

**RESEARCH: FIRST NATIONS DISCOURSE  
IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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## Introduction: What is Research?

Research is a relatively recent term in the vocabulary of First Nations peoples. In fact, any reference to "research", even to our university students, still presents a feeling of anxiety and incompetence. How often have we heard students say, "I can't do a Master's because I hate research?" Research, to many, conjures up images of statistics with complicated mathematics requiring analysis and just generally being incomprehensible. For so long, we have been subjected to the view that "Indians can't do math.", that we have internalized a fear of anything to do with numbers.

If, as I suggest, this mystery of research is experienced in the university, how much more remote is the notion of research in our communities? If, however, we examine what research really is, we could dispel a number of myths. In any dictionary, you can read that research is a systematic inquiry into a subject in order to find out or check facts" (Chrisjohn, 1993). If that still sounds ominous, let's look at it another way. Have you ever asked an Elder how to do something? Have you ever compared two textbooks? Somewhat more formally, in order to solve a problem, have you ever:

1. talked to a number of people, interviewed them?
2. consulted history books?
3. given out questionnaires and analyzed/compiled the results?
4. checked public records?
5. checked through archives?
6. checked through libraries?

If so, you have been doing research (Chrisjohn, 1993).

Even more amazing is the fact that Our Peoples, the original peoples, were also the original researchers in North America. Empirical research is research that relies on experience and observation alone (Webster, 1971). We all know that, long before contact, Our Peoples were navigating the waters, having learned about tides and all aspects of weather, winds, temperatures. Our Peoples knew about the runs of the various fish (e.g., salmon, cod, halibut). They knew the habits of the animals (e.g., the buffalo, the rabbit, the muskrats). They knew the natural rhythm of the land, the forests. All this and much more they learned through systematic reliance on observation and experience. They were researchers.

All this is to say that at one time or another, each of us has very likely engaged in research. Therefore, it needn't be a mystery or a threat.

### Reflections of the Past:

Research has been the purview of academia "since time immemorial". Anthropology has probably dominated the research agenda with Our Peoples. It is no wonder that a common joke around for many years was, "Do you know what an extended Indian family is?" Answer: "a mother, a father, grandparents, grandchildren and an anthropologist."

Anthropology (and archeology, a field within anthropology) is the study of humankind which explains its interest in Our Peoples. It began with the study of bones, in an attempt to determine when people first arrived in the New World and where they had come from. Added to this was the study of living men. They studied blood types and languages (Vlahos, 1970). In their exuberance, they are said to have claimed artifacts (e.g., sacred masks) and desecrated our burial grounds. Consequently, our view of research has been adversely affected by the attitudes of early anthropologists. We, the First Peoples, have found many of their ethics and research practices morally repugnant.

I mention Anthropology only because of its early dominance in the study of Our Peoples and to demonstrate the changing discourse in research.

Academic research is usually driven by a specific question. Over time, the question has changed from "When did humankind first arrive in the New World? Where did they come from?" to the questions in the late 19th century about dying civilizations and "Which must come first, "Christianization" of the Indian, or his adoption of "civilization"?" (Urion, 1991). In the 1930's and 1940's, the question became one of the acculturation of Our Peoples. "Our People would change and become like the 'other' group." (Urion, 1991). In the 1960's, there was a great deal of comparison between Natives and non-Natives, continuing the saga of acculturation. Applied to the education of Our Peoples, Urion observes that "In the end, it measures 'success' in education by how closely the end results in Native culture approximates the end results in the homogeneous 'other' and 'dominant culture'."

While First Nations discourse clearly opposes this cultural-determinist model, we find ourselves continuing to be subsumed by it.

### First Nations Discourse:

As stated earlier in this paper, our ancestors engaged in research. "Predictions were made on the coming winter's weather, plentifulness or scarcity of fish for the following summer, the coming summer's berries and where they will be most plentiful, etc. This was done by observing and reading the significance of nature, and reflects the power of the thinking Native's mind. Predictions were made based on observable phenomena." (Kawagley, 1992: 27-28). The same empirical research continues today in areas

where Our People practice traditional lifestyles. "The environment was their school and their cathedral, and reading its natural progress gave meaning to all life." (Kawalgey, 1992:28).

Just as it was with Our Ancestors, so is it with us today. Research is necessary in order to inform our lives. In the world of academia, we have for too long been the objects of study by outsiders who have drawn their own conclusions and often have created myths which we must now address to reverse the adverse impact these have had. Much of the research making direct reference to the children of the various Indian Nations is overwhelmingly flawed (Chrisjohn, 1986). We, the First Nations, must become better informed about conceptual and methodological techniques, and develop our own expertise, or we will remain dependent on outsiders whose qualifications we are unable to judge.

In the late twentieth century, we have taken our research to higher education institutions, to comprehensive studies under the aegis of our own organizations such as the Mokakit Education Research Association, and to Task Forces and Royal Commissions.

In the case of higher education, our growing numbers of graduate students are doing research that directly impacts the lives of our peoples. Such papers as: *Yup'ik Ways of Knowing* (Kawagley, 1990), *Coyote's Story about Orality and Literacy* (Archibald, 1990), and *Quaslametko and Yetko: Two Grandmother Models for Contemporary Native Education Pedagogy* (Sterling, 1992), speak to the emerging First Nations pedagogy. Other papers such as: *Native Indian Leadership* (Jules, 1988), *Jurisdiction and Control in First Nations School Evaluation* (Matthew, 1990), and *Indian Control of Indian Education: the Path of the Upper Nicola Valley* (Charters-Voght, 1991), address the questions of appropriation, responsibility and control.

Still other papers deal with various aspects of development. *Toward Community: the Community-School Model and the Health of Sovereignty* (Calliou, 1993), *Language Renewal and Language Maintenance: A Practical Guide* (Brandt & Ayoungman, 1989) and *Cultural Strategies for Retaining Fisheries, Forestries and Land* (Maanu Paul, 1987).

Finally, we have the papers that reveal that we are, in fact, moving toward conceptual and methodological techniques from First Nations perspectives. Examples of this emerging approach include: *Pimosatamowin Sikaw Kakeequaywin - Walking and Talking - a Saulteaux Elder's View of Native Education* (Akan, 1992), *Compassionate Mind: Implications of a Text Written by Elder Louis Sunchild* (Lightning, 1992) and *Considerations for Inclusion of Multiple Cultural Competencies in Teacher Assessment* (Nelson-Barber, 1990).

First Nations research discourse has as "its first assumption, the integrity of the person. It assumes a context in which there is unity and wholeness to be discovered or reaffirmed....It is thus essentially empirical. The major requirement is that the observer (researcher) be part of the

observation." (Urion, 1991). To take it a step further, the subject(s) and the research should engage together in the process of creating the discourse. Research questions must be driven by The People and they must be involved as participants in the study. This is the essence of participatory research, which is different from participant observation, which had as its central tenet the understanding of a phenomena and not the desire to change it. This latter view has given way to participatory research, based on the principle that people become subjects rather than objects of research (Wright, 1993). This approach is conducive to change which is the hallmark of research for First Nations in the late twentieth century. Participatory research using tradition as a base for change rather than as a bulwark against change by outsiders, as has often been the case, is a means of regaining our security as a people.

Elements of participatory research can be found in the more comprehensive studies that have been undertaken among First Nations. The Assembly of First Nations study entitled *Tradition and Change: Toward a Vision of Our Future* (1988) researched the areas of jurisdiction, quality, management and resourcing. Currently underway is a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. A Roundtable on Education, held in July 1993 as part of the Commission's inquiries, dealt with two primary goals: the reform of mainstream educational systems to recognize aboriginal perspectives; and, the elimination of barriers and the development of supports for Aboriginal educational systems and Aboriginal students. Among the research papers presented at the Roundtable were: *Visions for Future Aboriginal Education Systems* (Battiste, 1993), *Language and Culture* (Hampton, 1993), *Remote and Northern Education Issues* (Clouthier, 1993) and *Metis and Other Aboriginal People in Urban Settings* (Lamothe, 1993).

For both the Assembly of First Nations study and the papers presented at the Roundtable, research was largely participatory.

The Royal Commission has targeted a number of critical areas for research. One example is an inquiry into residential schooling. A researcher, presently an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia and a member of the Iroquois Confederacy (Oneida), and his colleague Sherri Young, have recently submitted their paper, which is currently undergoing peer review. It forms part of the Royal Commission's overall investigation of residential schools. Their research is to produce a handbook designed to assist "First Nations communities to develop their own understanding of how residential school has helped create their world today" (Chrisjohn & Young, 1993). It is aimed at encouraging First Nations individuals and communities to conduct their own community-based research. It will provide information on methodology - how to go about doing research. Research is about gathering and checking facts; it will not determine what to do about residential schooling. Questions raised will help to provide a clear view of the problems which, in turn, can provide a background against which interventions can be made. Research, then, helps us to see the big picture.

To proceed with this example of research into a critical area, in residential school research Chrisjohn and Young suggested "personal narratives which report personal musings, small group conversations, personal recollections, stories told by one's parents or grandparents" (Chrisjohn & Young, 1993). In terms of community research, the task is to make a "local populace intelligible to itself", in the light of the history of the community, which includes the history of its individual members. Community-based research, like all research, is like putting together a puzzle. The sources of information (pieces of the puzzle) might include personal narratives, meetings, conferences, workshops, interviews, or archival information. Once we have assembled some part of the puzzle, the creativity of the community is tantamount to using the research to engage plausible solutions.

The research, in this specific example (Chrisjohn & Young, 1993) suggests that participatory research is a means of conducting community research. It is based on the premise that solutions lie within the community. It is a capacity defined by what they can do with whatever they have, to improve their own quality of life. The methods of participatory research may also be applied to other areas.

#### Visions of the Future:

Given that a research agenda is now underway among First Nations, it is imperative that we own our research. We must engage our people and our communities, including youth, parents and elders, so as to identify their questions in order to take charge of the whole research process.

In the context of education, the vision of the future lies in the challenge of utilizing the current research and engaging in further research, so as to answer a very basic question: **"What is Indian (First Nations, Aboriginal) education?"** Without knowing what we mean by Indian education, we find ourselves in limbo. What we continue to do is emulate the Western model of education, simply making adaptations here and there. If we are to adhere to our own values, we must begin with ourselves, our philosophies, our theories, our pedagogy. For instance, how can we use the Medicine Wheel or the Sacred Tree to describe our philosophy, theories and pedagogy? As long as we don't have this critical element in place, we will continue to educate our peoples with the Western model, that has clearly not been an effective educational system for our peoples.

That is the challenge we must face. With the help of our respected Elders, we must face the question, using their knowledge and experience, for that is the only source of archival information we have. We must listen carefully to their stories, draw upon the metaphors which provide invaluable teachings. The answers to our demands for a better education, better health, a better life, cannot be derived from outside. The answers are within us. We are told that to find the core of knowledge we must go deep in thought. As an

Elder at Maskwachees Cultural College stated, "We must close our eyes so we can see further."

Our vision of the future must necessarily include research for us and by us. We must ask the right questions and engage not only ourselves as academics but our communities in the research process. Without the community, our work is futile. We must utilize what research we have and promote research in areas requiring factual data. Let us continue the research agenda of our ancestors so we, too, will learn how we should proceed to make our lives better.

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