in and meeting with them, and asking questions about them and their identity.

During my second session, I requested that the youth in the study to identify a song that said something about their self-identity, their values and what was important to them. I recorded the songs and artists that they identified and later watched the videos of each song and identified lyrics that I believed could be connected to their identity.

**Project Outcomes**

I asked the youth to bring songs that were linked somehow to their identity and their values. The songs identified by the youth were very relevant, profound, and meaningful.
One of the male youth chose the song, “Just like You” by Three Days Grace. He reported that he agreed with the lyrics. Some of the lyrics that popped out at me include: “I could be mean, I could be angry, you know I could be just like you”; “I could be fake, I could be stupid, you know I could be just like you”; “You thought you were standing beside me; you were only in my way. You’re wrong if you think I’ll be just like you”; “You thought you were standing beside me; you were only in my way. You’re wrong if you think I’ll be just like you”; and “I could be cold, I could be ruthless, you know I could be just like you”.

A female youth chose the song, “Save me” by Avenged Sevenfold. She chose this song because she agreed with several of the lyrics. Some of the lyrics that I think relate to identity include: “Save me”; “I’m trapped in a vile world”; “How many years to walk this path alone?”; “Is it something we did? Is it something we did to them?”; “I can use some guiding light, somewhere to go”; “Help me find my way”; “All lies and to a degree losing who I want to be”; “If you hear me let me know”; and “Tonight we all die young.”

Another one of the male youth identified with the song, “Nothing Else Matters” by Metallica because the lyrics were linked to his emotions. Some of the lyrics that popped out at me include: “So close no matter how far. Couldn’t be much more from the heart, forever trusting who we are and nothing else matters.”; “Trust I seek and I find in you, every day for us something new open mind for a different view and nothing else matters”; “Forever trusting who we are and nothing else matters”; “Never opened myself this way. Life is ours, we live it our way. All these words I just don’t say and nothing else matters”.

“Today My Life Begins” by Bruno Mars was identified by one of the female youth. She chose this song because she liked the lyrics. I believe that a number of things might stand out for her in this song because they resonate with me: “I will break these chains that bind me, happiness
will find me”; “a whole new world is waiting, it’s mine for the taking”; “I know I can make it”; “I see that I was wrong for ever doubting I could win”; “life’s too short to have regrets so I’m learning now to leave it in the past”; “only have one life to live so you better make the best of it”; “I know I can make it”; and “today my life begins.”

The last male youth chose the song, “Another Way to Die” by Disturbed because he identifies with the environmental issues included in the music video. When I watched it, I felt moved and emotional. The screen displays the news title “Disturbed TV – Breaking News – Surgeon General Issues Warning: Another Way to Die. Some of the lyrics reverberated with me include: “The indulgence of our lives has cast a shadow on the world.”: “Our devotion to our appetites betrayed us all”; “More destruction will unfold”; “Mother Earth will show her darker side and take her toll”; “It’s just another way to die”; “we should have seen it coming; consequences we cannot deny will be revealed in time”; “We don’t need another way to die. Can we repent in time?”; “The time bomb is ticking and no one is listening.” “Is there any hope we’ll survive?”; “Still we ravage the world that we love”; “Are we dead inside?” and “Our endless maniacal appetite left us with another way to die”.

When we asked the youth what they wanted people/society to know about them, a couple of the youth really struggled with this. One youth reported that non-Aboriginal people do not want to talk about “it”, referring to racism, whereas Aboriginal people do want to talk about “it”. Yet another youth reported that Aboriginal kids are not all bad, and that they have potential. He stated that they do things because they have learned them from other people (e.g., alcoholism). Another youth didn’t think that non-Aboriginal people would care about his story, so he didn’t know what he would say.
Through my involvement, I learned that many of the youth involved in this research group sacrificed the option to live at home with their supports and families in order to gain a better education by living and going to school in Prince Albert. They explained that there are two different education systems in Canada, with rural Aboriginal schools receiving less money for programs. The youth left their families, often to live in overcrowded conditions in the city, and often at a lower education level than what they would have been at in an urban school. They chose this route with the hope that they can attain their goals, including going to university. Several of the youth explained that they come from a First Nations community where there is intimidation, violence and gangs. They came to a turning point in their life and this directly affected their choice of whether to stay at home with their families or find a new home in Prince Albert. One male youth stated that if he had stayed on his reserve he would have been pressured to join a gang or could have been harmed; when he goes home there are males looking for him and threatening him and his family.

One of the female youth and her mother explained that Aboriginal/Indigenous families do indeed fit into the category of the middle class or the ‘category’ of having educated parents or two-parent families. This is not always recognized by “others” because of their perception of what an Aboriginal family looks like. This youth shared that she has experienced additional struggles with not being accepted by either Aboriginal people or non-Aboriginal people because she is Metis and not physically identifiable as an Aboriginal person.

Discussion

The following discussion is a result of what I have learned through reviewing the literature, immersing myself in the research, and having discussions with the Aboriginal youth and the Aboriginal researchers.
In the first session, I discussed with the youth how they felt about me, an outside researcher, coming in and meeting with them, asking questions about them and their identity. The youth reported that they were comfortable with it and that it would not matter to them whether I was non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal. I recognized that not all Aboriginal youth would agree with their stance on this. We chatted about personality and how my stance assisted them in welcoming me into their group. I entered their group as a learner; I was nonjudgmental, easy-going and open to what they had to say. This was an informal discussion, but I found it helpful to see that how an outside researcher approaches research participants can affect whether or not they are welcomed into the group, as well as whether or not they are trusted with the knowledge being shared. I ascertained that how I approached the group was helpful in being accepted by the youth. I was myself, and was genuine, laidback, approachable, and humble. I explained that I was hoping to work with them as part of my learning and asked them if they were willing to help me with this. They agreed that they were open to this request.

Many young non-Aboriginal people appear to be drawn to Indigenous approaches, and Kovach (2009) believes that this is related to the generation seeking ways to understand the world without harming it. I agree with this statement, and even though I am not young, I am also attracted to Aboriginal approaches. The way that Aboriginal women and communities are gaining their voice, the values they hold and the teachings they provide are facets of Aboriginal approaches that I find very interesting and empowering. I believe that we need to practice with an anti-oppressive framework and be cognizant that we are engaging in research that is ethical, empowering, and valid, especially when creating knowledge by working with Aboriginal people and their communities.
Kovach (2009) writes from her voice, in her style, and it reflects who she is. “The Elders say that if it comes from the heart and is done in a good way, our work will count. My hope is that this work will count for Indigenous people in a way that is useful – that's all” (Kovach, 2009, p. 8). This quote resonated with me. Although I am not Aboriginal and am coming from a different stance than this author, I hope that my work in this project will count. I did it from the heart and in a good way, to the best of my ability. I like the Aboriginal way of storytelling versus writing. I have an easier time explaining myself verbally rather than through writing.

I was feeling challenged when I first read the literature on ethical space by Willie Ermine (2007). I wanted to understand the concept better and I found that Willie Ermine was featured in a number of You Tube clips for McMaster University. I watched the videos to gain a better understanding of Ermine’s work, and learned more about Aboriginal knowledge as a result. Ermine talked about Aboriginal knowledge being compared to food; something that can grow and can feed others. Elders could come along and feed the knowledge system. He reported that graduate students have often been informed by the Western knowledge system and therefore have difficulty feeding the Aboriginal knowledge system. Ermine stated that we must commit to feeding the Indigenous knowledge system; as well as commit to work and build that system within its own contexts. I am willing to make that commitment. Ermine also spoke about dialogue and the importance of it. He said that symbolically they leave their shoes outside the circle to show they will leave their status and position/ideology/doctrines outside the circle. We have to come to the circle as human beings first of all, without human constraints. This stuck in my mind. I believe that I do this quite well when working with Aboriginal people. It is a great wish of mine to be welcomed as an equal to Aboriginal people in some way because I am so interested in understanding Aboriginal ways.
I learned that in order to work with Indigenous people, I need to be able to challenge myself to think from an Aboriginal perspective. I needed to be aware of, and then change, my language so that it fit with this perspective. Aboriginal people do not talk about research. Instead, they talk about creating research. I needed some explanation on this, but once I understood, it made sense to me. The creation of knowledge is important to Aboriginal people and their communities. I am hoping to create knowledge about outsider research by writing about my experience, thoughts and challenges.

There were a number of challenges and limitations encountered in this research project. The biggest challenge I encountered during this learning experience was that of balancing the kind of haphazard way that community-based research occurs with my own personal and professional schedules. I struggled with the uncertainty of the schedule of research meetings with the youth and the community liaison. In order for me to keep all of my obligations as a social worker, student and parent, I needed to be very organized and plan ahead. I found that trying to schedule when I would be involved in the community research project was often not something that I could schedule ahead. First, we had to plan meetings when the youth would be at school or could make it to the school. Once we did get meetings arranged, we often had to locate the youth and get them to the meeting. We had to take into account any school holidays because many of them left Prince Albert to return to their First Nations communities during the weekend and school holidays. Next, we had to plan around the availability of our community partner; one of the meetings was cancelled because she was ill. Our technical support person was going to join us for the meeting when the youth were given the cameras and video cameras so that he could explain how they worked, and on the day we all met, he had another commitment. As a result, the head researcher did her best to explain the technology to the youth. The head researcher and I
are both very busy people, single mothers, and had lots of commitments. It was sometimes a struggle just to connect with each other to discuss the research.

Participating in this research practicum and facing the challenges presented motivated me to question and evaluate many of the concepts I learned in Social Work school that I have practiced over the years. I had to challenge my own values and expectations by learning how to practice patience better. I had to trust in the Creator, and understand that things would work out even though I felt stress and had concerns that I was going to miss a meeting or that I wouldn’t sound like I knew what I am talking about. I want to be considered as credible and I want my story and experience to be helpful to other Social Workers. I found that in writing this article, I had to critically examine my language in order to ensure that I was not biased by my own privilege. This is the first time that I have had to consider this.

Conclusions

This article was an expression of my own experience and opinions to do with the research I was involved in. There is an old saying that you do not know another person's journey unless you have walked in his or her shoes, or traveled in his or her moccasins (Absolon & Willett, 2005). I can only speak about my own experience, which has assisted me in locating myself and in recognizing my privilege.

With every learning experience in my field as a Social Worker, I have realized that we need to take a different approach when working with Aboriginal people. In our Social Work programs, we were taught not to share personal information because it means poor boundaries and we were cautioned about this being unethical practice. However, Aboriginal people share a great deal of personal information in order to create knowledge. They teach others by sharing their experiences and knowledge. I believe that, especially when working with Aboriginal
people, Social Workers need to find an ethical and appropriate way to share more about themselves and their experience in order to help people understand and learn. I understand that there are people and professionals that will disagree with this statement based on the information I provided above, however, I believe it is important to consider.

I learned from the existing literature what the concerns and arguments are in regard to outsiders conducting research with Aboriginal people. This helped me to understand what I needed to be aware of and how to avoid continuing the historical negative impacts of research.

I believe, that with guidance, and in consultation with Aboriginal researchers, I can offer valid research information on Aboriginal people and their experience. I am willing to walk beside Aboriginal people, to ask questions, and to listen to their stories in order to gain an accurate understanding of their experiences, their strengths, and their struggles. I want to hear their stories and I want to be able to share their stories as they would like them to be shared. I am willing to prove myself as being worthy of this information and trust if needed. I believe that a large part of building the trust is being open in identifying and locating myself, as well as recognizing and sharing the privilege that I possess.

In regards to research with Aboriginal people and their communities, I do not believe that being an outsider makes me a better or worse researcher; it just makes me a different type of researcher. I need to remain open to learning and the teachings of the people I am researching. I have an extensive background in counselling and helping people, and as a result, I have typically engaged in quite a bit of self-reflection. I have continued to do this in my research and part of my learning experience was to keep a reflective journal on my experience, parts of which have been included in this article.
I believe that if other non-Aboriginal researchers are open and willing to conduct their research in a similar way to what I have, considering all of the factors discussed in this article, that they may be able to conduct research in a non-oppressive, respectful and ethical manner that follows OCAP principles, leaving the creators of knowledge (participants) empowered and better off as a result of their involvement in the research.

What I am taking away from my experience in this research is the knowledge of the literature on outsider research and the considerations involved when creating knowledge with Aboriginal people. Based on my experience, and my project results, I believe that I have added to the available literature on outsider research. I have concluded that outsiders can be involved in creating knowledge with Aboriginal people when the outside researcher gains welcome into the group and walks beside the participants and Aboriginal researchers in sharing their story.

I was a part in creating knowledge about the identity of the Aboriginal youth in the research project. Even though I carved out my own piece of the overall project to work on during my practicum, I was involved in the main project as a whole. The research process, with my small piece included, benefitted the youth, myself, and also the researchers. The youth created their stories and shared them with each other and with society at the conference. I consider myself fortunate that the youth walked with me through the process of creating knowledge about their identity. I am a more educated person as a result and I hope that my experience and recommendations can educate and inform others who are interested in this area.

**Recommendations for Social Work Practice with Aboriginal People**

Personal learning and ongoing professional development is so important for Social Workers and anyone who is in a helping and supportive role. I have participated in training for
professional development, however, the self-reflection and continuous critique of my thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions during this research was more valuable to my learning than most of the workshops I have taken.

I think that my experience is important for social work practice because the role of Social Workers is diverse and we work in many different areas and with many different populations. I believe that social workers need to understand their own privilege and be able to both identify and locate themselves before working with Aboriginal populations. It is important that when we come in as outside researchers that we come in as a learner and not assume or act like we know everything because we cannot know.

Wilson (2008) states, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right.” (p. 135). I believe that I have changed as a person after my involvement with this research. I have learned so much about myself, my privilege, and about research with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal researchers. It is vital that non-Aboriginal researchers work in conjunction with Aboriginal researchers in order to ensure that we are understanding and respectful of the approach taken when working with Aboriginal people and their communities.
References


Krieg, B. (2012). *Cultural continuity and community response: Re-storying youth*
identity. (Unpublished research report). University of Regina, Saskatoon campus, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.


Schnarch, B. (2004). Ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) or
self-determination applied to research: A critical analysis of contemporary First
Nations research and some options for First Nations communities. *Journal of
Aboriginal Health*, 80–95.