

**A Reflexive Analysis of Community-Based Participatory Research with Indigenous
Communities in Relation to my Positionality**

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Positionality

I, Jasmine Leelo, am a descendent of immigrants, currently living, working, and playing on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee lands. I was born on the west coast on the unceded territories of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples, primarily growing up on the lands of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ nations. Both my parents are second-generation Canadians, born to immigrants fleeing racial violence. My father's family is ethnically Hakka and mixed South Asian descent; they lived in South Africa for generations before fleeing Apartheid in the late 1960's. After settling on Lheidli T'enneh First Nation land, my father and his brother attended a local residential day-school. This experience of residential school does not reflect the extent to which Indigenous communities and cultures were oppressed, and so I take this information with criticism, not invalidating the existence of the experience yet maintaining awareness for the spectrum of residential school experiences. On the other side of my family, my mother's father immigrated from Hong Kong to evade the Japanese invasion during World War II and her mother is of mixed European descent. Both my parents obtained medical degrees, and raised a family with strong values in education, career, and relationships. Therefore, I am exploring how to deconstruct the biases I grew up with and learn with an open mind and heart. Coming from a family that has been oppressed multiple times over yet views Canada as a place of refuge contrasts the Indigenous experience in Canada.

Background

The definition of “research” is deeply rooted in European imperialism and colonialism¹¹.

Research *on* Indigenous communities has traditionally involved a dominant Western researcher,

who acts as the knowledge holder, and an Indigenous community of passive subjects⁹. Many of the earliest researchers were not formally trained to follow a scientific method; they functioned more so as journalists. These early researchers returned tales of adventure to Europeans with images of Indigenous peoples depicted as savages and primitivism. Stories spoke of “the ‘cannibal’ chief, the ‘red’ Indian, [and] the ‘witch’ doctor” to sell Indigenous culture as entertainment¹². Considering Western research is rooted in colonial epistemologies, how can we cultivate a collaborative process that encompasses values from *both* Western and Indigenous cultures to come to a mutual understanding? The answer to this question is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach.

CBPR is a research approach in which decision-making power and ownership are shared between researchers and the community involved. The approach originated from social science and adult education, evolving in Latin America and Anglo-America. Paulo Freire was the Brazilian educator who proposed conscientization, the development of critical understanding of society through reflection and action, as means to resist oppression⁷. In contrast to positivist approaches and authoritarian paradigms of teaching, which are dominant in Western academia, Freire stressed the significance of bi-directional research; “the teacher is a student, and the student is a teacher”⁷. Thus, through CBPR, these co-learning opportunities and findings are co-created and shared in a mutually beneficial manner.

To address the withstanding power imbalances between researchers and Indigenous communities, five tenets of CBPR should be followed: respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility⁸, and relationships^{7, 11, 12}. In essence, the goal of CBPR is to “shift away from working *on* Indigenous communities and rather work *with* and *for* them”⁹. The concept of CBPR is not novel; however, the practice of CBPR is ever-changing. While the CBPR approach is ideal

for furthering Indigenous health, wellness, resilience, and vitality on paper, CBPR in practice takes on various forms. This incongruence inspired my investigation into the practical effectiveness of CBPR in decolonizing research, and furthermore, how my upbringing and background intersects with my CBPR approach. Decolonizing research, in this context, refers to shifting the inquiry to centralize Indigenous values and practices; Western ideas of research are critically analyzed and deconstructed, adjusting accordingly to create a progressive space for the self-determination of Indigenous peoples in academia. How my upbringing and background influences how I conduct my CBPR approach is evident in how I practice respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and relationships in my work with Indigenous groups.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to compare the framework of community-based participatory research (CBPR) 5 R principles and the practical application of these with Indigenous communities in relation to my positionality.

Methods

I explored CBPR with Indigenous communities in relation to personality through four main activities: (1) a literature review on the Effectiveness of Community-Based Participatory Research Involving Indigenous Peoples, (2) working with the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority (WAHA) to collect attitudes around COVID-19 in the Moose Cree Nation, (3) assisting Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Program (KSDPP) in the website and social media management, and (4) performing a scoping review analyzing Public Health Preparedness

and Response Strategies During Viral Respiratory Pandemics/Epidemics for Indigenous Communities in CANZUS Nations. From these experiences, I then reflected on my engagement with the five R's (relationships, respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility) in relation to my positionality.

This process involved taking each principle and reflecting on how it was used in each of the four activities. For example, I reflected upon my relationships by noting how I practiced connecting with others uniquely in the literature review, research with WAHA, KSDPP website and social media management, and the scoping review. I then identified themes between my experiences with each activity, relating them to my positionality. This was the most difficult stage of the project, which required deep introspective exploration into my identity and how my family history shapes who I am today. I connected with a distant aunt in Singapore who shared stories of how my family moved to Canada from Hong Kong during the war, giving explanation to many family attributes and values. I also learned through conversations with my siblings and cousins; I found many similarities between our childhood experiences and identity formation. This connection with my family allowed me to understand deeper reasons for why I approach, practice, and reflect upon the 'R' principles in the way I do.

Naturally, some reflections yielded more data than others or the reflections were applicable to multiple principles. To narrow the data to relevant information and avoid repetition of reflections, I chose to expand upon the most significant connection between each principle and my positionality. The final results were determined by the level of influence my family history, cultural traditions, and method of upbringing had on my CBPR approach; furthermore, these results were narrowed based on the extent of challenge I faced in each activity. For example, I chose to expand upon my relationships with the WAHA research team because I experienced the

most challenge in carrying out trusting relationships in this activity. In addition, my family's history, cultural traditions, and my upbringing played a significant role in how I initially approached the relationships with the WAHA members and managed the social complexities. In contrast, my relationships within the scoping review do not involve direct communication with the communities involved; therefore, there is a weaker connection between my positionality and relationships in that activity. In summary, I generated my results based on the extent of challenge faced in each activity and the strength of connection to my identity through my family history, cultural traditions, and upbringing.

Results

Relationships

Relationships refers to the ability to collaborate and build trust with Indigenous peoples^{8, 12, 15}. The focus on developing relationships is crucial to carrying out the other four pillars. In relation to my positionality, I entered this project with less connection to the lands and people of the communities I worked with. I drew from my understanding of Indigenous cultures from the Coast Salish peoples. Although this previous experience was valuable to understanding general values shared between Indigenous nations, the contrast in lifestyles and historical context between the Coast Salish peoples and the groups I worked with from Kahnawake and Moosonee changed my way of thinking. I learned that my relationships with Indigenous communities will vary between each nation, and, furthermore, the relationships between these communities add to the complexities of my relationships.

During my visit to Moosonee, we sought approval from the Moose Cree Nation, but did not consider insights from the MoCreebec people. The MoCreebec people did not originate from the Moosonee/Moose Factory region; these Indigenous peoples were displaced from their homes in Quebec through colonization¹¹. Many members of MoCreebec were taken during the Sixties Scoop and relocated by force to Ontario. Because these people did not originate from Ontario and lost connection to their homes in Quebec, they were excluded in the signatories to Treaty no. 9 in both Ontario and Quebec. Thus, many of these displaced peoples found community support through Moosonee/Moose Factory's employment, education, and healthcare, eventually forming MoCreebec in 1980 to affirm their Indigenous rights¹¹. Both these communities share the same region of land, creating tension between the councils. Furthermore, I learned from an employee at WAHA who is also a part of the Moose Cree Nation that the Moose Cree Nation council was generally cautious and mistrusting of WAHA. I was unaware of these dynamics going into the project, but soon realized how my relationships, or in some cases, lack of relationships, with certain groups could influence the effectiveness of the CBPR approach.

Learning about the deeper intricacies of relationships with and between Indigenous peoples was an opportunity for me to reflect on how my own background impacts my connections. Although I understand that from the perspective of the Moose Cree Nation, the MoCreebec Nation is intruding their ancestral lands to create a new community, I also empathize with the members of MoCreebec who have been displaced through colonization and thus have no home other than the one they were relocated to. Of course, I am merely an outsider in this regime and still lack insight into the details of their relationship, but considering my family's history of immigrating to Canada, I can relate to the feeling of having no home. For me, this was an emotion, but for the

members of the MoCreebec Nation, this was a legal establishment that rescinded their right to Indian status¹¹.

Respect

Respect refers to honouring Indigenous peoples and their understandings of the world⁹. My family's culture is a minority in Canada, so I can relate to the white washing experienced by Indigenous peoples, yet this does not speak to the extent of violence Indigenous people face. Through learning more about the history and ongoing rich cultures of Indigenous groups, I have developed a strong admiration for Indigenous resilience.

In my experience working with KSDPP, the website and social media management group has stressed the importance of translating website information into the Mohawk language, a process that will take significant amounts of time, consideration, and collaboration. Revitalizing Indigenous languages promotes reconciliation by addressing the damages from residential schools. Introducing these languages to younger generations and continuing the practice of Indigenous languages is thus a meaningful way to contribute to reconciliation¹⁵. (REF).

Similarly, Canada's colonial culture also discouraged my parents from teaching us our mother tongue for smoother assimilation into a white society; speaking Hakka was viewed as damaging to our image. However, in contrast, my family is disconnected from the Hakka community, and revitalizing the language is difficult without the support from elders. Witnessing Indigenous communities teach their language to younger generations is thus inspiring, and I have developed a deep respect for their perseverance. In a way, I am almost envious of their connection to their language.

Because I cannot relate to how culture is reclaimed through language, to express respect in culturally relevant forms, I spend much of my time listening. In gatherings, my team follows traditional practices of welcoming and thanks, which is spoken in Mohawk. Sometimes I wonder how my own family would express welcoming and thanks in our own language, and thus, being able to listen to Indigenous people express this in their own language is an honour.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity refers to the respectful exchange of ideas for mutual benefit ⁹. To escape racial violence and political unrest, my family fled to Canada, seeking peace and safety. My grandparents were unaware of how colonization impacted Indigenous peoples, and my parents did not understand the extent of cultural genocide until they were adults, despite my dad attending a residential school as a day-student. My family originally viewed Canada as a place of safety and refuge, greatly contrasting from the Indigenous experience. Therefore, to practice reciprocity, I had to unlearn many of the biases I grew up with; understanding the damages of colonization on Indigenous people and Canada's violent history was crucial to giving back to my Indigenous teachers.

I have found ways to give back to Indigenous peoples through my strengths. COVID-19 has introduced unprecedented barriers to communication, but because my age group has practiced online communication from a young age, digital platforms are accessible and natural to me. Through the pandemic, my digital literacy improved since all my academics were moved online. I was able to apply these same skills to help KSDPP manage their website and social media. In my experience collaborating with staff, professors, and students involved with KSDPP, I realized

that my age-group is valuable in building the bridge for communication amidst pandemic-related barriers.

Relevance

Relevance refers to how the goals of Indigenous communities are addressed ⁹. While my obstacles growing up pertained to my academic accomplishment, athletic endeavours, and social circles, disproportionate health inequities faced by Indigenous peoples introduce more prominent and a greater multitude of obstacles. I grew up in an active household with two parents who had stable jobs as physicians. On top of the privilege of financial stability, education, and access to sport, my family carried on eating our traditional foods with access to land, unlike Indigenous peoples. As immigrants, my family did not suffer the land and cultural dispossession that harmed and continues to harm the health of Indigenous people. As a result of this discrepancy in colonial experience, Indigenous people in Canada are “diagnosed with diabetes at a younger age, have more severe symptoms when diagnosed, face higher rates of complications, and experience poorer treatment outcomes”⁵. Therefore, learning about how diabetes and other health risks and illnesses disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples caused me to reflect on the privilege I previously took for granted growing up as a non-Indigenous person.

In addition to diabetes, more recently, Indigenous peoples have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to a greater extent than non-Indigenous peoples. In my personal experience over the pandemic, I was able to return to a safe, stable home in Victoria, BC where there was easy access to healthcare and social services. Considering my hometown is the capitol of BC, there were many resources to support community response to the pandemic. The proactive nature of my community allowed me to prioritize my health and continue my post-secondary education

remotely, which was not the case for many Indigenous peoples. Thus, to promote relevance in my work, I am using my privilege as a platform to promote research into culturally relevant preparedness and response strategies.

Through the scoping review assessing ‘Public Health Preparedness and Response Strategies During Viral Respiratory Pandemics/Epidemics for Indigenous Communities in CANZUS Nations’, I am focusing my work on relevant issues faced by Indigenous peoples. This paper is valuable to highlight efficient ways to improve the health of Indigenous communities in the CANZUS nations because it considers Indigenous epistemologies of health, traditional ways of knowing and doing, and promotes self-determination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responsibility

Responsibility refers to how one works with and for Indigenous people⁸. As a non-Indigenous student, I am responsible for unlearning colonial epistemologies I was raised with. My understandings of Canada’s history, colonization, and Indigenous culture was initially fed to me through the BC public school system, my social circles, and media. I sought to relearn concepts from an Indigenous lens, critically analyzing the ways I initially understood the world.

When I was growing up, my idea of health pertained to the presence or absence of disease, illness, or injury¹. This idea of health was medically determined; however, through my undergraduate degree, I began to question this epistemology. I have thus been exploring different avenues of health over the past couple years. Upon starting this project, I wrote a literature review analyzing how CBPR is framed on paper versus in practice. This was an important step to gain exposure to different lenses and learn what shapes health in an Indigenous context. From

this, I gained a deeper appreciation for Indigenous understandings of health and traditional health practices, allowing me to act responsibly with and for Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Through comparing the framework of CBPR and the practical application of it with Indigenous communities in relation to my positionality, I hope to bring critical awareness to how I carry myself in the field of Indigenous research as a non-Indigenous student. This reflective prompt is valuable to apply to my current and future relationships, guiding me to act with consideration for how my background will influence my actions. I hope to further promote healthier collaboration and celebration of diversity through authentic practice of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and relationships.

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