

SEARCH FOR AN 'ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY'

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ABSTRACT

The quest for self-determination by Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the accompanying need for government officials and the Canadian public to understand Aboriginal peoples is revitalizing anthropological studies. In contrast to traditional research, wherein anthropologists entered the field to record data for academic consumption, it is now necessary for our work to reflect the concerns of the people with whom we are working.

This paper discusses the use of elements from various methodologies during work with the Innu people. It deals with the benefits and limitations in the use of participant observation, a feminist approach, and a participatory research model. The combination of principles from each methodology can avoid the illusion of objectivity in research, which only serves to silence the people studied. Rather it enables a dialogue based on a respect for differences.

RÉSUMÉ

Les efforts des autochtones pour obtenir l'auto-détermination au Canada et le besoin conséquent des agents gouvernementaux et du public de comprendre les aspirations autochtones ont revitalisé les études anthropologiques. En opposition à la recherche traditionnelle, où les anthropologues enregistraient des données à fin de consommation purement académique, il est maintenant nécessaire que notre recherche adresse les problèmes des peuples parmi lesquels nous travaillons.

Cet article décrit l'utilisation d'éléments de plusieurs méthodologies lors d'un projet parmi le peuple Innu. L'auteur évalue les bénéfices et les limitations de l'observation participatoire, d'une perspective féministe, et d'un modèle de recherche participatoire. La synthèse des principes de chaque méthodologie permet d'éviter l'illusion de l'objectif, qui ne sert qu'à silencer les peuples étudiés: cette synthèse nous permet d'entrer en dialogue avec eux, basé sur un respect des différences.

INTRODUCTION

Why should we look for alternative ways to do social science research? Are not traditional approaches to anthropology good enough?

What is wrong with carrying out work that is objective and value-free in order to increase our understanding of others?

Criticism of anthropology has come from various sources. In addition to feminist complaints that anthropology has been 'the study of man', Aboriginal peoples are dissatisfied with their portrayal as 'primitives'. Criticism has also come from within the discipline by those who dominate it -- white men. Reflexive literature in anthropology works against the discipline's aim to achieve objective and value-neutral work. The combined result of these critiques is a growing awareness that it is impossible to arrive at an objective truth about a particular people or to carry out unbiased research.

Each anthropologist works from his or her own history and position in society. The position of privilege enjoyed by those of us who are white middle-class academics can interfere with our understanding of the people we study. Although rhetorically we may advocate 'equal rights', we act as though we have much to lose if we share power with 'the oppressed'. We seek to maintain our investment in this privilege.

If by chance you doubt your role as oppressor, I ask you to consider the methodology you use for your research on 'living subjects'. You may believe that the people we study need us to translate their cultures to the rest of the world; and, without us they would continue to be ignored. But I ask you, who benefits from this exercise? Who but other academics read our work? To what end is the information about a group's kinship system, religion, political and economic system used?

Certainly in the past, colonial administrators found this information useful for their reign over 'the natives'. Today, neo-colonial administrations use information collected by anthropologists in land-claim settlements. During land-claim disputes, governments insist that the culture in question be documented by a legitimate source¹. Legitimacy comes from affiliation with a university. Academics, more often than not white men, are believed to be carrying out objective, value-free work.

The knowledge and experience of someone from the culture studied, someone born and raised in it, is not considered valid. Only an outsider, who visits the people for a year or so and then returns to academia, can be an expert.

This paper will argue that there is a need for anthropologists to work *with* people rather than *on* them. Although I have qualms about outsiders being involved in the research process at all, I acknowledge its existence but propose the use of more appropriate research methods. What follows is an account of my attempt to apply alternative methodologies to my work with a First Nations group and the difficulties and successes that resulted.

My work is with the Innu, a people formerly known as the Naskapi-Montagnais. The Innu live in Nitassinan, a land we call Labrador and the Quebec north-shore. They are famous for their protests against low-level flying and the proposed NATO base at Goose Bay. The Innu successfully halted the building of a NATO base but the low-level flying continues.

My initial interest in working with the Innu stemmed from my thesis topic: militarism and prostitution. When I discovered that prostitution-like activities were occurring between young Innu women and military personnel at Goose Bay I decided to do fieldwork. However, several feminists and Aboriginal women helped me realize the inappropriateness of my topic. They explained that because of the history of Aboriginal women being stereotyped as 'whores' and the abuse that accompanied it, the women would be uncomfortable discussing the topic with a white researcher.

I arrived at an alternative topic based on my readings of feminist methodologies and the work of scholars doing participatory research. Feminist literature not only pointed out the lack of attention given to the lives and concerns of women but also indicated the need for new research approaches (Harding 1987; Mies 1983). Feminist scholars have realized that simply adding women to models made for men did not work. Instead they offered alternative, feminist methodologies.

The primary difference between feminist methodologies and traditional research is the position they take on the tenets of positivism. Feminist theorists reject the notion of value-free research (Maguire 1987; Mies 1987). All research, they state, is motivated by particular values. Research which condones the values of a patriarchal, racist and classist world will appear neutral to some because it helps maintain the status quo. In actuality it is far from neutral.

The alternative is to carry out research which will reveal the injustices of society and aim to bring about change. Feminist theorists acknowledge that their work has an agenda: their goal is to work for the betterment of women's lives (Duelli Klein 1987; Maguire 1987).

The other tenet of positivism which feminist theorists reject is objectivity (Ladner 1987; Oakley 1981). They believe it is impossible for researchers who study people, to remain detached from their subjects. Not only is it impossible to do objective work, it is also undesirable. Attempts to keep a distance from the people we are studying can only lead to questionable results.

Because of the close contact that anthropologists have with the people whom they study, our discipline sits on the border between the humanities and the social sciences (Johnson & Johnson 1990). Fighting for our status as social scientists, anthropologists claim to be able to juggle participation with objective observation. In actuality, if the anthropologist manages to

keep a distance from the people he is studying, they are less likely to trust him².

At the very least, 'objective' work will benefit no one but the researcher. If the research done is irrelevant to the people studied, there is no reason for informants to be forth-coming with information. In a worst-case scenario, the information an anthropologist obtains will be used against the people studied. This took place when anthropologists worked for governments during the colonial era. In these cases there is no motivation for informants to tell the truth. Hence work is neither objective nor accurate.

Further criticism of attempts to carry out objective research come from feminist scholars who question the ethical implications of such work. Ann Oakley (1981) has pointed out in her research on motherhood, the impossibility of responding in an impartial way to questions directed to her by the women she interviewed. Despite recommendations by other scholars to do so, she could not ignore questions such as "Does an epidural ever paralyse women?" and 'Why is it dangerous to leave a small baby alone in the house?' (Oakley 1981:48). Neither could she answer with responses such as "that's a hard one' ... (or) 'my job at the moment is to get opinions, not have them'" (ibid). Joyce Ladner (1987:79) questions the ethics of remaining objective in face of "poverty, racism, self-destruction and the gamut of other problems ... " when there is a possibility for the researcher to improve the lives of those she studied.

The alternative is to interact freely with the people one works with. By sharing one's life and beliefs without fear of contaminating data, a rapport will be established and friendships may emerge. When interacting with those we research, their interests are taken into account and in this way the work becomes relevant to all involved and may even improve lives.

The basic tenet of participatory research is also to improve the lives of those researched. In particular its goal is to liberate the oppressed by working with them towards an awareness of their oppression and then towards solutions (Friere 1970; Maguire 1987). This approach is used more often by Third World scholars and First World feminists than by white male academics. The former have less invested in maintaining the status quo and, having been marginalized themselves, are more sensitive to an inclusive research process (Maguire 1987; Small 1988). In participatory research the researcher works with the people to arrive at a research topic, to choose and implement a research method, and to analyse the results.

I planned to use aspects of this approach, combined with feminist principles, for my research with the Innu. I decided to abandon my topic

of prostitution and militarism and instead have the Innu determine what I would research and how it would be done. My plan was to do work with Innu women that would be of value to them.

However, before entering the field, and in fact before I had permission from the Innu to work with them my professors advised me to establish a research agenda. It was suggested I work with an already established women's group and record the effects of NATO on Innu women, or continue my investigations into prostitution on the sly! It also occurred to me that it might be useful to document how Innu women had organized themselves against NATO. However, none of this materialized.

I made contact with Rose Gregoire, a leader of the Innu community of Sheshatshit, who had other ideas. In response to my suggestion to research the effects of NATO on Innu women, she informed me that a report of that nature had already been made. She suggested instead that I go out to a camp in the bush with her sister's family⁸. I agreed, but without knowing how I would do research there or what I should study.

In retrospect, I believe that the research agenda which my professors and I had set out, was an attempt to modernize the account of an Aboriginal people. In order to avoid the shameful past of our discipline, which portrayed Aboriginal peoples as primitive, our aim was to show them as 'modern'. By illustrating their interaction with 'our world' we would prove that they were like us.

Difficulties arose when I came to realize that the Innu were not just like us. Their way of life and many of their values are different from ours, particularly when they are in camps in the country. The trick for me was to gain an understanding of Innu life without romanticizing it. At the same time I did not want to portray the Innu solely as victims of neo-colonialism, nor as savages or drunks.

By combining aspects of participant observation, participatory research and feminist methodologies, I was better equipped to avoid these pit-falls and to come closer to achieving my research goals. These goals included increasing my knowledge of a First Nations people and disseminating this knowledge in order to combat Canadian ignorance of Aboriginal peoples. Another goal was to work towards a research approach that would be sensitive to the concerns of Aboriginal people. What I refused to acknowledge was my own input into the project. I thought I was going to let the Innu run the show.

On the advice of Rose Gregoire, I flew out to a camp in the country. Not knowing what to research and unwilling to be a typical researcher and take copious notes, I tried to fit in as best I could. I learned how to pluck ducks, clean fish and scrape caribou skins. I also made bread, cut wood and caught fish.

Although I denied it at the time, I was engaging in participant observation. I refused to take fieldnotes on the principle that I was doing 'alternative' research. However, I did keep a detailed journal in which I recorded much of what I saw. Unfortunately, I found people were uncomfortable when I wrote in my journal. They did not know what I was writing or how I was going to use the information I collected. In fact they had no proof that I was who I claimed to be nor that I would keep my word and let them check material that I wrote before it was released.

Due to the number of researchers who had entered their lives to collect data, who left, and never were heard from again, I was surprised that they tolerated me. Despite the investigations by the Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS) into the activities of the Innu, they allowed me to stay with them.

Upon my return to the community of Sheshatshit I sought Rose Gregoire out in order to begin the 'real' research. I believed that because I had neither a research agenda nor fieldnotes I had not been doing research while in the country. Rose provided me with a research topic and agreed with my decision to work with two Innu people, one woman and one man, who had offered to act as interpreters. To my surprise, and initial disappointment, Rose suggested that I not restrict my interviews to women only. The topic I was given was to explore the nature of problems in the community and how they contrasted with life in the country. In contrast to the country, the community was plagued with poverty and alcoholism.

Rose did not specify how I should approach the topic but I decided that a typical participatory research project, in which community members invested a lot of time and energy, would not be possible. A prime example was the women who offered to be my interpreter. She had six children, a household to maintain and a job as a translator. She explained that while she would do interviews for me, she did not have time to engage in other aspects of the project.

Based on the educational tenet of participatory research, I had planned to work with the Innu to teach them how to do research. My goal was to eliminate the future need for outside researchers. For several reasons this did not materialize: in addition to being busy with their own activities, I thought that people would not be interested in participating in a project which was directed by a white woman. I also perceived a financial restraint on our work. I only had enough money to hire two people to work on the project.

In retrospect I realize that the trouble with my approach was that while I told everyone that the work we were doing was for the community, I was unwilling to give up control of the project. I feared

losing my role as 'researcher' in the community. If I was not doing research what was my reason for being there? What would I do? How would I meet people and feel useful?

This need for a role as a researcher and my reliance on traditional research methods (despite other intentions) stemmed from my academic training, my living situation and my own prejudice. At university I was taught that only academics knew how to do research. It is also possible that my desire to control the research process arose from a racist and classist assumption that the Innu would not be able to do the work 'properly'. My sense of alienation from the community led me from a participatory role and work with the Innu, back to the role of traditional researcher. In the country I had abandoned this role except when I wrote in my journal. My problem in the community was that I lived in the Roman Catholic nun's house, and not with an Innu family.

This distance and my own prejudices led me to want control over the project. Taking the topic Rose suggested, I designed a set of questions and gave it to the interpreters. I also administered their salaries. When the interpreters told me that they would be doing the interviews without me I balked, but could not complain as I had stated that I wanted the Innu to control the project.

A few problems arose because I had designed the questionnaire. Several women complained that my rigid set of questions prevented them from talking about their families. There was too much of an emphasis placed on their own experiences. The inappropriateness of even using a questionnaire was brought to light when the male interviewer told me that the Innu learn by watching not by asking questions.

Nevertheless, there were successful elements to the project. Despite my efforts to control the research, the Innu did have some power over it. Rose decided what would be researched and the two interpreters/interviewers exercised some control over the administration of the questionnaire. In the end, despite his initial decision to exclude me, the male interviewer decided to have me accompany him to the interviews. This was likely due to the friendship we had established, as well as the fact that the people he interviewed knew me from my stay in the country.

Initially I believed that I needed large amounts of funding to do participatory research. However, while I did pay the interpreters for the interviews, our interaction extended beyond an employer/employee type of relationship. As well, Rose Gregoire who directed my work, and everyone interviewed, did so without pay. I believe there were several reasons for their willingness to participate. First, the topic was relevant to their lives because it had been selected by an Innu person and not an academic. Second, people were told that the interviews were being done for their community resource centre, not for me. Third, by going to the

country I showed the Innu that I had an understanding and appreciation of their life in the country.

Personally, my work benefitted me in many ways. First, my experience in the country was an invaluable opportunity to stay with people living off the land and in harmony with nature. Second, I met many special people and made some very good friends. Third, I have been able to work towards a more appropriate methodology for work with a First Nations people. Also, the Innu have helped me realize the validity of the claim, made by Black feminists (Davis 1981; Hooks 1984), that gender cannot be studied without consideration of racism and classism. It was not appropriate for me to focus my studies only on women when issues of concern to the Innu, such as poverty and low-level flying, affect both genders.

I also learned that the principles of feminist methodologies and participatory research are valuable, in that each shares power with the people. In an era in which Aboriginal people are insisting that research be of benefit to them, and in which anthropologists are questioning their role in society, it is alternative research of this sort that holds the key to the future.

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NOTES

1. I use the word 'dispute' rather than 'negotiation' as Aboriginal peoples are forced into settlements for fear of losing all of their land to the government or other interest groups.

2. I use the masculine gender here as anthropologists are more often men. As well I assume that there would be less of an attempt by female anthropologists to maintain objectivity.

3. The Innu call the areas which they hunt and gather in 'the country'. Many people in Sheshatshit spend six months of the year away from the community, out in the country.