Reflecting on Research in the Context of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT : Engaging in collaborative research projects with Indigenous scholars and communities requires non-Indigenous researchers to respect and honor the unique experiences and perspectives of Indigenous voices. As a non-Indigenous and settler person and ally, I have welcomed opportunities to collaborate in research projects with Indigenous scholars, Elders, and community members. Being positioned in what were once especially unfamiliar environments has challenged my understanding of what it means to engage in re-search across fundamental differences and perspectives between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, brought significant and unique changes to the research process. It is important, thus, to reflect upon and learn from the research experience during pandemic times. This paper discusses my impressions of how the research engagement with participants was challenged by the global pandemic, and how virtual Research Conversations with Indigenous community members also presented noteworthy possibilities.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic restrictions, research process

I. INTRODUCTION

Western-based Eurocentric research paradigms that are often empirical in nature do not necessarily account for the socio-historical implications of Indigenous peoples' experiences and circumstances ([1] [2]). Engaging in collaborative research projects with Indigenous scholars and communities requires non-Indigenous researchers to respect and honour the unique experiences and perspectives of Indigenous voices. For non-Indigenous researchers, this is particularly significant when research is conducted in non-traditional Western-based spaces. In these contexts, Indigenous ways of knowing, traditions, and values not only challenge the more objective Eurocentric research methods, but in fact are privileged in research partnerships that recognize decolonial theory and research practices that focus on Indigenous ways of knowing and being ([3] [4]).

Positioning the Researcher in the Research : As a non-Indigenous and settler person and ally, I have welcomed opportunities to collaborate in research projects with Indigenous scholars, Elders, and community members for over 15 years. Being positioned in what were once especially unfamiliar environments has challenged my understanding of what it means to engage in re-search across fundamental differences and perspectives between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies. The opportunities have brought to light how research paradigms influence the co-construction of knowledge ([5] [6]). I have been welcomed by Indigenous community partners across Turtle Island and continue to learn about the nature of collaborative research practices that are sometimes unique to each community's methodologies, and how one must remain sensitive and responsive to Indigenous peoples' understanding of traditional knowledge (see, for example, [7]). I appreciate the opportunities to collaborate with Indigenous communities and have come to understand the importance of consultation and relationship with various stakeholders involved in the project. Elders and knowledge keepers provide the necessary direction for the research aims and are also instrumental in guiding the direction of the analysis in a culturally appropriate manner. Moreover, they represent the link between researchers and community and establish the context of the relational activities throughout the research process.

Hence, I have a better sense of the significant relationships in collaborative research projects between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As a result, engaging in respectful relations with Indigenous communities has meant being in active dialogue with them to ensure that the research remains centered upon their voices and experiences. I feel fortunate to have had opportunities to share meals, take walks, and participate in smudging, ceremonies, and social events to strengthen our relationship first, as people and second, as colleagues and collaborators.

II. CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

The research process itself reflects this same spirit of cooperation and mutual respect during circles and shared stories of common and individual experiences ([8]). Using a Medicine Wheel structure with a focus on Action, Vision, Knowledge, and Relation, Elders and cultural advisors have guided the conversations. These are spaces

that honour both silence and emotion, as they do tears and laughter. We immerse ourselves in the ceremony of the circle. We take the time, before and after each session, to get to know one another. The same context of respectful relations extends to the data analysis itself, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and community members revisit and reflect upon the words of the research participants that were shared in circle. The transcripts are re-read aloud and the space around the table invites all members to comment informally on the emerging themes and central ideas embedded in participants' words. Particularly memorable are those projects where Elders participated in the data analysis. Their ability to contextualize our insights in the broader understanding of culture and tradition lends itself to profound learning experiences that often challenged our assumptions as non-Indigenous peoples. They were experiences of re-search based on relationship.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN A PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic brought notable change to the research process. It is important, now that the majority of the social restrictions have been lifted, to reflect upon past experiences. This paper further discusses my impressions of how the research engagement with participants was impacted by the global pandemic. The restrictions based on provincial public health protocols in Ontario (Canada) during Covid-19 – including social distancing measures that prohibited and/or limited social gatherings – posed significant implications on conducting respectful research with Indigenous peoples and communities. The face-to-face circles so integral to the Indigenous methodology in which I have participated was replaced with virtual synchronous meetings on electronic platforms. Where once we engaged in developing relationships at community gatherings, the pandemic restrictions forced a reliance upon electronic communication and telephone conversations. While the sense of respect and mutual support was not compromised, it was a challenge to establish the same degree of relationship with community and Elders (see, for example, [9] [10]). As a non-Indigenous researcher, I wanted to be respectful of community and maintain respectful relations (see, for example, [11]).

We, therefore, employed the same Research Conversations (RC) used in our collaborative research projects with Indigenous communities during the pandemic ([12]). Research participants from Indigenous communities were invited to participate in virtual synchronous gatherings using on-line platforms. It should be noted that for some Indigenous participants on-line platforms presented significant barriers to engage in research projects. Various individuals did not have internet connectivity in their homes and/or the personal devices necessary for the electronic RCs. Familial obligations at home and work commitments during the times the RCs were scheduled prevented some community members from joining the conversations. For those that were able to participate in the virtual RCs, I noted how the process was clearly a challenge to their understanding of Indigenous methodology. As a researcher, I worried about connectivity issues that could interrupt the virtual RCs, as I did the possibility of participants having to tend to other priorities at home.

While I attempted to maintain the focus of the project on the perceptions and experiences of the Indigenous participants themselves, the conceptual and physical location of the conversations often suffered from our inability to meet in-person ([13]). Despite the best attempts to establish an informal and relational space in the virtual RC, I reflect upon the fact that the location of participants' gaze, as ([14]) describes, was not situated in a context most conducive to sharing. In pre-Covid-19 Research Conversations, participants' stories were shared in physical, emotional, and social spaces that nurtured reflection ([15] [16] [17]). Participants readily shared individual experiences in RCs that contributed to common understandings, mutual interests, and a collegial culture of understanding ([18]). In the virtual RCs, I noted that the emotion and spirit of the community was simply not the same. Participants often observed anecdotally about the significance of traditional face-to-face interactions when conducting Indigenous research methodologies. In a virtual setting, however, the research teams also worried about the lack of physical support for participants' emotions.

The potential disconnects between participants and researchers extended to the actual protocols of the virtual RCs. Researchers had to negotiate the silence between speakers in a manner that did not interrupt an individual's story or impose pressure for them to continue speaking. It was important to provide time for each participant to reflect upon their words and not pose a probing question to alter their sense of direction. All of this made it more difficult to assess participants' attention during the RCs – a near impossible task when some participants chose not to turn on their cameras during the virtual meetings. During in-person RCs, there is far greater evidence of participants' sense of engagement. As a non-Indigenous researcher, I noted the stark contrast between in-person and virtual RCs in terms of gauging participants' interactions – a component of Indigenous research so vitally important to its design and implementation.

Moreover, as a non-Indigenous researcher, it was increasingly difficult to understand and be responsive to the physical signs of participants' reactions to what they spoke about or what they heard. I had to account for the potential for feelings of uncertainty to emerge in terms of participants' comfort levels since we were not physically present at the RCs. This was to understand, in both the preparation and engagement of the virtual RCs, that the conceptual space among participants was potentially very fragile. In virtual RC environments, the physical distance between and among participants often stifles the proper facilitation of respectful spaces for participants to share their experiences. One cannot help but wonder how different participants' perceptions and discourses could have been in face-to-face RCs where they could physically and visibly engage in dialogue while supporting each other's shared experiences.

However, this is not to suggest that the virtual RCs with Indigenous community members did not present some possibilities. For those participants that could not travel to in-person data gathering sessions, the virtual model allows them to participate in the research from their own homes. Similarly, for those participants that are caretakers of loved ones and cannot attend on-site RCs, the virtual format allows them to remain at home. From a research perspective, as well, one has almost immediate access to a draft of the transcript because the virtual sessions can be recorded by the researcher. This enables transcriptionists to have both a video recording and transcription draft of the proceedings to better ensure a more accurate version of the RCs. Last, and equally important, virtual platforms may actually provide a greater sense of privacy for some participants. For those that may be reluctant to speak publicly at physical gatherings, or simply prefer to express themselves only in audio, the virtual platform may be more welcome.

he first paragraph under each heading or subheading should be flush left, and subsequent paragraphs should have a five-space indentation. A colon is inserted before an equation is presented, but there is no punctuation following the equation. All equations are numbered and referred to in the text solely by a number enclosed in a round bracket (i.e., (3) reads as "equation 3"). Ensure that any miscellaneous numbering system you use in your paper cannot be confused with a reference [4] or an equation (3) designation.

IV. CONCLUSION

The implications of the global pandemic adversely effected research protocols. Indigenous research methodologies were no exception. As a settler-person, I have been privy to the powerful outcomes of collaborating with Indigenous communities in good relations ([19]). I have a better understanding of how issues related to time, place, and respectful relations are central considerations to Indigenous methodologies (broadly speaking). Research must be conducted at a time when all participants are prepared to engage in the work from a position of understanding and openness ([20] [21]). Relatedly, it is important to account for the place in which the research is conducted and to understand the respective and related protocols. Thus, both time and place must be situated in respectful relations with the Indigenous community to honour Indigenous ways of knowing ([22]).

Yet, the social and health restrictions of the global pandemic forced an approach to re-search from different perspectives ([23]). It was difficult to measure the time to prepare properly to engage in the re-search. In certain instances, it felt less certain that we were in an ideal space. In terms of place, the physical spaces of community were replaced with electronic communications, telephone calls, and virtual meetings. There was not necessarily that feeling of being rooted in the place that the community values. In a similar light, while we aimed in all cases for respectful relations, we missed dearly opportunities to be with community. We did not have all of those informal moments of personal encounter to get to know one another outside the research environment.

Nonetheless, while the conditions were different given the altered versions of time, place, and respectful relations, research projects proceeded. Communities remained willing to engage in collaboration and to share their stories of success, challenge, and resilience. I felt privileged to be a member of bi-epistemic teams and partnerships and to walk alongside one another – albeit virtually in most circumstances – to honour the voices and perspectives of the Indigenous community.

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