

## Pursuing Mutually Beneficial Research: Insights from the Poverty Action Research Project

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**ABSTRACT** Research with, in, and for First Nations communities is often carried out in a complex environment. Now in its fourth year, the Poverty Action Research Project (PARP) has learned first-hand the nature of some of these complexities and how to approach and work through various situations honouring the Indigenous research principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). By sharing stories from the field, this article explores the overarching theme of how the worlds of academe and First Nations communities differ, affecting the research project in terms of pace, pressures, capacity, and information technology. How PARP research teams have worked with these challenges, acknowledging the resilience and dedication of the First Nations that are a part of the project, provides insights for future researchers seeking to engage in work with Indigenous communities.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous research; decolonization; action research; community-based participatory research

### Introductory Note: Inclusion of First Nations as Authors

In the spirit of Indigenous research and of the project about which this article is written, the principal author and research teams wish to acknowledge the participation and co-authorship of the five First Nation communities in the preparation of this article. Without the First Nations' collaboration and consent, this essay would not be possible. Breaking from conventions of academic authorship and introducing how the practice of mutually beneficial Indigenous research extends to publications, the five First Nations are acknowledged as equal partners in the preparation and content of this article.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Precedence for the practice of listing First Nations as authors may be found in *Pimatisiwin, a Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* (Lonczak, Thomas, Donovan, Robin, Sigo, Lawrence, Suquamish Tribe, 2013) and *Health Promotion Practice* (Smylie, Kaplan-Myrth, McShane, Métis Nation of Ontario-Ottawa Council, Pikwakanagan First Nation, Tungasuvvingat Inuit Family Resource Centre, 2009).

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, the research environment involving Indigenous<sup>2</sup> communities has changed from *research on* to *research with*. Building upon the research approach of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council formally recognized this change in 2015 with the release of a set of principles to be used in undertaking Aboriginal research. These principles have been applied in many ways. The Poverty Action Research Project (PARP) does so in its pursuit of mutually beneficial research. Research that is mutually beneficial for both Indigenous peoples and researchers adheres to relationship-based principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). While Kirkness & Barnhardt (2001) discuss these principles in the context of post-secondary education and First Nations students, they are equally applicable to and echo other authors' calls for respectful and relational Indigenous research (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Weir & Wuttunee, 2004; Wilson, 2008; Wilson & Restoule, 2010).

Research with, in, and for First Nations communities is often carried out in complex cultural and political environments. Now in its final year, PARP researchers have learned first-hand the nature of these complexities and how to work through various situations while honouring principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). By sharing stories from the field, this article explores how the worlds of academe and First Nations communities differ, affecting the project in terms of process, pace, pressures, capacity, expected outputs, and information technology. How PARP research teams have worked with these challenges, acknowledging the resilience and dedication of First Nations partners, provides insights for future researchers seeking to engage with First Nations communities.

Beginning in 2011, PARP was first conceptualized through a joint partnership between the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and university researchers from across North America. The five-year research project is funded through a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute on Population and Public Health, and Institute of Aboriginal Peoples Health. The overall aim of PARP has been to work with First Nations communities to develop and begin implementing a long-term strategy to reduce poverty, create a sustainable economic base, and provide the foundation for community health and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset, 61 First Nations (FN) communities across Canada expressed interest in participating in the project. Five volunteer communities were selected to reflect the diversity of First Nations across the country. These five communities are Sipekne'katik (Shubenacadie) in Nova Scotia, Opitciwan in Quebec, Eabametoong in northern Ontario, Misipawistik Cree

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, the term "Indigenous" is used in general, collective references to Peoples who are the original peoples of their lands. The term "Aboriginal" is used when it appears in a specific organization's name, a publication or website. The term "First Nations" is used to distinguish persons who may previously have been referred to as "North American Indian" and are distinct from other Aboriginal groups such as Métis and Inuit, as articulated in the *Indian Act*. "First Nations" also refers to the communities who are a part of the PARP project.

<sup>3</sup> See the Research Proposal Summary "A Poverty Reduction Approach to Improving the Health and Well-Being of First Nations Communities."

at Grand Rapids, Manitoba, and T'it'q'et at Lillooet in British Columbia.

The PARP process is grounded in core principles of community-based participatory action research (CBPR) and, as such, focuses on taking actions by and for the benefit of the people involved (Sagor, 2000). While conventional research tools, such as questionnaires and focus group discussions may be part of a community's process, a main emphasis of this project is the mutual benefit of the research for the community as well as for the academy. As it has been applied in this project, CBPR is distinguished as community-driven and action-oriented rather than researcher-driven and study-oriented. Stiegman and Castleden (2015) note:

A central goal of CBPR involving Indigenous peoples . . . is to radically shift, if not invert, the balance of power between the academy and Indigenous research partners – and to meaningfully acknowledge Indigenous partners as *nations*, not stakeholder groups – with jurisdiction over research in their communities and on their traditional territories (p. 4-5).

Stiegman and Castleden (2015) concur with PARP's approach that “acknowledging the jurisdiction of the nation in question and deferring to their authority” (p. 5) is paramount, since research is being conducted “with their people on their territory” (p. 5). PARP's initial research approach and objectives called for designing and implementing a strategic plan with each First Nation, which could be used to help create a sustainable economic base toward reducing poverty and improving community health and well-being. However, the distinct realities of each First Nation have influenced the nature of the project. Each First Nation has taken a leadership role in directing PARP's work, which in some cases has digressed from its economic development focus. While the five research teams have had different experiences, common themes have emerged that provide an opportunity for others interested in engaging with Indigenous communities to learn from PARP's process as it continues to unfold.<sup>4</sup>

After presenting the overall research process and recognizing the core foundational strengths of participating communities, the nature of the divergent worlds and languages between academe and First Nations is investigated. Experiences are then shared, highlighting these differences as they relate to pace and protocols, pressures and social forces, capacities, and information technology challenges. Finally, insights are shared, summarizing the major findings and underscoring additional work to be done. Space does not permit a thorough inventory of PARP's community initiatives as the article's focus explores how researchers and communities have worked collaboratively to address various challenges of maintaining a long-term, mutually beneficial research process.

### **Research Process**

As in any research undertaking, the project's work plan outlines a general process for all research teams to follow. In addition to researchers traveling to and building positive working relationships with the communities, a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was to be

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<sup>4</sup> The five-year project has been extended one year with no increase in budget and will conclude in the spring 2017.

established to guide and approve the researchers' activities, with regular reports to Chief and Council. When the project got underway, however, research teams deferred to the direction of each community. In Opitciwan, for example, the Nikaniw Committee<sup>5</sup> was established, and includes representation from all interest groups in the community including Band Council, health and social services, education, employment, youth association, women's association, and Elders. For other communities, Chief and Council have preferred to serve as the coordinating body, and no CAC exists. Both approaches have been effective to varying degrees and both have raised challenges, as discussed below.

A Community Liaison also was to be hired by PARP to assist the research team with various tasks. These included, but are not limited to undertaking a community assessment to identify salient characteristics, strengths, challenges, and opportunities; collaboratively preparing an economic development strategic plan; working with the community on its implementation; and eventually undertaking research to measure project outcomes. Every community has successfully hired at least one liaison. In at least one instance, however, the First Nation and project team have opted to work together in a different way (e.g., dealing directly with Council and Band Administration, or with the CAC).

The project has unfolded differently for each community. Now in its final year, PARP has collaborated with the five First Nations to pursue numerous undertakings, ranging from strategic plan development and implementation to capacity building, policy, and governance initiatives within the band administration to cultural and economic development programs to engage the youth and people of all ages interested in seeking employment or setting up a local business.

### **The Foundational Strengths of the Communities**

Research *on* Indigenous communities has often focused on the notion of deficit. Indeed, the objectives of PARP focus on the alleviation of poverty, a condition of deficit in various measures. One thing that was *not* lacking was the determination of community leaders. Throughout the project the people with whom PARP researchers have worked, be they Chief and Council, the CAC, Band staff and management, or community volunteers, have all demonstrated a strong will to improve the health and well-being of their communities. They have been dedicated to the project, working on the many tasks to the best of their abilities even with the demands of their primary responsibilities. As well, they have exhibited both creativity and resourcefulness, drawing on their resiliency, knowledge and skills to pursue innovative alternatives when presented with unexpected challenges. These strengths ground the close working relationships that have developed amongst research teams and First Nations and provide context for the following discussion.

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<sup>5</sup> In the Atikamekw language, "nikaniw" may be translated to mean "go forward."

### ***Different Worlds***

An overarching theme that has emerged in the PARP project is the acknowledgement that core differences exist between the world of academe and the five First Nations. Our differences are not to be seen as a negative, for our combined strength lies in the diversity of all our peoples. To ignore our differences and carry on with a research project insensitive to the history and cultural traditions that make Indigenous peoples distinct is inadvisable.

The *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*, Chapter 9, has provided much needed guidance for ethical research respecting cultural protocols and practices of Indigenous peoples. Yet, difficulties in honouring the spirit and intent of these guidelines have surfaced when working through the institutions that govern research conduct, ranging from the funding agencies to university financial administrations and ethics boards (REB) (Stiegman & Castleden, 2015; Glass & Kaufert, 2007; Guta et al, 2010; Guta et al, 2013; Flicker & Worthington, 2011). As Stiegman & Castleden (2015) note, “the REB . . . retains ultimate decision-making over the research process” (p.2). Unless an REB includes Aboriginal cultural representation and a balanced process respecting the adaptive nature that often characterizes CBPR with Indigenous communities, REBs have a tendency to uphold “structures and processes deeply embedded in a colonial institution” (Stiegman & Castleden, 2015; p. 6). The implications of these rigid “structures and processes” for Indigenous research, as experienced by PARP, are the subject of a future publication. The topic is mentioned here to underscore the deep roots of both worlds in different priorities, diverse languages, and varied worldviews. Researchers working with Indigenous communities stand between these two worlds and must be adept at bridging them. The remainder of this article highlights some of these differences, focusing on relations with communities and how PARP research teams have responded to various issues in ways that are mutually beneficial.

### **Different Languages**

Three noteworthy issues regarding language have influenced the PARP project. These include translation requirements both in the community and at national meetings, and different understandings of words based on different worldviews.

For some communities, the primary language for many band<sup>6</sup> members, especially Elders, is their original, Indigenous language. When holding band-wide meetings, therefore, a bilingual community member translates the presentation into their language. Best efforts are made to use words that are easily translatable, and visual aids are often helpful.

Nationally, in addition to monthly teleconferences, a face-to-face PARP meeting is held annually where research teams and community representatives from all five communities gather, share project updates, and discuss issues—all in English, the common working language for the project. For Ojibwe, where Anishinaabemowin is the first language and French is the second, interpreters are hired for community participants at these meetings. The ability of

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<sup>6</sup> The use of the term “band member” in this article is consistent with how some of the First Nations communities involved in the PARP project refer to their membership.

Opitciwan representatives to participate and interact freely with the group, including members of other First Nations, depends on the skill level and professionalism of the interpreters, including their availability during unofficial activities (such as lunch, dinner, and health breaks). Moreover they must be present in sufficient numbers. As well, when the PARP website was first introduced at the second annual meeting, only an English version was available ([www.povertyaction.ca](http://www.povertyaction.ca)). A French version became available to Opitciwan over a year later.

Another issue surrounding language that reflects differences in worldviews is the different understandings of commonly used English words. For example, the title of the project is “Poverty Action Research Project,” which has its origins with the AFN campaign to “Make Poverty History”<sup>7</sup> launched in 2006. Most communities have questioned the use of the word “poverty.” While most researchers started the project with conventional understandings of the term, community members have challenged these assumptions, pointing out the stigmatizing connotation of the word “poverty.” They view issues in a more holistic way that includes social, health, educational, cultural, governance, as well as economic parameters. To better understand these community perceptions, the idea was proposed to conduct interviews with key informants. Some communities, however, expressed concern that discussing “poverty” was not seen as helpful. They do not wish to dwell on “poverty;” rather, they wish to focus on issues contributing to improving health and well-being.<sup>8</sup>

At Sipekne'katik First Nation, for example, as a strategic plan was being developed, it was suggested that it be called “Building Our Community Together” rather than having a title featuring the term “poverty.” Part of the rationale for the change was the desire not to isolate or stigmatize one segment of the community. The Misipawistik Cree Nation’s (MCN) advisory committee decided early in its tenure to call itself “E-Opinitawayk Advisory Committee.” “E-Opinitawayk” means “lifting ourselves up” and is seen as empowering for the community, promoting self-reliance in efforts to make a difference. Eabametoong indicated that there was no word in Nishinaabemowin for “poverty” and has preferred to view the project in terms of improving community well-being.

In Opitciwan, the Nikaniw Committee has contextualized the term as “*cultural* poverty,” referring to their people’s, especially the youth’s, ability to follow the values and ways according to Atikamekw customs and beliefs—their ability to speak Atikamekw, to live off the land and in harmony with nature, and to learn from their Elders and storytellers. Based on a lengthy discussion at one of its first meetings, the Nikaniw Committee has focused PARP priorities on their children’s future, rather than reducing poverty through economic development.

A final issue surrounding the use of language concerns difficulties some researchers have encountered training community workers to conduct interviews with a questionnaire. Comprehending the flow of a written set of questions when one is a more aural learner has proven a challenge for some. In addition, one community coordinator reportedly had difficulty recruiting interviewees, in part because of burnout from too many surveys in

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<sup>7</sup> The full title of the campaign is: “Make Poverty History: The First Nations Plan for Creating Opportunity.”

<sup>8</sup> An article on this topic is forthcoming.

the community by past researchers and government agencies. Other research teams and communities have met with more success. For example, MCN recommended a band member with a master's degree to organize the community and key informant surveys. She hired and trained several band members to complete the survey in a timely and professional manner, avoiding such problems as a low response rate, which was predicted by community contacts if people outside the community were hired. In yet another community, a PARP researcher and community member, after receiving training, visited each house in the community in order to undertake a survey with adults, youth and children.<sup>9</sup> While the time required to visit each household was lengthy, this process was critical in order to ensure that community members felt comfortable participating in the survey, effecting both a positive experience and high response rate. While some research teams have met with success in administering surveys, others have not, reaffirming the importance of providing sufficient training and supervision as well as allotting sufficient time to conduct the survey in a caring way.

### **Different Pace and Protocols**

Research design involves decisions about research activities and the pace at which these activities are expected to be undertaken. Academic researchers work in an environment that emphasizes timely and concrete outputs that can be reported on yearly faculty performance reports. CBPR, however, occurs in a timeframe appropriate to the community rather than the academy and often requires the building of a relationship that serves as the foundation for working together. As has been noted by many authors, when working with First Nations communities and organizations, taking time at the outset to establish respectful, trusted relationships is of the utmost importance (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012; Stiegman & Castleden, 2015; Weir & Wuttunee, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Those seeking to work with a community must realize that trust is not given overnight, but earned. When arriving for the first time through the doors of an organization or in a community, one needs to come with the sole expectation of being present, spending time getting to know the people and giving them the opportunity to get to know you. This does not happen in one visit, but several.

The nature of action research also affects the pace of the project. A request for action comes from the community, yet no such request can be expected without a level of trust. One's true intentions have to be seen by the community and the leadership before they will begin entertaining ideas of how the researcher(s) may be of assistance.

Within PARP, each team has had unique experiences during this initial "getting to know each other" phase. Some researchers have had positive relationship-building experiences, such as in MCN where a close working relationship has been established with councilors, and the chief's tenure has been uninterrupted, providing stability for the project. Others have had a

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<sup>9</sup> This was a community-wide health survey and not a survey related to "poverty." The survey was designed with substantial input from the CAC, support from the community, and approvals from the university REB. The Community Coordinator/Liaison expressed concern over delays in receiving REB approval for the questionnaire, which impacted the timing of the survey. Throughout the survey, the research assistant and community member were supported by the PARP Research Lead and the Community Coordinator.

long-standing relationship with their communities so trust already exists. At Sipekne'katik First Nation, the community has had a close relationship with the principal investigator going back decades, which has helped with the acceptance of the project, an acceptance that has bridged usual family-based and political divisions within the community.

For another community, relationships were built during initial visits, which included sharing meals, presenting gifts, and taking tours of the community with members of a newly formed CAC. During the first year of the project, several visits and teleconferences were held to update CAC members and seek their guidance on evolving work. They also helped to establish a comfort level as these social interactions can be quite challenging for shy or introverted community members and researchers (including Indigenous researchers), for whom social interactions may be difficult.

For others, the initial phase of relationship-building has gone less smoothly. One researcher, for example, worked with the community coordinator to introduce the project to band membership in community-wide and kitchen table meetings. While his approach was sound and intentions good, upon implementation he failed to effectively account for political nuances within the community. Even though he invited Chief and Council to these gatherings, they came to very few, if any. In effect, Chief and Council were left “out of the loop,” and two problems arose. First, a number of people who had grievances with decisions taken by Council (or not taken) were attracted to the meetings as were some individuals who had aspirations to run against incumbents in the next election. Second, as a result, Chief and Council came to the view that the project was fostering dissent in the community, and support for PARP by the elected leadership decreased. The researcher was asked not to return, and the future of the project was jeopardized. Another researcher was then asked to assist with damage control and to see if the relationship with the community, especially Chief and Council, could be repaired. He insisted that, to do this, he and the Project Lead must “show up,” spend time with Chief and Council, host a meal, apologize, and discuss how the project will proceed differently. The insistence by the new researcher of sharing a meal together before any formal meetings were held was seen as key to helping renew the relationship. Once Chief and Council accepted the apologies, the new researcher planned several trips to the community simply to show up, observe, and listen. After about a year of these visits, which involved becoming acquainted and establishing trust with a new Chief and Council after elections were held, Chief and Council began approving work for the researcher.

Another factor that has affected the overall pace of the project for a number of communities is one that is out of everyone's control—the weather. In Opitciwan, for example, the trip on the forest road, which is an adventure in good weather, becomes particularly risky in icy, stormy, windy or rainy conditions. On more than one occasion, the research team has arrived late due to bad weather and the need to drive slowly. Another time, they arrived only to be prevented from leaving because the road had been closed and travel forbidden. Other communities have had similar problems, including Eabametoong, which is a fly-in community, and T'it'q'et, which is a full day's drive through the mountains that can be quite dangerous, particularly in the winter.

Other factors are process-oriented. Many, if not all, communities wish to assure community-wide support for a particular “action” being contemplated. Chief and Council or the CAC may wish to hold band meetings to seek broad-based endorsement of an initiative. In Eabametoong, for example, Chief and Council asked the researcher for help with economic development and, together, they began discussing establishing an economic development corporation. Previous attempts had failed, so Chief and Council, understandably, were cautious about trying yet again. After the researcher had explained the issues contributing to these failures and how the approach he was proposing has proven successful for other First Nations, Chief and Council gave consent only if band-wide support was obtained. A number of band meetings were held. In addition, the topic was discussed during phone-in radio talk shows with councilors. Finally, a community vote was taken, approving the concept. Then, the researcher had to wait for the accompanying Band Council Resolutions (BCRs) to be passed, which took a few more months. Sorting out additional details about the corporation regarding directors, a shareholder agreement, and other issues added more time because each decision required a number of discussions with Chief and Council to ensure both clarity and comprehension before voting. Taking the time necessary to ensure understanding and broad-based acceptance has helped reinforce trust in the research team to set up the corporation with Eabametoong’s best interests in mind.

Sometimes, Chief and Council/CAC have requested a community-wide survey to seek support for an initiative if attendance at band meetings has been low. In these cases, time is spent designing an easy-to-understand survey, getting it approved by Chief and Council, and administering it. Once all the surveys are in and results tabulated, more time is often necessary to discuss results and obtain the requisite approvals (or refusals). In all communication tools and strategies, time and care must be taken to convey concepts in layperson terms to facilitate broad-based understanding. Whether in a band meeting or a survey, oral translation into the community’s original language is required. With surveys, a band member may go door-to-door to translate the survey one-to-one, requiring more time.

Illustrating the effect on pace in this circumstance, at Sipekne’katik First Nation, a community survey is being designed at the request of Chief and Council in order to obtain more input and more specific guidance on the design and implementation of their strategic plan. Indeed, it is hard to say when the design process ends and implementation begins. The community has been implementing aspects of the strategic plan almost since its emergence, while still seeking further community input and adapting the plan accordingly.

A constant influence on the pace of the project is the reality that researchers’ time with the CAC, Council or Band staff, as well as other stakeholders, on PARP matters competes with numerous day-to-day obligations and priorities. Many band administrations, unfortunately, are not alone in feeling, at times, overwhelmed with the demanding responsibilities and significant needs of their communities. Housing shortages and repair needs, health and safety issues, and employment concerns are just a few of the constant demands. Eabametoong First Nation has the added stressor of the Ring of Fire negotiations process, which involves numerous meetings with other chiefs in the Matawa Region, as well as calls for input to technical environmental

assessments and other studies.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, the PARP team has arrived for council meetings and must wait to the end of the day to be seen. At that point, Chief and Council appear to have had their fill and understandably so. Presentations are adjusted accordingly or attempts are made to meet the next day. Sometimes it is not possible, but just being present is important. Spending time there, seeing how one may be of assistance, and visiting during coffee breaks all help strengthen relationships.

The research team in Opitciwan has had similar experiences with the Nikaniw Committee. Attendance by all members of the committee all the time is nearly impossible for many reasons, including job demands, illness, or political and judicial conflicts. For instance, one meeting was postponed due to tensions that had arisen with the provincial government. Another meeting was shortened when important public hearings were scheduled at the same time to review specific claims related to the community's displacement.<sup>11</sup>

For Sipekne'katik First Nation, an Advisory Committee composed of academics, First Nation leaders and government representatives as well as band members has proven helpful in providing advice to the community. The community is open to such advice but it needs to be done with sensitivity, respecting the fact that the community does not want to be pushed into a non-Aboriginal mold. Additionally, what is offered needs to be clearly defined as advice, not telling the community what to do.

The research team in MCN has maintained momentum with PARP through an effective working relationship with its advisory committee, which does not require regular meetings with Chief and Council. The chief is advised by the community coordinator as to project developments. During PARP, three different councilors in MCN have been project contacts, and two have served as advisory committee co-chairs. The advisory committee has recommended youth-oriented projects that were funded by PARP, and these have had a positive effect on the community and the working relationship with the research team. In summary, research teams have had a range of experiences coordinating with CACs, Chiefs, and Councils. In many instances, flexibility, adaptability, and patience are important for healthy relationships.

Affecting all communities is the unfortunate occurrence of periodic emergencies. Throughout PARP's tenure, all have had to cope with deaths due to illness and suicide, with losses of the old as well as the too young. In many if not all communities, when a death occurs, the band observes the tradition of closing the band office; all work halts so everyone may pay their respects to the family and honour the deceased.

Again, flexibility, adaptability, and patience are key in such difficult circumstances. Understanding the impact a death has on such a tight-knit community is critical. While the

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<sup>10</sup> The "Ring of Fire" refers to a massive mineral deposit in northern Ontario estimated to be worth about \$60 million and includes chromite, a key metal in stainless steel, as well as base metals, platinum, palladium, and more. For more information, see: <http://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2015/06/23/liberals-failing-to-deliver-on-ring-of-fire-opposition-says.html>

<sup>11</sup> Opitciwan has been displaced twice due to flooding of its territories with the construction of the Gouin Reservoir. For more information, see <http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-toward-a-new-relationship-with-the-atikamekw>; and <http://www.nationnews.ca/fighting-for-a-fair-share/>.

community observes their traditions, researchers must be patient and respect the Band's wishes to refrain from work for the amount of time required. While it may affect the pace of our research, life happens and we appreciate the compassionate nature of the chief, council, and band as a whole. In death, as in other crises of life, all else seems trivial and the priority must be to take care of those in need.

### **Different Political, Academic, and Social Pressures**

Generally, First Nations communities and academics live and work in worlds with different pressures that, in turn, have influenced mutually beneficial processes and outcomes. Understanding the pressures and social forces of each participant provides insights for PARP team members and future research undertakings.

In addition to those noted above affecting the pace of PARP, other pressures are worth mentioning. Regarding pressures to develop resources, First Nations are constantly being approached to participate in one socio-environmental assessment or another, enter into negotiations for Impact Benefit Agreements, or listen to another proposal for their community's consideration.

Development pressures felt by Opitciwan have been heightened by the provincial government's allocation of wood quotas in surrounding forests to large firms, disadvantaging the First Nation's sawmill. Quebec's decision sparked a protest, including a blockade by Opitciwan and other Atikamekw communities, followed by negotiations and eventually an in-principle agreement, all of which has monopolized the leadership's time. The Nikaniw Committee has been unable to benefit from the presence of several members during the crisis.

Another constant pressure is each First Nation's numerous obligations to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). First Nations have extensive reporting and disclosure requirements to fulfill on an annual, and sometimes more frequent, basis. Sometimes, application deadlines and forms seem to change mid-stream, creating a challenging environment for band staff to navigate. Opitciwan has the added challenge of currently operating under third party management with INAC. The announcement of the imposition of a Management Action Plan has created a climate of uncertainty. Everyone in the band office has been concerned about job security, and severe restrictions have been imposed on all activities, including PARP's. For instance, a member of the Nikaniw Committee in charge of a key initiative was prevented from purchasing materials necessary for its implementation. As a result, the activity itself was compromised, and the PARP team has had to hold discussions with council to seek reassurances about the status of the entire project.

As well, First Nations who rely on federal transfer payments for their core funding were, until recently, operating in a budgetary reality where the federal government had restricted funding increases to two percent per year, despite higher inflation and population growth rates.<sup>12</sup> Each year, because of this deficit relative to transfer payments provided to urban areas

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<sup>12</sup> Retrieved October 4, 2015 from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/how-does-native-funding-work-1.1301120>. Since this article was written, the Trudeau Administration has promised to lift this cap, but the cumulative effect of long-term, inequitable funding continues to impact First Nations.

nationwide, many First Nations are struggling to address the issues that persist for their people. In this bureaucratic reality, dedicated leaders and staff have had to cope with the demands of their jobs with what amounts to diminishing resources. PARP team members are aware of and sensitive to this ongoing challenge for the five communities and are exceedingly grateful that, even in this tough financial environment, they are willing to participate and devote time and personnel to the project. In turn, PARP researchers have a heightened sense of responsibility to ensure that the communities realize some tangible benefit from PARP initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

As if these pressures are not enough, most of the communities still operate with a short electoral cycle of two years as mandated by the *Indian Act*. Some communities are pursuing the change to a four-year term, but this will take time.<sup>14</sup> With a two-year term the reality for the foreseeable future in many First Nations, the implications for leadership are significant. First, when newly elected, getting oriented to the job takes time. In Eabametoong, a council retreat was held one year after elections, at which time Chief and Council discussed how it had taken them that long to get a handle on their jobs. With one year before the next election, time was short to get anything accomplished before thoughts turn to the next campaign. Long-standing chiefs and councils, such as in MCN, have not had these issues. Two elections have been held during the project, and the same chief has been re-elected both times, providing stability for the community and PARP.

If, however, a new chief is elected and a significant turnover occurs amongst councilors, the PARP team will have to reintroduce itself to the new leadership and reestablish trust, affecting the pace of the project. PARP in Sipekne'katik First Nation, for example, has survived two elections so far, each of them resulting in some change of elected leadership. Long-term support for PARP has been aided by the passage of a BCR after initial meetings with Chief and Council in 2011, endorsing the project and specifying a multi-year commitment by the community.

When elections loom, Chief and Council want to show the community all they have accomplished. The PARP team may be pressured to provide evidence of progress, or at least a degree of momentum on its various projects to aid a campaign. For example, during Eabametoong's election process, Council was tempted to alter the original terms of the BCR it had passed for the economic development corporation to show how the corporation will provide jobs in the near term for community members (i.e., voters). The PARP research team had to meet with Chief and Council to underscore the importance for the success of the corporation that politics not interfere with its business, as this is how previous economic development corporations in Eabametoong and other communities have floundered. While jobs may arise for band members in the future, promising jobs in the short-term was not

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<sup>13</sup> To emphasize this point, one community member notes a "... concern in the community that this project would turn out to be just another study that gathers dust on the shelf. This view has been mentioned in the past with other projects and may explain low turnout at community meetings/events" (Billy, D., personal communication with C. Loppie, October 7, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Lengthening terms is now possible after the *First Nations Elections Act* came into effect April 2015, requiring development of a community election code, adoption by a majority vote of the membership, and passage of a Band Council Resolution.

encouraged, as it takes time for effective economic development corporations to become established and realize business success.

PARP has its own set of academic pressures to balance with those in the communities. Adhering to the project objectives as approved by the AFN and funding agencies, complying with REB protocols, and doing so while maintaining a trusting relationship with the First Nation, is a challenge mentioned earlier. Another is balancing the workload of the project with one's other responsibilities as a university academic (i.e., teaching, administrative committees, supervisory obligations, other research projects, etc.). Both community leaders and researchers are under pressure to 'get things done' and show progress in the project to sustain continued community-wide support for PARP's presence. Researchers also are compelled to complete the project within the funder's timeline. Moreover, community members are not always aware of the spending restrictions on research funds. Consequently, tensions may emerge when researchers must deny a community's request to fund activities that are outside research funding guidelines.

Publishing presents another pressure for researchers and requires fulfilling important responsibilities to First Nations. In order to publish material that is derived from this project, consistent with the principles of respect and mutual benefit, as well as OCAP (Schnarch and First Nations Centre, 2004), the project has adopted a protocol where consent of the communities is sought. As noted earlier, PARP wished to recognize and include participating communities as authors. In seeking permission to do so, each research team presented a draft of the publication to primary contacts within the community and received feedback and suggestions for change on passages and/or stories that related to their circumstances. Sections were edited so that each community was comfortable with what was being shared and how their stories were written. In some instances, they felt a story was important to include but they wished to remain anonymous. Significant effort was made to ensure concerns were addressed and the ultimate choice of words was acceptable. Listing them as co-authors was also discussed, and their consent to do so was given.

The process of preparing articles for publication raises a number of questions. Who benefits from these publications? Who are the authors? Do First Nations wish to receive this sort of publicity? One PARP team member likens Indigenous research ethics to medical ethics where "do no harm" and "act for the good" are central philosophies (D. Newhouse, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Are we doing any harm when sharing stories from PARP's experiences with First Nations partners to illustrate a point made in an article? Is the pressure to publish in the best interests of the communities? These and other questions are important to consider and discuss with each community involved. First and foremost is taking care of the relationship team members have with each First Nation. If something to be published jeopardizes the relationship in any way, the draft must be revised in order to respect and address the concerns. Reiterating Stiegman's and Castleden's (2015) point, PARP is endeavouring to pursue Indigenous research that is mutually beneficial and "[acknowledges] the jurisdiction of the nation in question and [defers] to their authority" (p. 5). Not only is this true for the actual work being carried out in the project, but also when considering the

question of what may be published.

That is, jurisdiction and deference considerations in mutually beneficial Indigenous research may run counter to the convention of academic freedom, exercising a belief in a researcher's ability to write about whatever one chooses. In Indigenous research, however, broader ethical issues are at stake. A researcher's accountability to the First Nation speaks directly to practicing the Indigenous principles of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and relevance (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). Accountability issues also speak to the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) that ground a great deal of Indigenous research today (Schnarch & First Nations Centre, 2004). Engaging in research with First Nations communities according to these principles generally translates into balancing the fundamental philosophies of "do no harm" and "act for the good" with one's academic freedom. Other authors who discuss philosophies of ethical care in Indigenous research include, but are not limited to, Wilson (2008) with a discussion of relational accountability and reciprocity, Warren (2008) with the practice of "deep care" and the question "is your work clean?" and Dockstator (2014) who refers to both Wilson (2008) and Warren (2008) in an experiential reflection of research as ceremony, where attention to process and protocols as well as the research content is necessary.<sup>15</sup>

### Capacity Issues

Mutually beneficial research, in addition to respecting the above Indigenous principles, recognizes that potential changes may occur in the actual work itself. The terms of reference and work plans, written long before the commencement of project tasks, need to be written with room for adaptation. For PARP, the work on the ground has, in some communities, been modified to suit the needs of the First Nation, rather than priorities of the academy.

One area in which this has occurred in the PARP project relates to capacity issues. For example, in some communities, Grade 8 may be the average level of formal education attained by band members. Fewer high school diplomas amongst the current leaders of a community are offset by all the learning on the job and life experiences of Chief and Council and senior staff. While formal post-secondary education may be limited, especially in more remote communities, First Nations people have a wealth of knowledge, from traditional knowledge of living on the land and wisdom about local ecosystems, flora, and fauna to experience navigating the complex bureaucracies of provincial and federal governments. Professional development programs for staff and management in band administrations is a constant priority. Additional training in various fields is sought, but this depends on the availability of funds, time, and coverage for those away on training.

Eabametoong is the only fly-in community in the PARP project, and cost is a major factor in professional development. Whether flying someone in to deliver training or sending a group to a course in Thunder Bay, travel to and from Eabametoong is not inexpensive. Sending staff to receive training off-reserve is a major financial and time commitment, not to mention the

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<sup>15</sup> See also Kovach (2009); Weber-Pillwax (2001); Wilson & Restoule (2010); Wilson (2001).

additional workload for those remaining in the office. Providing distance learning opportunities in Eabametoong is infeasible because of technological issues, which are discussed below.

As a result, while the work plan for PARP focuses on economic development, Eabametoong's Chief and Council have asked the research team to develop and deliver locally a tailor-made professional development course for band staff and management. The justification for the project's adaptation is that in order to be successful in economic development, building capacity within the band administration is a necessary stepping stone.

A challenge to doing so is the staff turnover rate within the band administration. The hope is that, after PARP ends, someone on staff, such as the Human Resources (HR) Director, will be able to deliver the course to new hires on a regular basis. That said, at the time this article was written, the position of HR Director was recently vacated, illustrating an ongoing struggle First Nations communities may have retaining people in key positions. Being a fly-in community exacerbates the challenge, as the remoteness may not necessarily entice qualified people to apply and, once there, stay with the job long-term.

A significant job vacancy rate, however, is not unique to fly-in communities. Opitciwan, for example, has had two general managers since PARP began and the position is currently vacant yet again. Given the complex environment in which band administrations operate, as described throughout this article, difficulties persist in filling positions. Intervening factors common throughout many communities include the demanding nature of the work, the skill level it commands, as well as interfamilial conflicts among employees affecting workplace relationships and productivity. In addition, for many First Nations, remote or not, the pool of people available for any one position may be limited, and given the small pool, people may not have the requisite skill set for a particular job. As a result of these and other factors, people may simply not apply and positions may remain unfilled for extended periods. If PARP depends on this position in any way, the project may be affected.

Alternatively, a complex situation arose in one community that threatened the viability of the entire project. The community liaison was unable to work with the research team and could not support the project. Concentrated efforts to address concerns were unsuccessful and matters were complicated when band council required that the community liaison continue in the position. Personal dynamics can become easily tangled without malice and with unplanned consequences. Eventually, the situation was resolved without a significant effect upon the project.

### **Information Technology Issues**

An issue related to administrative capacity that has also had implications for PARP research teams concerns a Band's information technology (IT) resources. For some communities, such as those closer to urban areas, bandwidth speed is fast, and technology is present to facilitate effective communications via email and video-conferencing. As a result, distance learning and on-line professional development courses are readily available. Download speeds for email attachments are also relatively quick. For First Nations that are more remote, however, IT problems persist. In bad weather, oftentimes, the internet and telephone lines

have been disconnected for both Opitciwan and Eabametoong. MCN has also experienced internet problems. For Eabametoong, because it is so remote, limitations on bandwidth have restricted internet speeds, access to on-line instruction, and distance learning. Also, capabilities that many academics take for granted are problematic, such as the ability to download and open email attachments quickly, use of programs such as DropBox to transfer larger files, downloading monthly bank statements, loading webpages, and exploring websites for resources and information. While the installation of a fibre optic cable is being planned, this is years away because of the expenses of purchasing rights-of-way and installation through several territories and jurisdictions.

Even seeking assistance to troubleshoot computer problems is a challenge. Excellent IT support is available in Thunder Bay. However, accessing long-distance IT support is an issue, given the limited bandwidth speed and subsequent inability of IT workers to connect directly into the server with a dependable, high speed connection. The PARP team, when present, has provided what support it can. For example, a printer had been off-line for a while, and the staff person had ordered replacement printer cartridges but this failed to solve the problem. The researcher suggested replacing the imaging drum, and once this was ordered, flown in, and installed, the printer started working again. For remote communities such as Eabametoong, these problems persist and have a significant impact on staff productivity, as well as PARP, because so much time is spent on problems such as these, impeding information sharing and timely communication.

### **Summarizing Shared Insights**

Research with, in, and for First Nations communities is carried out in complex environments. Achieving the original vision and overall aim of PARP has had to start with a process focused on developing and maintaining trusting relationships with each of the five communities. Taking time to allow Chief and Council, the Band Manager, the Advisory Committee and the community as a whole, to get to know the researcher and vice versa, listening to and discussing their issues and ideas, and determining and collaboratively planning various initiatives that are given priority by the community are all part of this community-driven action research. With PARP now in its final year, enough time has passed and several initiatives have been implemented, allowing a review of the project to share some insights from our collective experiences.

Beginning with the self-as-researcher, one observation concerns the emotionally challenging nature of CBPR and action research. It is easy to use a conventional lens and see the problems and deficits of a community, but harder to see things through a community lens where determination and resilience are strong. As well, it is difficult to maintain a positive attitude given the challenges that many communities face. Action research is hard yet rewarding work, and one inevitably develops close relationships. Invariably, when working with any community – Indigenous or non-Indigenous – crises happen and work must cease for a time. When a death or other crisis occurs, the distress affects everyone, including the researcher. At times such as these, and in general, taking time to care for oneself according to one's own beliefs and

practices is essential. If the researcher is not healthy in mind, body, and spirit, the project and one's ability to work effectively with a community are likely to suffer. For a project's long-term sustainability and efficacy, therefore, a researcher's dedication to the community and project needs to be balanced with care for one's personal health and well-being.

At the community level, PARP's research approach is rooted in and guided by Indigenous research principles (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Wilson, 2008) and emphasizes care for the relationship between researcher(s) and community. *Respect* for the people, their cultural practices, their strengths, their knowledge, and their creative problem-solving given the challenges they face is key. The above discussion highlights the importance of taking enough time at the outset of a project to develop respectful relations and caring for them throughout the project via clear communications, regular visits, listening, effort, patience, and understanding.

*Responsibility* and accountability are understood as respecting the leadership and decision-making structure within the community as well as the need to seek community-wide support for different initiatives being proposed. Given the numerous pressures discussed above, the commitment of the five communities to participate in a research project such as PARP carries with it a responsibility for each research team to uphold a community's trust. Therefore, an emphasis on respectful process and careful attention to how researchers conduct themselves to earn and maintain trust are recommended (again, through effective communication, visiting regularly, listening, etc.).

*Reciprocity* or *mutual benefit* is embodied by identifying work that will realize some benefit for the community, in this case to contribute toward improving community health and well-being. Being flexible and able to adapt the project to ensure reciprocal benefits is essential. For example, providing professional development training may be a necessary intermediate step. Even though the original work plan does not articulate taking action on capacity building measures, Chief and Council or band staff working with the researcher may identify such a need that, if pursued, would help establish a stronger foundation for the community's efforts to improve overall health and well-being.

Ensuring that the work is *relevant* to the community is also key. This may require balancing expectations from the REB-approved work plan with those of the community. In conducting mutually beneficial research, again, flexibility and being able to adapt an academic work plan are important. For example, the project's initial approach to reducing poverty involves the pursuit of economic development strategic plans and initiatives. It has since become clear that conventional academic perspectives of solving poverty issues primarily through economic solutions is only one part of a more holistic, Indigenous understanding of well-being that integrates health (of mind, body, and spirit), social, educational, environmental, cultural, youth, elder, as well as economic issues. Expanding the project's scope from focusing only on the economy has yielded a more diverse set of actions, including land-based programs with the youth and elders, educational and cultural activities, and more.

A final insight is to approach work with Indigenous communities with an open mind and open heart, staying true to the spirit and intent of CBPR and action research as well as trusting that the research process, if properly designed and implemented, will result in 'acting for the

good.’ Entering a community with preconceived ideals and academic rigidity may run counter to the priorities and needs of the community. Keeping an open mind, maintaining flexibility, and adapting personal as well as academic expectations to ensure one is working in the best interests of the community are essential.

The relationship between university researchers and Indigenous communities has changed significantly in recent decades. Many communities have extensive experience with research and researchers. They expect to be involved in all aspects of a project and to benefit from their involvement in the form of improved capacity to conduct their own research, reports they can use to advocate for government funding, or relationships with members of business communities (among other gains). Mutually beneficial research is an opportunity to build communal knowledge that can be used to facilitate change.

In closing, this article has highlighted a number of challenges PARP is managing as its various “actions” and working relationships with the five First Nations continue to unfold. Additional issues are anticipated, especially around the ethics of exiting a community at the end of an extended project. Certainly, this article raises additional points of inquiry that due to space considerations are reserved for future publications. These include:

- Detailed analysis of activities undertaken in communities as part of PARP, exploring objectives, process, outcomes, and evaluations and their implications for future practice;
- Influence of communities on the shape of the research question(s) and on the initiatives and outputs developed in light of any shift in the research question(s);
- Balancing the adaptive nature of a community-driven research process with continued support of funding agencies and university partners, support predicated on a traditional academic approach to the formulation of a research project;
- Exploration of the “academic world” as a monolithic generalization. Is it accurate to characterize academe in this way, in light of research team members who may be members of both Indigenous communities and academic ones?
- Various challenges and implications of working with different kinds of community advisory teams (i.e., CACs, Chief and Council, etc.);
- Investigation of the importance and implications of a strengths-based approach to research, recognizing communities’ inherent fortitude and capacities that contribute to their continued perseverance in the face of ongoing hardships and government controls;
- Exploration of Indigenous understandings of concepts like poverty, capacities, experience, knowledge, etc.

For now, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the five First Nations that have welcomed us into their territories, for jointly and collaboratively pursuing mutually beneficial research, and for allowing us to share what we have learned so far, providing those that follow with insights into engaging in work with and for Indigenous communities.

## About the Authors

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**Eabametoong First Nation** (EFN) is located on the north shore of Eabamet Lake, 360 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ontario. EFN is a member of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and the Matawa Tribal Council and is a signatory to Treaty 9. Eabametoong is a traditional name, which in *Anishinaabemowin* (the Ojibway language) means “reversing of the water place.” Each year, due to water runoff, the flow of water from Eabamet Lake into the Albany River temporarily reverses. EFN has approximately 2,400 band members, of whom about 1,300 live on reserve with the balance living in Thunder Bay, Geraldton, and other surrounding communities. EFN is accessible year-round only by air. During the winter, residents maintain “ice roads” to Thunder Bay (16 hours), Pickle Lake (9 hours), and other surrounding First Nations.

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The **Misipawistik Cree Nation** (MCN) is located on the northwestern shore of Lake Winnipeg where the mouth of the North Saskatchewan River enters Lake Winnipeg. Traditionally, people from the Misipawistik Cree Nation have considered their community the geographic centre of Manitoba. Misipawistik Cree Nation is approximately 400 km north of Winnipeg and is accessible by Provincial Highway #6, by air and by water. As of 2012, the registered population totaled approximately 1,753 people.

**David Newhouse**, Onondaga from Six Nations of the Grand River, is Chair of the Department of Indigenous Studies at Trent. His research examines the emergence of modern Aboriginal society. His publications include *In the Words of Elders: Aboriginal Cultures in Transition*; *Hidden in Plain Sight: Aboriginal Contributions to Canadian Development and Identity*, Volumes I and II; *Not Strangers In These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*; and *Well-Being in Urban Communities*.

**Opitciwan** is an Atikamekw nation comprised of three communities: Manawan, Wemotaci and Obedjiwan-Opitciwan. Atikamekw means “whitefish” and refers to the species of fish the people have eaten for ages. Opitciwan was formerly located at the tip of Mékiskan, a site that is accessible by water and is one hour by canoe from the spot that the community occupies today. In 1920, the Gouin Dam flooded the community causing the families to move closer to the bay. The people settled slowly in the territory where the rising rivers meet, hence the name “Opitciwan,” which means “the meeting place of the rising rivers.” Opitciwan is located in the heart of the Province of Quebec north of the Gouin Reservoir in the region of La Mauricie. It is accessible by a 166 km logging road, linking the reserve to Highway 167 in Lac-Saint-Jean. Based on the 2011 census, the community has a population of 2,031 people.

**Sipekne'katik First Nation** is the second largest Mi'kmaq band in Nova Scotia and includes the communities of Indian Brook Indian Reserve (IR) #14, New Ross, Pennal, Dodd's Lot, Wallace Hills and Grand Lake. Sipekne'katik First Nation has 2,588 band members, with approximately 1244 members residing in the community and 1344 members residing out of the community. The land area of Sipekne'katik First Nation spans 12.13 square kilometres and is located 68 kilometres (km) from Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) and 28.8 km southwest of Truro, Nova Scotia.

The **T'it'q'et community** (formerly Lillooet Indian Band), situated adjacent to the town of Lillooet, BC, is approximately 254 km northeast of Vancouver, BC on Highway 99. T'it'q'et is one of eleven communities within the St'át'imc Nation that share a common language, culture, history and territory. T'it'q'et currently has 394 registered members. The band has seven reserves, including the main reserve Lillooet IR #1 and a shared reserve with the Bridge River Indian Band.

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