

## Indigenous Knowledge and Ethics

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### Abstract

Academics, corporations, and government agencies have begun to take greater interest in conducting Indigenous Knowledge (IK) research in response to environmental issues and failures of “development projects.” Indigenous scholars and communities, however, are concerned about how these research projects may affect their communities and goals towards autonomy. In order to protect their IK and minimize the possibility for misrepresentation and/or misuse, some communities insist on equal control and participation in the entire research project. This article examines the debates surrounding the definition and use of IK. I then explore a research framework based on “relationships” as one possible model that may address indigenous concerns about control, authorship, ownership, and benefits. I discuss two variations of a relationship model: one based on “reciprocity,” the other on “covenants.” I conclude that a *collaborative relationship research model* complements indigenous expectations and conceptions of research and begins to address indigenous concerns.

### Introduction

In both the physical and social sciences, researchers have steadily been moving towards collaborative research projects, which are dependant on the cooperation of indigenous peoples as well as scientists and academics across disciplines. Indigenous knowledge in particular is increasingly viewed as possibly providing alternative sources of knowledge, for medical research and the study of plants and herbs for example, and as providing answers to global concerns, such as environmental issues. Often called upon to act as “cultural brokers” between indigenous and Western worldviews, anthropologists are embroiled in these research projects. They participate as collaborators in larger projects, or they may pursue their own research projects. Given the sense of urgency and the prominence of some of these medical and environmental research projects involving the collection and use of Indigenous

Knowledge, anthropologists should take care to anticipate possible ethical concerns.

If we agree with the American Anthropological Association (1998) and Tri Council (n.d.) guidelines, which state that research should be “subject focused,” concerned with informed consent and participation, reducing harm, and maximizing benefits, and if we agree that research should follow basic principles of human dignity and respect, then we should address the following question:

*In terms of research involving the collection, use, and dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge, is there an ethical collaborative model we can follow that will move towards addressing ethical issues of control, authorship and benefits for the community and/or larger social good?*

The first section of this paper discusses definitions of Indigenous Knowledge and provides some examples of what research projects involving Indigenous Knowledge entail. The second section presents a possible model for collaborative research based on the concept of “relationships.” I consider two variations of a relationship model, one based on “reciprocity” and the other on “covenants.” These two versions are not oppositional; rather, they represent two possible versions of collaborative research along a continuum where the intensity of the “relationship” varies.

## **I. Indigenous Knowledge and Research**

### **What is Indigenous Knowledge?**

Situated within the larger context of the politics of knowledge production and the politics of culture, the term Indigenous Knowledge (hereinafter referred to as IK) eludes definition. Various definitions of IK exist, and there are many debates over what it is, how it should be defined (and *if* it should be defined in Western terms), who should define it, and if it can be ‘categorized’ as a type of science<sup>1</sup>. I will discuss some of these issues surrounding the definition of IK. But first, the following statements present some definitions of IK and TEK (traditional ecological / environmental knowledge), one of the

better-known forms of IK. I will refer to these statements throughout this section.

IK refers to the unique, traditional, local knowledge [which includes] ...all aspects of life, including management of the natural environment ... such knowledge systems are cumulative, representing generations of experience, careful observation, and trial-and-error experiments (Grenier 1998: 1).

Grenier elaborates:

IK is stored in peoples' memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices, equipment, materials, plant species, and animal breeds. IK is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture (Grenier 1998:2).

IK is... a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and local validity (Daes, cited in Battiste and Henderson 2000:41).

The director of the Dene Cultural Institute defines TEK as "...a body of knowledge and beliefs transmitted through oral tradition and first-hand observations." It is a system of classification and self-management based on empirical observation of the environment, but it also involves social and spiritual aspects; it is holistic. "The quantity and quality of TEK varies among community members... TEK is both cumulative and dynamic..." (Emery 1997: 5-6 cited in Battiste and Henderson 2000:44).

The debates over the definition of IK are very similar to the debates in anthropology over the definition of culture. Early conceptions defined culture as a 'thing', which consisted of a set of characteristics that are unchanging and homogeneous (Wright 1998: 9). Indigenous Knowledge is often similarly defined as a 'thing' existing outside of one's being and comprised of certain characteristics, as is evident in some of the quotes above. The first quote by Grenier goes further by including an experiential component and by not separating IK from people, but most

definitions nonetheless tend to privilege a traitbased conception of IK.

Many indigenous scholars tend to refute the idea that IK is an 'object' that may be categorized and defined solely in terms of a set of physical traits. In terms of 'object' versus 'action,' Battiste and Henderson argue that current Western research methodologies are based on "noun-centred language systems" and are ineffective in "verb-centred language systems," like indigenous ones (2000: 39-40). Other scholars echo this critique. For example, McGregor states that Western views of TEK are "noun-" or "product-based," focusing on physical traits (2004: 11). While Aboriginal understandings of TEK encompass physical aspects, McGregor states, "Aboriginal views tend to be broader in scope and more holistic" (2004: 11). She writes: "Aboriginal views of TEK are 'verb-based'; that is, action-oriented. TEK is not limited...to a 'body of knowledge.' It is expressed as a 'way of life'; it is conceived as being something that *you do*" (2004: 11). This way of life includes the material, social, cultural and spiritual. McGregor argues, "TEK is about relationships, not just about *understanding* the relationships in Creation, but about *participating* in those relationships" (2004: 19). Thus, ways of knowing are relational and involve participation (Semali and Kincheloe 1999: 31). These statements represent the tension that exists between understandings of IK as an objective observable thing and IK as relationship, experience and 'praxis'.

This tension between 'object' and 'experience' emulates a larger tension in research between the validity of 'objective' and 'subjective' knowledge. Indigenous Knowledge is frequently contrasted with 'real' or Western science. While IK is often described as subjective, based on observation but relying on experiences and relationships, Western science is described as objective knowledge, based on observable facts and data (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 37). Implicit in this tension are the power relations at play which privilege Western forms of knowledge. Within the hierarchy of knowledge production then, Western science maintains a privileged position as more

legitimate whereas indigenous ‘sciences’ are undervalued: “...the power struggle involves who is allowed to proclaim truth and to establish the procedures by which truth is established; it also involves who holds the power to determine what knowledge is of most worth...” (Semali and Kincheloe 1999: 31).

However, indigenous scholars argue against simply incorporating IK into Western knowledge systems as a way of legitimizing it. For example, in the definitions above, IK is generally defined as a system or body of knowledge<sup>2</sup>. However, critics argue that IK is more than a distinct knowledge system and that this type of definition lends itself to “fitting” IK into other existing academic categories (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 39). In response to these critiques – defining IK as a ‘thing’ separate from ‘living’ and undervaluing IK as a valid source of knowledge – some indigenous scholars suggest the need for a paradigm shift in theory. Furthermore, some scholars suggest that we require a different methodological approach in order to research and understand IK as “relational”: “to learn about Indigenous perspectives requires a different method of research” (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 41). Much of the literature written by indigenous people echoes Battiste and Henderson’s call for indigenous involvement with IK research (see Smith 1999 for example).

Part of this movement towards pro-active indigenous involvement with IK research includes the belief that indigenous people should be able to define IK for themselves, instead of categorizing it using a Western taxonomy. However, defining IK is a complex task. Caught in the politics of culture and knowledge production, some indigenous communities depend on essentialized conceptions of culture and IK to mobilize political issues. Indigenous people attempt to gain public support by drawing on “old” ideas of culture and presenting their lives as essentialized “things” (Wright 1998: 13). The Kayapo, for example, are astute ‘ethnic politicians’ who play the authenticity card well for political purposes (Turner 2002: 1991)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the way Western or indigenous people define and represent

culture and IK have real political (and economic, cultural, etc.) implications.

The movement towards pro-active indigenous involvement also includes incorporating indigenous perspectives in designing IK research projects. Given the position of IK within dominant scientific frameworks, indigenous scholars are concerned that IK will be appropriated, or worse, misappropriated, leading to harmful circumstances for their communities. Such concerns surrounding IK research appear to be the motivating factors that have lead First Nations in Canada, and indigenous communities elsewhere, to formulate their own research guidelines or 'indigenous ethics.' It is important to note that First Nation guidelines (or protocols) are hybrid in that they incorporate Western academic guidelines but emphasize indigenous concerns and perspectives, such as respect and reciprocity<sup>4</sup>.

As this overview demonstrates, defining and researching IK is a complex issue. So what are we left with? Although there is no agreement as to the definition of IK, for the purposes of this paper, IK is some form of knowledge system, which includes interrelated aspects of material, social, cultural and spiritual life (holistic). This "system," however, is experiential (experience based, 'verb'), and understanding IK relationships involves *practising* IK. That is, IK is not separate from the people who live it, and IK involves *relationships*. Furthermore, IK is not uniform: the degree in which individuals or communities understand and engage with IK varies within and between communities. That is, "not everyone who identifies with a particular indigenous culture produces knowledge the same way nor do different indigenous cultures produce the same knowledges" (Semali and Kincheloe 1999: 24). Finally, IK is passed down mainly through symbolic and oral traditions, but also through observation and 'praxis.'

### **Researching Indigenous Knowledge:**

Indigenous knowledge is [thus] at the heart of the global issues of our times. The future of indigenous knowledges will not

simply determine whether the diverse cultures of the world will evolve in freedom or are colonized; it will also determine whether humanity and diverse species survive (Shiva 2000: ix).

### **Why such an interest in IK?**

Interest in IK has increased exponentially in response to environmental issues and in response to failures of “development projects.” IK is seen as containing the solution to development failures (and subsequent cultural and environmental consequences) and providing a framework for more “sustainable” development. Sustainable development presumably is different from regular development projects in that it involves local participation, looks at culturally appropriate programs, provides long-term solutions, and seeks to identify practices for adaptation and improvement (Grenier 1998: 8). In addition, fear of the loss of cultural and biodiversity calls for a different research strategy, one that draws on “alternative” worldviews or epistemologies. Consequently, “industrialized societies are *demanding* that Indigenous peoples share their knowledge...” (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 11, emphasis added).

However, conducting research aimed at addressing sustainable development and maintaining biodiversity is not so straightforward. For example, while biodiversity conservation attempts involve sustaining local communities, it also “involves commercial interests, which make their profits harvesting this planet’s biodiversity and feeding that harvest into industrial systems of production” (Shiva 2000: ix). IK is also seen as a source of new ideas for resource management of minerals, timber, or wildlife for example, and as a source of new products, such as dyes, foods or medicines (Dei et al. 2000: 11). Furthermore, exploitation of tropical species has economic value (Dei et al. 2000: 11). Thus, we should remember that, first, IK research spans across academic, corporate and government sectors, and second, IK research involves competing interests.

### **What type of research involves IK?**

As stated above, agricultural, medical, environmental related fields, and the social sciences more generally, are just some areas conducting research that involves the collection and use of IK (Shiva 2000: vii-viii). Wildlife inventories, pharmaceutical research, disease research, and the four fields of anthropology all potentially draw on IK. Furthermore, different organizations, such as environmental groups, corporations, First Nation tribal councils, and courts of law, may draw on this research for their own purposes. Thus, the spectrum of research involving IK is diverse and the implications for indigenous communities vary. The following examples describe just a few types of research involving IK and raise some questions we should consider in terms of ethical concerns in IK research.

Some research in Canada seeks to find ways to manage the environment and implement development projects. For example, IK is used to provide baseline data for environmental impact assessments (Grenier 1998: 8). Inuit hunters provide IK on wildlife in the Arctic, including population and migration patterns. (Grenier 1998: 8). This IK is then used to complete wildlife inventories, which are used to assess and predict potential impacts of development (Grenier 1998: 8). To what extent will this research address local concerns? What constraints may be imposed on Inuit communities as a result of the interpretation of IK data from this research? Are we ethically obligated to be concerned about what happens in communities after the publication of data?

Martindale correlates oral tradition with archaeological data to provide evidence for the development of a Tshimshian paramount chiefdom in the post-contact era (n.d.: 9). In his paper, he discusses the complex "levels of information" found in oral tradition (one form of IK), ranging from more "objective information," like information of the natural world and material things, to more "subjective information," like relationships between people, symbolic meanings and ideologies (n.d.: 7-8). He acknowledges that 'outsiders' may not be able to access all levels of knowledge but encourages researchers to consider the



value of oral tradition information, whether limited or expansive (n.d.: 17,1920). What 'extra' information about territorial ownership, privileges and obligations may be revealed from the collection of IK for this research? What is the significance of this data within the community and within the larger sociopolitical context? In other words, what might be some consequences of the collection and publication of IK in terms of relationships within and between communities and in terms of their political struggles on land claims?

The pharmaceutical industry invests large amounts of money on 'folk medicine' research, that is, for researching IK on plant varieties and properties. Shiva points out that "indigenous systems of medicine and the properties of medicinal plants were totally neglected in Western scientific research and health policy..." in the past (2000: viii). But now, "...Western commercial interests claim products and innovations derived from indigenous traditions as their 'intellectual property' (through protections such as patents)...because indigenous knowledge systems have been devalued and (it follows) have not been afforded protection" (Shiva 2000: ix). Will indigenous communities benefit directly from this research? Will they have access to the products? Will their contributions be recognized? How can indigenous communities be compensated for their IK?

These examples demonstrate the range of interests and research projects utilizing IK. The questions I have posed are meant to draw attention to anthropologists' need to consider some of the possible implications of IK research. I suggest that anthropologists should attempt to anticipate possible problems and concerns with IK research, particularly ethical issues of concern to indigenous communities.

### **Why should we be concerned about research projects using IK?**

I suggest that all researchers should try to anticipate possible ethical concerns and research tensions or conflicts. Certain issues, such as "biopiracy," "intellectual piracy" and intellectual property rights (IPR), harm benefits to locals, and

indigenous (cultural and physical) survival, have received much attention from both researchers and indigenous people. Thus aware of these ongoing debates, anthropologists should consider whether or not these issues may be a factor in our own research. Because our ethical guidelines (AAA 1998; Tri-Council n.d.) suggest that anthropologists be subject focused and follow basic ethical principles, we should attempt to address these ethical concerns. Even if one disagrees with the usefulness of these guidelines, arguing that each research project varies with the local context, this should not dissuade us from addressing local concerns, such as those discussed below. That is, I am suggesting that a 'guidelines and basic ethical principles' approach should be applied in conjunction with a 'contextual and situational' approach to ethics.

Indigenous people are concerned with protecting IK. In terms of intellectual property, First Nations argue that indiscriminate use and manipulation of IK, such as oral histories, can be harmful and may have unforeseen implications on political claims and self-determination, for example. In general, indigenous people have issues with research that consists of a 'go in there and get the information and do what we will with it' kind of approach. Indeed, a Native participant of a conference on Northern health "...emphasized that the biomedical notion of research contracts between mutually trusting and mutually benefiting co-participants were difficult to sustain "when researchers parachuted into a community, collected their data and flew out". (Kaufert 2001: 57). Hence, one concern is that data collected in this manner, where researchers quickly come and go and First Nation communities have little control over what is collected and used, may negatively affect First Nation communities through misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or misuse.

Indigenous scholars argue that this type of approach is "extractive" instead of "enriching." One example of extractive research includes the collection of biological information for pharmaceuticals (Shiva 2000; IPCB 2000). While certainly not arguing against research that seeks to alleviate human suffering,

First Nations argue that this type of research is “extractive” because it does not benefit the community (immediately, and perhaps never), they are not sufficiently compensated (what about product royalties?), or they are not full participants in the research decision making process (was not another researcher just here doing the same thing?). Even though some IK research projects involve local participation, the research ‘solutions’ often address larger social issues rather than providing specific local solutions. Thus, a tension exists between societal and local benefits. Therefore, the view that research should have ‘immediate benefits’ for the community is another concern for First Nations<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, many First Nations are concerned with the commodification of IK; this includes the commodification of both intellectual (the knowledge) and material (the plants or DNA, etc.) property (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 132). For example, TEK is used to enhance resource usage, such as marine resources. A better understanding of salmon runs in British Columbia may help fisheries in their commercial goals, but how will the use of this TEK affect indigenous communities? Battiste and Henderson argue that this rush for IK by outsiders is in fact an effort to access and control resources (2000: 12). Again, one concern is that in many cases, the benefits of the research do not go back to indigenous communities, particularly the economic benefits of the use of biological resources (Battiste and Henderson 2000:12). Another concern is that the commodification of IK to “better society” may inadvertently affect indigenous communities negatively.

Some indigenous scholars argue that the ‘sciences’ attempt to fit select pieces of IK into Western categories and frameworks. They maintain that this continues to privilege Western values and methods while maintaining power imbalances when the goal should be towards decolonisation and reciprocity. For example, Battiste opines: “The Eurocentric strategy of universal definitions and absolute knowledge has made its scholarship unable to know and respect Indigenous knowledge and heritage. To attempt to evaluate Indigenous

worldviews in absolute and universal terms is irrational” (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 38). While she acknowledges that no world-view is “better” or more “complete” than the other, she states the opinion that “Eurocentric contexts cannot do justice to the exteriority of Indigenous knowledge” (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 38). This view that IK should remain separate, held by many indigenous people, reflects the desire for control of local understandings and frameworks. As a response, it appears that indigenous communities are suggesting that researchers should consider using *indigenous* frameworks and guidelines for *indigenous* research (Kahniakchak Nation 1996). Battiste and Henderson argue that the reclaiming of IK under their own terms, perspectives, and strategies is part of the decolonising process, and hence necessary (2000: 13).

### **Decolonising Research Methodologies**

Many indigenous scholars suggest that attaining “ethical” research requires a different methodology. I borrow the phrase “decolonising methodologies” from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori scholar, who describes the task of decolonisation as such:

Decolonisation is about centring our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes (Smith 1999: 39).

Thus, it needs to be stated that indigenous people’s request for a more “ethical” (read indigenous) approach to IK research is part of a larger political and social movement towards decolonisation and self-determination. Research that may hamper these goals of self-determination and decolonisation is viewed as “unethical” and a means of maintaining hierarchal power relations. Indeed, some scholars argue that IK has “transformative power” and may be “used to foster empowerment and justice in a variety of cultural contexts” (Semali et al. 1999:15).

This call for “ethical/indigenous” research involving IK is historically situated within the context of past colonial relationships. During colonialism, both material and intellectual forms of IK were appropriated, and First Nations people were gazed upon as objects of study. Moreover, information collected from Aboriginal communities was ethnocentric (or “Eurocentric”) and often resulted in harm and disruption for communities. Consequently, IK has been under assault in residential schools, in their community life and social relations, and in political forums (Castellano 2000: 25). Shiva opines: “Indigenous knowledges have been systematically usurped and then destroyed...” (2000: vii). Decolonisation, therefore, means restoring IK to its place in indigenous communities and subsequently restoring its presence in the larger community. It means reversing the gaze. As the Curaçao case study discussed in the next section demonstrates, collaborative research “turn[s] the critical gaze fully on the research enterprise and ask[s] what it is, what it is good for, and why researchers do it” (King et al, 1999b: 219). I suggest that a collaborative research model which works towards establishing “relationships” based on the concept of “reciprocity” and/or “covenant” may provide a framework for addressing some of the main concerns for First Nation communities - issues of control, trust, equality, harms-benefits, and collaboration.

## **II. Moving Toward Collaborative Research**

Participant observation as *the* method for anthropological research has developed over the years from the time of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard towards a more collaborative approach<sup>6</sup>. While early participant observation methods sought to establish rapport with participants and observe and learn about tacit knowledge, anthropologists were not obligated to (or even felt the need to) consult informants about their interpretations. However, the anthropologists’ authority as observer and ‘expert’ was seriously challenged from within the discipline in the 1980s; the “crisis of representation” challenged anthropologists’ interpretive and writing authority. Clifford

argues that the anthropologist's account is only a "partial truth"; it is only one voice and perspective (Clifford 1986: 2). Moreover, the resulting "texts" veil the discursive nature of the field, that is, the negotiations that occur between the ethnographer and informants. A call to recognize the multiple voices and perspectives led to a movement towards "reflexivity." Building on the post-modern movement towards the acknowledgement of multiple voices, reflexivity, and conflicts, I suggest that we extend reflexivity and authority beyond text, into the entire research process.

Following King et al, (1999b), I suggest that the guiding principle for collaborative research should be the concept of "relationships." I do not agree that this paradigm should necessarily *replace* a "principles-guidelines" approach, as they suggest (King et al, 1999b). Rather, relationship and principle-based paradigms may coexist, each acting as a check and balance for the other. I suggest that anthropologists should *begin* with a collaborative research model framed in terms of relationships; this will allow us to address contextual and situational issues and concerns as they arise. However, basic ethical principles (guidelines from within our discipline and from the communities) should also be considered and applied within these contexts. Applying basic ethical principles is different than applying "absolute" ethical principles (Macklin 1999: 31-2). In short, I suggest that ethical research requires flexibility, dialogue, and the oscillation between the two approaches or paradigms, relationships and principles-guidelines. A *collaborative relationships research model* may provide a way in which anthropologists may balance their ethical obligations to the discipline and to the participants.

A collaborative relationships research model may begin to address some of the concerns indigenous people have in terms of IK research. Collaborative research to me suggests an *ongoing or continuous relationship* that involves reciprocity that is *equal*. Thus, I suggest that collaborative research should include these central features: commitment, respect, reciprocity, and relationships. While collaborative research implies cooperation

between researchers and research communities/individuals, collaborative research projects are not uniform. In other words, the degree of collaboration and participation varies in terms of participants' control of research questions, processes, authorship, and dissemination of results. In some cases, the term consultation seems more appropriate than collaboration. In other cases, communities possess control over many aspects of the research process, as in the covenant model discussed below. Ideally, collaborative research should be a "reciprocal," two way process, involving mutual trust, commitment, and negotiation (give and take) from all participants. In the next section, I explore the usefulness of collaborative research founded centred on the notion of "relationships." Specifically, I examine "reciprocal" and "covenant" versions of a collaborative research model based on "relationships."

### **Relationships**

King et al, propose that social scientists employ a "relationships model" that acknowledges multiple relationships (individual and community), is contextualized, focuses on narrative, crosscuts issues, emphasizes continuity (of relationships and issues before and after research), and recognizes that relationships change (or may be negotiated) over time (1999a: 35). This model is useful because IK research also often involves multiple relationships between First Nation communities, scholars, corporations and government or non-government organizations, for example. Moreover, research with First Nations often involves both community and individual participation. The notion of continuity also corresponds with indigenous people's call for research based on notions of reciprocity. I explore how a model that sees "research as a series of relationships" (King et al, 1999a: 1), offers flexibility, addresses the complexity of the IK research endeavour, and begins to tackle some indigenous concerns about the research process, such as control (which leads to empowerment), authority, authorship, representation, and research consequences (harms-benefits). Anthropologists may employ the relationships

model to different extents, from reciprocity to covenants. I will now examine these two in more detail.

### “Reciprocal Ethnography”

In response to the “crisis of representation,” some scholars argue that we should go beyond representations of multivocality and dialogue. Lassiter suggests that collaboration should be extended to “collaborative reading and interpretation (between the ethnographer and his or her “informants”) of the very ethnographic text itself” (2001: 137). In other words, researchers should expand the dialogue, incorporating it throughout the entire research process. This means establishing an ongoing relationship through continuous dialogue and exchange. To this end, Lawless suggests we engage in “reciprocal ethnography,” a methodology, which involves “collective interpretation”, combined with concepts from “folk hermeneutics” (1992: 311). Following Titon’s call for a “dialogical method of interpretation,” Lawless argues that we should extend “dialogue past the scholars interpretations, back to the people involved, and into the published work so that a dialogue is actually possible with the reading audience” (1992: 306). Engaging in reciprocal ethnography of this sort means “...our interpretations are *not* the ‘last word,’ that our interpretations are not necessarily the right or the insightful ones” (Lawless 1992: 310). It also involves presenting *all* our ideas, interpretations, and conclusions to the research participants for critique and comments, and the researcher must “adjust her lens and determine why the interpretations are so different and in what ways they are and are not compatible” (Lawless 1992: 305, 310). Instead of solely attempting to include the ‘Native voice’ and perspectives, we should also offer the ‘Native’ the opportunity to comment on and even reinterpret our interpretations and conclusions. This means that no one gets the “last word,” but it does not mean that anthropologists need to discredit their own interpretations. Lawless describes her view of the process:



I allow her to respond to my interpretations with her own, and that I insist on the credibility of my interpretations even when they are different from hers. The point is that both should be presented, and that the dialogue between us should be part of the whole picture. No one gets 'the last word'; we merely share the opportunity to speak directly to the reader (1992: 313).

What I find useful about this stance on reciprocal ethnography is the idea that interpretations should be discussed and reviewed throughout the *entire* research process, not just at the end when the text is already written. While Lawless' concept of reciprocity here deals specifically with processes of ethnographic writing and interpretation, I suggest that this concept may be applied more generally to the entire collaborative research process. Collaborative research based on reciprocity emphasizes a twoway exchange process and consists of ongoing relationships and constant negotiations. This type of collaborative approach "demands the unmasking of the negotiation of moral responsibility, commitment, and friendship in the ethnographic process" (Lassiter 2001: 144). Thus, the negotiation of relationships, interests, interpretations, data, priorities, etc. occurs (or should occur) throughout the entire research process.

In my own research (Scarangella 2002) with Salish community members who worked at a tourist site called *Hiwus Feasthouse* in North Vancouver, I attempted to involve them in the interpretation in two ways: first, by allowing interviews to be guided by the Salish community members themselves, and second by negotiating my role with their role as interpreters of the text. I asked myself, what is my role in this processes? How could "outsider" and "insider" positions be negotiated? Outsider and insider perspectives were not as distinct as they seemed to be at first. Rosaldo's (1989) discussion on narratives and "relational knowledge" offered me some useful guidelines in dealing with this notion of emic and etic perceptions. He defines

relational knowledge as a situation where “both parties actively engage in the interpretation of culture”; both parties (the researcher and the participant) participate as both analyst and “subject” (1989:206).

This exchanging of roles, positioning, and perspectives occurred in a number of ways during the research process at *Hiwus*. After attending a few performances, I established a rapport with certain people who were there most often; these consultants became my teachers. Because scheduling varied, I took the opportunity to ask questions whilst conversing in a more informal manner. Most often, I asked questions before performances, during “warm ups,” and after performances. Several times, I arranged more formal meetings at Grouse Mountain before performances to have a chance to talk more one on one. Most times, these meetings were semistructured interviews, but free flowing conversations usually followed. Moreover, I never knew who would be performing there, until I got there. This unpredictability affected my methods. “Planned” interviews and intended questions were often diverted. In most cases my teachers advanced conversations and “interviewing”, instead of by me. Yet the benefit in allowing conversations to develop freely instead of arranging more structured interviews is that the Salish employees were able to guide the subject matter for discussion. That is, these community members expressed and shared what *they* felt was important and prudent about *Hiwus*. As such, I think that this project benefited in that Salish interests and perspectives guided the research.

I did not really begin any interpretation of the material until I started on a draft of my thesis. I gave copies of it to several of my teachers for feedback. Some did not have any feedback; others were more readily available and provided significant feedback. For example, Kwel-a-a-nexw and I arranged a meeting and reviewed the entire thesis together. He provided feedback, suggestions, and corrections on my interpretations. I appreciated this opportunity for further knowledge exchange, and I found the experience to be very valuable. In my final version, I acknowledged his comments and

I included all of his suggestions in some form, whether we agreed or not.

So what are the implications of reciprocal ethnography? How does it address First Nation concerns about control and authority? In terms of authorship, Lassiter suggests that we share our interpretations and texts (not only verify informant quotes and contributions) as early as possible in the process rather than at the end and then hope for the best (2001: 141). From a First Nations perspective, this would be an ideal research relationship based on reciprocity and respect and possibly lessen the possibility of misrepresentation.

However, a research model based on reciprocal ethnography is not without limitations. How would this process of exchange, interpretation, reinterpretation, and even re-interpretation play out in practice? How can these exchanges be presented? Lassiter is correct when she states, "the norms for ethnographic writing have remained individualistic; and norms for collaborative writing are less well articulated or recognized" (Fischer and Marcus 1999: xvii in Lassiter 2001: 145). Consequently, participants' input received as the project nears a close often has little impact in the revision phase; rather, it becomes an epilogue or postscript (Lassiter 2001: 141). Besides ethnographic writing norms constricting us, reciprocal ethnography also involves a greater time commitment, one that graduate programs or research projects, limited by time and funds, are not often able to accommodate.

Nonetheless, "reciprocity" as a research model has value because it involves the sharing of control, authority, and results:

Sharing authority and visions means inviting consultants to shape form, text, and intended audiences. It also means directing the collaborative work toward multiple ends, ends that speak to different needs and different constituencies, ends that might be so differently defined as to have never even considered by one or more of the collaborating parties (Hinson 1999 cited in Lassiter 2001: 144).

Including participant responses to interpretations, as suggested by Lawless, Hinson and Lassiter, may be complicated. However, I argue that pursuing “reciprocal ethnography,” which allows the opportunity for “collective interpretation,” is worthwhile because it may lead to more nuanced and complex ethnographies. Hinson favours the term “collaborative” over “reciprocal,” arguing that reciprocity entails an exchange but does not imply an ongoing discussion whereas collaboration “implies constant mutual engagement at every step of the process” (in Lassiter 2001: 146, n.4). Conversely, I prefer the term reciprocity because it signals a process of exchange *and* corresponds with indigenous epistemologies on relationships. Hinson assumes that reciprocity (exchange) is finite. However, indigenous conceptions of reciprocity entail an exchange (among humans, spirits, animals, for example), which is not only continuous, but also involves the establishment of *obligation and responsibility* in an ongoing, respectful relationship. Another reason I prefer the term is because First Nations are establishing their own protocols and guidelines for collaborative research based on the above notions of respect and reciprocity<sup>7</sup>.

### “Covenants”

The idea that collaborative research involves establishing a set of obligations between participants also resonates in May’s (1980) discussion on “covenantal ethics.”<sup>8</sup> He states, “a covenant is an exchange of promises, an agreement that shapes the future between two parties” and “...becomes the basis for future exchanges as the covenantal relationship grows” (May 1980: 367). Unlike Kantian or utilitarian ethics, however, which speak of “general obligations,” covenantal ethics “account [for] those special obligations that arise on the context of extended exchanges between people” (May 1980: 367). Therefore, May’s description of covenants is similar to indigenous understandings of reciprocity. However, the balance of control, power, and authority in collaborative research based on covenants varies. At one end of the spectrum, the case in

Curaçao demonstrates how research communities attempt to reverse the nexus of control.

Benjamin entered into a covenant with a Jewish congregation in Curaçao called the United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel Emanuel (who established a Review Committee of The Congregation). Concerned with their reputation and the potential harm resulting from misrepresentation, the Congregation stipulated that Benjamin send all his interpretations, conclusions, drafts, articles, etc. to the Committee for revisions and final approval (Benjamin 1999: 50). Nothing gets published, not even his PhD, without the Committee's approval. The contract went as far as to set a fine at \$2800 per day from publication for not receiving approval (Benjamin 1999: 50). Benjamin agreed to the covenant, stating that the Congregation had the right to "...protect themselves from harm than I might not foresee resulting from my publication about them" (1999: 55).

This covenant creates a research context that binds all research participants to a set of obligations and expectations. Benjamin argues that it establishes "an ongoing moral relationship that includes mutual responsibility"; furthermore, "[a]fter the contract was signed our covenant grew stronger" (Benjamin 1999:57). Thus, research based on the notion of relationships does leave a space for negotiation because relationships may change and grow throughout the research process. The core of a covenant is based on the establishment of mutual trust. Estroff points out that researchers expect participants to trust them, but we do not place trust in them (1999: 76). In terms of this case, she asks why "we assume that the congregation will unfairly restrict Benjamin's academic freedom, but that scholars such as Benjamin and I can be trusted to first know and then protect the sensibilities of the congregation" (Estroff 1999: 76).

This case study addresses issues of power and control, trust, and commitment in the research process. Benjamin states:

In our developing 'covenant,' I committed myself to sensitive and respectful conduct; the board

committed itself to cooperative conduct. In a process at times adversarial, we learned something of each other's expectations and anxieties... (Benjamin 1999: 55).

While not without difficulties, this more formalized relationship is an attempt by the Congregation to balance research power relations and protect the community. That is, this covenant inverts the hierarchy of power and control.

This case also highlights another issue, the fact that research data and relationships continue past the specific project and potentially go beyond the immediate community. To address this concern, the Congregation thus "requested a more *formal* means of addressing their concerns, recognizing that [my] published representations would *exist outside the sphere of our everyday social relations...*" (Benjamin 1999: 57, emphasis added). I would argue that this issue does not receive enough attention in ethical guidelines. While current scholarly guidelines recommend disclosure, they do extend this past the primary research context; the guidelines do not give a sense of the true longevity and manipulative-ability of data.

Covenants, as one possible version of a collaborative research model based on the notion of relationships, have both positive aspects and limitations. Some may argue that this particular case illustrates an extreme relationship, bordering on absolute censorship. Does this type of relationship stifle "academic freedom" and compromise "the integrity of scientific research"? Those who maintain the view that covenants inevitably lead to compromising scientific integrity "fail to consider the ways in which all research is 'compromised'" to some extent (Benjamin 1999: 60). That is, research is not 'objective' or 'disinterested.' As I stated previously, this covenant appears to invert the hierarchy of power and control and therefore may be seen as a move towards "decolonising methodologies." We should ask, is this position any different than the position normally held by researchers and academics? While the research process appears to be constricted and

controlled by the Congregation, it actually involves a shift in control more towards the *centre*: “The contract I signed constructs a relationship in which power over published material is more easily contested than in other research-subject relationships, because the relationship is more *equal*” (Benjamin 1999: 56).

Just what information should/should not be included in publication? This decision is often made in *consultation* with participants in order to determine if the publication of data may inadvertently harm research participants. Consultation, however, is different than full collaboration. Some scholars argue that leaving the decision of what may be published up to participants is a form of censorship. Yet, eliminating negative aspects “...run[s] the risk of producing diminished, analytically atrophied, and thus misleading ethnography” (Dyck 1993: 197). In other words, it may be argued that conflict, problems, and negative aspects of the community should be presented (particularly if it addresses larger social issues and increases knowledge) because it represents a more complete and ‘accurate’ picture. For example, Scheper-Hughes justifies the fact that her publication angered and offended the community, arguing that as long as the research “resonates” with the community and “satisfies some higher good, for example, that people will gain new insights and that unacknowledged problems will be discussed” (cited in Benjamin 1999: 59). Indigenous communities, on the other hand, are worried that presenting unpleasant and negative aspects about their community will only continue to support “negative public identity” based on stereotypes (Dyck 1993: 195). When addressing this debate, therefore, researchers should consider the desires and priorities of the community and attempt to balance them with the presentation of communities in all their complexity and diversity.

This goal may prove difficult, as researchers’ interests, goals, authorship, and authority have historically been privileged over the community’s. Benjamin points out that researchers have been the “primary arbiters of ethical correctness” when it comes to final publication and assessing the effects of those

publications on the community (1999: 58). In terms of the Congregation in Curaçao, then, Benjamin writes:

They *do* want the power to reject material they find unacceptable. Members of the board are saying, in effect, we do not appreciate being used for your cultural critique if it ignores *our* sensibilities (1999: 60).

Although I myself would enter cautiously into such a covenant, an example of a covenant relationship taken to this extent provides us with much to consider in terms of ethical research and of collaboration.

While many arguments for the limitations of covenants exist, as discussed above, there are positive features as well. Covenantal and reciprocal research models may lead to more meaningful research results because, first, they entail intense, ongoing relationships, and second, they provide the opportunity for “collective interpretation.” Furthermore, the results may be more meaningful in that they will necessarily include participant perspectives and input and that they are presumably of interest to the community as well. Thus, another positive feature is that a relationship research model moves towards meeting both the researcher’s and the community’s interests and may lead to more complex, meaningful results.

Furthermore, this type of relationship may help researchers make difficult ethical decisions. A researcher unsure about what to publish, what the implications may be, what the community wants, needs only to draw on their relationship with the participants to find out. This does not mean that there will automatically be answers and consensus. Rather, a relationship research model provides a framework in which concerns, conflicts, and disagreements may be discussed and where consensus may (in theory) eventually be reached. Moreover, covenantal and reciprocal research relationships potentially address ethical concerns of the community because they necessitate a sharing of *equal* authority, responsibility and control.



In my opinion, reciprocal and covenantal research versions of the “collaborative relationship model” are very similar. Both are based on the notion that research should involve establishing equal, ongoing relationships, which include a set of obligations and responsibility. Both are based on exchange and entail sharing power, control, and authority, while respecting all participants and building mutual trust. The covenant case study in Curaçao is useful because of its very (perceived?) extremeness. It highlights how the *community* perceives the research process and how the community, given the opportunity, may define a collaborative research relationship. Possible issues for contention - control, power, reducing community harms, research interests, and balancing community needs for respectful representation with researcher goals of contributing to the knowledge base and the greater societal good – are at the forefront in this example. Some scholars may maintain the view that the Congregation covenant crosses the line. Yet this is the very reason why we should discuss and experiment with such a model. The model challenges the status quo of existing collaborative research models and serves to question what collaboration really means.

### Conclusions

This paper began by questioning whether an ethical collaborative model, one that addresses indigenous concerns, for researching IK exists. I argue that anthropologists should seriously consider indigenous concerns, given the scope and prominence of IK research. IK itself is a complex concept. Defining it, researching it, and writing about it, is not without complications. “Westerners” and indigenous people understand IK in different ways, and this is a point of contention when it comes to conducting research involving IK. Some scholars (Battiste and Henderson 2000, Grenier 1998, McGregor n.d., Semali and Kincheloe 1999) suggest that IK is a way of knowing and living; it is about relationships, experience, and action. These scholars argue that to research IK, therefore, one must not only understand IK from this indigenous perspective, but also

participate in IK. This has implications in terms of research, since research projects with indigenous communities in the past have privileged Western knowledge systems and research methodologies. The suggestion, then, is to use a different method. Given that IK depends on relationships and participation, a research model similarly focused on such concepts may provide a possible framework. In view of this statement, I then discuss a collaborative research model based on the concept of “relationships” as a possibility.

The “relationships model” is a collaborative research model based on ongoing, equal relationships between researchers and indigenous communities/individuals. This relationship model involves mutual trust, commitment, and respect. The terms “reciprocity” and “covenant” convey the essence of this type of relationship. I discuss how research based on reciprocity imbues active engagement between the researcher and participants. This leads to not only collaborative researching (collecting data, etc.) but also “collaborative interpretation.” This is certainly one of the advantages of a reciprocity approach, given indigenous concerns about the misrepresentation of IK, which may negatively affect indigenous communities directly or indirectly in their political goals, for example. Most importantly, reciprocity engenders a two-way relationship based on obligation and responsibility.

The covenant approach likewise conveys the view that collaborative research should establish a set of obligations. It is similarly based on mutual responsibility and consists of *evolving* relationships. Local research interests and concerns are just as important as those of the researcher. Moreover, this type of relationship considers “local sensibilities” and perspectives. While perhaps a bit extreme, the Curaçao case study directs us to local concerns, issues, and priorities. Notably, the case study challenges anthropologists to consider to what extent we are willing to share control, authority, and authorship in research and to consider what collaboration really means in practice.

Should anthropologist move towards using a relationship model? Are “subject centred” research guidelines

that incorporate indigenous epistemologies and community interests feasible? I believe that I have made a case for the appropriateness of a relationships model for conducting IK. This model begins to address indigenous concerns for protecting IK and limiting the (mis)manipulation of IK data. Because indigenous people would be active partners in a collaborative relationship model, they can ensure their goals and priorities are met, and that the research is “enriching” instead of “extractive.” Also, IK research based on notions of reciprocity and covenants would be more in line with indigenous epistemologies and indigenous understandings of IK itself. Therefore, it appears that a “collaborative relationship model” not only incorporates indigenous perspectives and epistemologies, it also addresses many of the concerns and problems surrounding IK research.

A relationship model may begin to address local concerns and correspond with First Nation guidelines and protocols. In other words, collaborative models based on relationships, reciprocity or covenants move towards a more “indigenous ethics” research model in that they address indigenous concerns about control, authorship, ownership, and benefits. Finally, the relationship model appears to be in line with First Nations’ desire to decolonise research methods and to decolonise themselves as they move towards self-determination and empowerment.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Die et al. (2000), Semali and Kincheloe (1999), and Battiste and Henderson (2000) for a more in depth discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the definition of TEK (third statement) adopted by the Dene Cultural institute comes from Martha Johnson's 1992 description, which McGregor considers to be a *Western* perspective that defines TEK as a "body of knowledge...separate from the people who hold it" (McGregor n.d.: 8, 9).

<sup>3</sup> See Turner (2002, 1991) for a discussion on the politics of culture and the Kayapo.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of hybrid guidelines and guidelines done in collaboration include ACUNS 1997 and the *Mi'kmaq Research Principles and Protocols* (n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> This concern may be seen in some of the First Nation (and collaborative) guidelines and protocols. It may include economic benefits, training, or employment opportunities, for example. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP 1993) calls for capacity building, and the *Akwesasne Good Mind Research Protocol*, for instance, states that research should benefit the community and “empower[s] those involved through education, training, and/or authorship...” (Kahniahaka Nation 1996: 96). Other guidelines are more general. For example, the guidelines from the University of Victoria state, “indigenous people have the right to participate in and enjoy the benefits that might result from research...” and that “research should empower the community involved...” (2003: 4).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the ethical concerns in participant observation research, see Fleuhr Lobban (1998).

<sup>7</sup> See the *Akwesasne Good Mind Research Protocol* from the Kahniahaka Nation (1996) for an example of how indigenous concepts and epistemology are incorporated in research guidelines and protocols.

<sup>8</sup> In section A.5, the AAA (1998) also uses the term ‘covenant’ to refer to research relationships in terms of consent (section A.5)