

The Canoe Trip: A Northern Cree Metaphor for Conducting Research

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Author Note

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Abstract

In this essay, I use a northern Cree metaphor to conduct respectful research. Descriptive language is used to illustrate how community-based research is like going on a canoe trip. The landscape, rivers, and lakes come alive as the research unfolds from initial visioning, planning, implementation, final report, and knowledge dissemination.

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Research in Aboriginal¹ communities has made major shifts since colonial times. Past studies focused on doing research *on us*. Today, doing research *with us* is what matters. This focus in research raises the quality of our lives by involving community in the visioning, questioning, exploring, co-creation, and dissemination of knowledge (St. Dennis, 1992). However, there are complex social issues in Aboriginal communities that require diverse research approaches. More importantly, Aboriginal people are asserting their right to use their own place-based metaphors, methodologies, protocols, and ethical standards (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Grenier, 1998; Michell, 2009; Smith, 1999).

As an educator with deep roots in Northern Canada, I have been raised to respect the natural world of which I am part. Our Cree worldview, culture, and languages come from the land. The land provides us with what we need to survive and anchors our *Cree ways of knowing* (Michell, 2005). In this article, I use the canoe trip as a Cree metaphor for conducting respectful research. Going on a canoe trip involves careful preparation, planning, and a lot of collaboration with others. Similarly, embarking on a research journey involves thinking about the intent and purpose of the quest and some idea of what benefit it may be for both the researcher and the community.

Long ago, Cree people used the lakes and rivers to hunt, fish, trade, and share with their relatives throughout the North American continent. The water systems enabled them to borrow teachings and technologies from other cultures in order to survive. Thus, in many ways Aboriginal people are not strangers to building bridges between multiple ways of knowing (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011). Water is also sacred to the northern Cree. We all come from water when we come into this world. We require water for our existence. We cleanse ourselves with water. We build our birch bark canoes so that we are able to glide gently over its waves. Distinguished Professor Lorraine Easley, from the University of Pennsylvania, talks about water in the following way.

If there is magic on this planet, it is in water. Water fills our bodies, and it is the solvent of life. It makes the beauty and substance of clouds and dew. It is the strength of thunderstorms and ocean waves. It absorbs the sun's energy and makes our weather. It is life-giving rain and snow and also the fury of hurricanes along our coasts, floods...and monsoons across our ocean. It awakens dormant life and brings the miracle of new growth. (Lujan, J., c.f. James, 2001, p. 81)

Metaphorically, doing community-based research is like going on a canoe trip to hunt for knowledge. When we journey out in the springtime, we bear witness to the land as it begins to re-awaken after a long winter. Dormant knowledge transforms into new life when we share our ways of knowing. It begins with a journey inward and spirals outward in the "relational way" onto our communities and onto the northern landscape.

- **Preparing for the Canoe Trip**
- **Inward Looking - Ceremony, Prayer, Reflection, Dialogue**
- **What is the Inner "Burning" Question?**

Prior to the trip, there is an inward looking and a lot of self-reflection. Our Elders say the answers lie within ourselves and within our communities and that we need not look any further (Michell, 2011). Cree scholar Dr. Neal McLeod (2007) asserts that Cree collective memory is anchored in places and landscape. My memory drifts back to my graduate training at UBC in Vancouver. I remember the words of Dr. Verna Kirkness, from Fisher River,

Manitoba, who said that research begins with exploring that "burning question". We think about that "inner flame" that flutters within our being. We find out if other people share our thoughts. We examine self in relation with others, self in relation with community, and self in relation with the natural world. We use a stick to move around the ashes and embers in order to ignite a flame of research questions. Have the questions posed been explored before? In our Cree belief system, at the core of every being is where "Spirit" sits. We visit this "Great Silence" from time to time to seek guidance and clarity. It is from this inner core we travel and spiral outward in a *relational way* (Wilson, 2008) as we think about key research questions to issues and challenges we face in our families and communities.

- ❑ **Outward Looking - Listening to community voices & stories;**
- ❑ **Identifying Key Issues and Questions**
- ❑ **Community Involvement**

Northern Cree trappers say the black wolf will travel great distances to hunt for food. In the same way, when we do research, we bring back knowledge to feed our family. Our quest for knowledge will lead us down many paths and river systems, but we always come back to our core focus. In our Cree belief system, we conduct research for the good of the collective. The community supports the hunter and his family. Community-based research requires community-involvement (Fletcher, 2003; Strand et al., 2003). Community members identify their own issues and solutions. We look at what we need in our communities. We determine how research can help achieve our collective vision. We make a decision to tackle an issue. We begin with envisioning a research path and developing a research plan; where might we go to find what we are hunting for? Who might be able to help on the trip and in what ways? We identify a research team - fellow travellers who are "co-learners" in the research process.

- ❑ **Deciding on What is Needed for the Journey**
- ❑ **Research Methodology, Methods, Data Gathering Tools**
- ❑ **Rules of Engagement, Ethics, Protocols**

Hunters often share stories of their past experiences in particular areas. They help us to think about what we may need on the trip and what to expect. A methodology is part of a paradigm that guides the overall research and is based on the assumptions of a particular ontology and epistemology (Wilson, 2008, p. 39). How we see the world around us is important. The way we think about knowledge is different in different cultures. A strategy of inquiry or a research plan is like a map that helps one arrive at different camps along the way. The methods are the actual tools that will help you answer the research questions posed and allow you to arrive at your final destination, at least for a brief period until the next trip out.

You have to behave on the land. There is a time and place for everything. Set some mutually agreed upon "rules of engagement." Using traditional protocols allows a researcher to conduct a study in a "good way" guided by respect, truth, and honesty. Cree/Saulteaux researcher, Margaret Kovach (2010) states, "To do this means to tend to the process in a good way, so that no matter the outcome you can sleep at nights because you did right by the process" (p. 52). You build-in "check backs" with research participants throughout the data collection phase to ensure accuracy of interpretations. The voices of research participants speak through you. What you write reflects the landscape of where those voices originate. Be careful how and what you write.

- ❑ **A Survey of the Research Landscape**
- ❑ **Literature Review and Examination of Existing Studies**
- ❑ **Identifying Gaps in the Overall Discourse**

Doing a literature review is like surveying the hunting territory in order to have a general idea of the discourse that lies in this path. You see the animal tracks and pursue where they lead. Sometimes they lead nowhere. Other times they lead you directly to the source. You learn how to read the land for survival, looking for key patterns in the studies. What hunters have passed through the area before? What might the footprints tell us of past events and happenings? Pay attention to identity gaps in the literature and to critiques to allow for a balance of perspectives. Articulate a rationale for why you are embarking on a research journey based on those gaps. What makes your research different?

Factor in flexibility for unexpected twists and turns of the research journey. Embrace the ambivalence and flux as the weather can change, the river waters may become tumultuous, and the terrain may be rugged, making for slow travel. It is during these times that great learning takes place. Things always happen for a reason. Lessons learned are documented along with challenges encountered by using the research design. As researchers, we have to be observers of things both big and small. Teachings may pour forth as we gaze at the vast expanse of the universe. We enter a trance like state as we witness the colourful dance of the great northern lights and stand in humility, coming to understand that we cannot possibly learn everything there is to know of the great mystery of life. We give thanks.

- ❑ **Packing and Unpacking the Canoe for Lightness**
- ❑ **Written Articulation of a Clear Research Plan**
- ❑ **Agreement on What is Essential for the trip**

The days leading up to a canoe trip involve multiple decisions and a tightening up of the research plan. We review the stories from the literature review and come together multiple times to dialogue and build a team spirit. Everyone has a role and responsibility. We unpack what does not belong in the canoe and prepare through ceremony and prayer, sprinkling a pinch of tobacco with good intent in our hearts.

- ❑ **Shoving Off From the Shoreline and Leaving Camp**
- ❑ **Deploying the Research Plan**
- ❑ **Going Forward With One Mind**

Finally, we quietly shove off from the shores of our camp. The research process commences. There is rhythm in the paddling, momentum, and energies are high with enthusiasm. Eagles soar in the sky and remind us that we must look far into the past and far into the future. We meet and listen to travellers who have been placed in our path, paying attention to the nuances. We learn to read between the lines. There are hidden teachings in Cree words. We share in reciprocity. We know there is more to learn as we part ways and paddle onwards, each one of us in deep thought.

- ❑ **Gliding Through Calm Waters and Observing**
- ❑ **Internalizing the Natural World in all of its Facets**
- ❑ **Identifying Key Themes From Interviews Along the Ways**

A good research plan will help the team glide though calm waters. The seagulls can be heard close by. It is important to keep alert. We come ashore once in awhile to engage in *side*

hunting and gathering activities to enhance the research process, finding different types of berries which represent tiny pearls of wisdom that nurture our being (Michell, 2009). We enjoy, observe, and record the landscape in all of its facets. Our Cree *ethic of conservation* teaches that we take only what we need and nothing more. We respect the earth and it respects us back.

- ❑ **Navigating Through Rough Terrain**
- ❑ **Embracing the Ambivalence and Flux**
- ❑ **Unexpected Stops, Turns, and Twists of the Journey**

In the North, we embrace the flux and ambivalence. There will be times when the research journey is interrupted. A change of weather can slow things down. We learn patience. Sometimes we may have to abandon the research plan momentarily, coming ashore and transporting our canoes through ancient pathways that lead around fast flowing rivers and majestic falls. We continue the trip. We are relentless, pressing on for meaning and understanding no matter how arduous the trip. We reach a point of no return. Our thoughts *become one* with the northern landscape and we are transformed. And all that is heard is the sound of paddles touching water. We see the sun going down as evening begins to set in. The color and patterns in the sky tell us what the weather may be like tomorrow.

- ❑ **Resting at Campsites of Knowledge and Wisdom**
- ❑ **Reflecting on Lessons Learned, Teachings, and Highlights of Research Process**
- ❑ **Journal Writing and "Coming to Know" Moments**

Somewhere in the distance, lights can be seen emanating from the homes of relatives. The silhouette of Migwaps and smoke houses against the darkened sky resembles a line of Cree grandmothers in shawls waiting our arrival. There are many gathering sites and camps in Northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. You can feel the power of some of these places. Rest stops are important for personal and collective reflection, nourishing our mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical selves. We are reinvigorated by what we have learned so far in the research journey. At this mid-point, an interim report is prepared in order to share preliminary findings.

- ❑ **Continuing the Journey Towards the Horizon**
- ❑ **Saturation of Information From Patterns of Stories and Interviews**
- ❑ **Feeding on Northern Foods of Wisdom for Survival**

We shove off from the shores and head for our final destination. The paddles are once again in unison. Data collection continues. We are grounded and focused on the incredible diversity of perspectives. Like the boreal forest trees, we honor and respect the different shapes, sizes, colours, and "rooted-ness." In the data analysis phase, we look at the overall pattern of the messages. What are voices telling us? We see the saturation of data, a signal it is time to bring the journey to a close. Just then thunderclouds roll in. The wind picks up. The waves become aggressive. Lightning flashes across the dark sky, so we come ashore and regroup one last time. The sharing is powerful as the rain falls and provides further clarity on the data analysis. A rough draft of the final report is written.

- ❑ **Transformation and *Seeing what Others Do Not See***
- ❑ **Bringing it all Together and Writing the Final Research Report**
- ❑ **Highlighting Key Answers to Research Questions Posed**

The editing process will take the research team through winding rivers, small streams, deep reflection in ponds, and down tight corridors that refine and polish what has been written. We look at our emerging and collective knowledge. Did we cover everything that needs to be told? Has the initial research question been answered? What have we learned? We see things other people do not see. We experience existential moments. We look across the vast lake and to our final destination. The dark clouds begin to recede and there is a heavy smell of earth and soil in the air. We breathe it in deeply, Spirit touching where we need healing. We paddle away in fervour. Our families on the shoreline are waving and patiently waiting.

- ❑ **Arriving at Back at Camp**
- ❑ **Communication Plan of Research Results**
- ❑ **Collective Versus Private Knowledge**

A good communication plan is needed for knowledge dissemination and exchange prior to arriving at base camp. How will we share what we have learned and to whom? Whom should we invite to hear us? Who is impacted by the study? We are welcomed as our canoes touch the shoreline. There is much talk. Our family members help us unpack our canoes. Food is prepared and tea is served. Individual stories of the hunting journey, teasing, and humorous moments set the tone for what is to emerge in the formal feast that follows.

- ❑ **Feasting, Sharing Stories, and Knowledge Exchange**
- ❑ **Celebration of the Research Journey**
- ❑ **Dissemination of Research Results**
- ❑ **Transformation and Change**

The feast is the final celebration of the research journey. It is a time when the hunters sit in circles with community to share the final report. There are question and answer sessions. The implications, recommendations, and next steps are made clear. Food is shared. Acknowledgements are made. Prayers and songs are sung giving thanks for another successful hunt. The knowledge and teachings are passed on and become part of the collective wisdom of the community. However, Indigenous knowledge is not static; it is forever unfolding and evolving (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). We think of other journeys that may be made as we enter the dream world where Spirit meets the physical.

Ekosi!

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Endnote

- ¹ The term “Aboriginal” refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.