

New Moccasins: Articulating Research Approaches through Interviews with Faculty and Staff at Native and Non-Native Academic Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The goals of this study were to explore the perceptions of professionals concerning research, its different approaches, and appropriate future directions with Native American communities, particularly in relation to nutrition issues.

Design: Semistructured qualitative interviews.

Setting: Interviews were conducted at Native and non-Native academic institutions, at other relevant locations, and over the telephone.

Participants: Participants (N = 20) were from Native and non-Native academic institutions and had experience working with research in Native American communities.

Phenomena of Interest: Relationships between Native and non-Native academic institutions, worldviews regarding research and American Indian communities, and beneficial research within American Indian communities.

Analysis: Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and returned to the participants for review. Analysis of interview material involved eliciting themes.

Results: Some participants acknowledged different cultural worldviews in relation to research. Many participants provided insight on how to define beneficial research. Most said building trust between Native and non-Native academic institutions is an important step in developing effective research relationships.

Conclusions and Implications: These findings are a first step toward creating a more equitable process of research that acknowledges different cultural worldviews and values community involvement within Native American communities.

KEY WORDS: worldviews, research, tribal colleges, American Indian communities

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INTRODUCTION

Within many Native American communities, research has been viewed with skepticism.¹⁻⁵ Research in indigenous communities has been historically associated with European colonialism in which an established epistemology (theory of knowledge⁶) was used to validate knowledge and, therefore, positions of dominance.⁷ For example, research conducted in the early 1900s used skull size measurements to determine “mixed blood” status within Native American communities in the upper Midwest. The data were used by the federal government’s Department of Justice to determine land ownership and selling rights among “mixed blood Indians.”⁸ Although this type of research is not conducted today, it still carries a significant stigma in many Native American communities. Additional criticisms of research, particularly research conducted by outside academic institutions, include that it provides little benefit to the communities involved, often resulting in misinterpretation of knowledge and information shared.^{1,2,4,5,7} Indigenous communities have recently begun to challenge the underlying epistemological frameworks of research conducted by outside academic institutions.⁷ In contrast, non-Native academic institutions continue to value and reward their faculty for research conducted from a Western epistemological perspective.⁹⁻¹¹ Many Western epistemologies continue to be framed through positivism, a theory of knowledge that emphasizes experimental control, external validity, reliability, and objectivity.^{7,12-15} As research becomes a necessary tool to address nutrition-related chronic health problems that occur in Native American communities, such as type 2 diabetes and obesity, attention toward epistemologies and value differences can assist the process of forming more appropriate research agendas and modes of inquiry. Values associated with indigenous epistemologies, also referred to as foundational characteristics of indigenous edu-

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cation by some researchers,¹⁶ are grounded in humanity, subjectivity, and relationships.¹⁶ Community-based research (also called participatory or action research) offers an opportunity to incorporate these values into an indigenous approach to research.⁷ It is grounded in community needs in which participants become an active part of the research process.¹⁷⁻²⁰

Tribal colleges, 1994 land grant academic institutions that serve many Native American communities throughout the United States and Canada, have become increasingly involved in conducting research.^{4,21} They differ from 1862 land grant institutions in that they are sovereign, chartered by tribal governments to serve as higher educational academic institutions within their respective reservations.^{22,23} Tribal colleges are rooted in the cultural ideology of the people they serve.²²⁻²⁵ Furthermore, tribal colleges have adapted aspects of community college organizational models, which place emphasis on serving the needs of local communities. Although many land grant institutions try to respond to their local community, tribal colleges have been particularly proactive in their community because they are grounded in community, cultural heritages, and local involvement.^{23,25}

For academic institutions interested in facilitating new, more relevant research in Native American communities, several considerations may prove helpful. Critical analysis and self-reflection among researchers concerning the dominant positivist epistemology have been and are an ongoing process.^{7,14,26-28} Research questions, design, and application should more effectively meet community needs.^{7,9,29-31} Hence, articulating more relevant research agendas in Native American communities should include community-driven needs and appropriate epistemological frameworks. To better understand the problems, issues, and implications of putting these ideas into practice, this study was conducted to conceptualize some of the philosophical ideas and unique approaches that formulate the research process within institutions that conduct research with Native American communities. The long-term goal of this research was to make recommendations on how research could be conducted in Native American communities in a way that is mutually acceptable to both the Native and non-Native institutions.

METHODS

Context for Research Design

This research project developed as a result of working with the Woodlands Wisdom Confederation (WWC), a collaborative effort between six 1994 land grant woodlands tribal colleges (College of Menominee Nation, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, Leech Lake Tribal College, Turtle Mountain Community College, White Earth Tribal and Community College) and the University of Minnesota, an 1862 land grant academic institution. The WWC was established as a response to the increasing rates of nutrition-related chronic disease within Native American popula-

tions.³² Its goal is to implement nutrition education and research programs that combine Woodlands cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and food practices with nutrition and food science.

In discussions, the type and approach to research emerged as a concern because scientific research was associated with negative perceptions within Native American communities. Additionally, it was apparent from the organization's beginnings that multiple worldviews existed, which helped formulate the basis for the research study and the interview questions. The intentions of the research project were to actively engage researchers and staff in a discussion concerning these issues and to make recommendations for more beneficial approaches to conducting research in Native American communities. Therefore, it was determined that the first study should examine underlying issues regarding research in Native American communities through interviews. A more detailed description of this project is given elsewhere.³³

Explanation of Terminology

Several terms, such as *Native American*, *indigenous*, *worldview*, *epistemology*, and *paradigm*, are used throughout the article. We would like to clarify their use. The term *Native American* is mostly used to refer to the indigenous peoples throughout North and South America.³⁴ Also, the term *indigenous* is used when using quotations or ideas from literature that uses this term. Each piece of literature may have different meanings associated with the term, making it difficult to define. However, *indigenous* generally refers to the first peoples and their culture of a given geographical area who have experiences with imperialism.⁷ The term *Native institution* refers to tribal colleges, and the term *non-Native institution* refers to Western (or European based) colleges, universities, and a public health department. The terms *Native* and *non-Native* institutions are used to describe the institutional affiliation of the interview participant. The term *ethnic* rather than *racial* is used because we feel that it is a more appropriate term. *Ethnicity* places more emphasis on the cultural background of an individual, whereas *racial group* stems from biological differences.³⁵ Also, we use the term *Caucasian* instead of *white* because we feel it is more consistent with the ways in which other ethnicities are identified.

The terms *worldview*, *paradigm*, *epistemology*, and *foundational characteristics of indigenous education* are used to compare Western culture and knowledge with Native American culture and knowledge. *Worldview* can be described as a foundation or set of basic assumptions within culture that is often taken for granted.³⁶ Each culture (and possibly subcultures) has a worldview. For example, some aspects associated with the generalized Western (biomedical) worldview value mastery over nature and think of time within future terms. In contrast, a generalized Native American cultural worldview values harmony with nature and thinks within present time frames.^{16,34} Within the "Results" section, participants

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