



RESEARCH IS CEREMONY: THE EVOLUTION OF INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY WITH THE SWINOMISH TRIBE, FROM 2006 AND 2023

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of Indigenous research methodologies conducted with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, contrasting a 2006 study that used co-researchers, grounded in Tribal Participatory Research, with a 2023 study guided by an Indigenous research paradigm. Drawing on Indigenous epistemologies, storytelling, talking circles, and tribal co-researchers, the work emphasizes relationality, respect, reciprocity, and cyclical validation using focus groups, member checking, and tribal oversight to ensure cultural appropriateness and trustworthiness of themes and attributional interpretations of student success. By situating methodology within Indigenous ceremony and worldview, the authors critique the earlier Tribal Participatory Research framing, document a deliberate shift toward community-led agenda setting and shared decision-making, and articulate how Indigenous paradigms integrate ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology into a unified, reciprocal research practice that centers Swinomish voices and accountability.

Keywords

Indigenous, Indigenous Research Methodology, Decolonizing Methods, Relationships, Hermeneutics, Storytelling, Tribal Participatory Research, and Talking Circles

Introduction

Okii niksokowaiks. Nisto nitaniko Will Makoyiisaaminaa. Nimohtoto amskaapiikani. Hello, friends and relatives. My name is Will Makoyiisaaminaa. I am from the Blackfeet Nation. I am the former superintendent of La Conner Public Schools located on the traditional homelands of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. I am writing to you to talk about my 2023 research using an Indigenous research paradigm. You will also hear from Dr. Tim Bruce, who completed a study in 2006 (Bruce, 2006) using a qualitative methodology. Both research studies were done in partnership with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community.

In the following paragraph, you will probably notice that we switch fonts. We're using a literary technique from a book that has had a huge impact on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. I was talking with Dr. Gerry Ebalaroza-Tunnell (2021) one day about how I wanted to keep my literature review to mostly Native scholars. She asked if I had read Shawn Wilson's book, *Research is Ceremony* (2008), I hadn't. She suggested that I might want to read it to inform my work. I deeply respect Dr. Ebalaroza-Tunnell and I knew that her wisdom and wise words would take me down a good path, and it did. In the next paragraphs, we hear from Tim about his research methodology.

Methodology

As Will already told you, I completed a research project with the Swinomish Tribe in 2006. At that time, I was the Superintendent of schools for La Conner School District; a job I proudly did for 27 years before turning it over to Will's capable hands.

The purpose of my 2006 study was to gain an understanding of the perceived attributes of success as identified by the 2003/04 Swinomish high school graduates of La Conner School District. Gaining a better understanding of the perceived attributes of success, as seen through the eyes of these eight Swinomish high school

graduates, provided insight into how Tribal and school district leaders might best provide needed support to future students.

Knowing the powerful role that oral traditions and relationships play in the Swinomish Tribe, I chose to base the philosophical foundation for the method of the study on a relational ontology (Jackson & Williams, 2002; Schwandt, 2000). Knowledge of Tribal traditions and common sense drove this decision. Furthermore, my fundamental assumption was that relationships, (and especially Tribal relationships) are necessary to understanding their causal attributions. Therefore, the epistemological foundation for the method of the study is hermeneutic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). At the core of this epistemology is the belief that “understanding is something that is produced in dialogue, not something reproduced by the interpreter through an analysis” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195).

To assist in understanding the perceived attributions of success as identified by the eight 2003/04 Swinomish graduates, and to better describe how school leadership can apply this information to help future Swinomish students, I utilized Weiner’s (1996) theory of attribution. Attribution theory is based on the premise that all students seek to understand the world around them, such as searching for the causes for why they are succeeding or failing in school. Weiner’s theory of attributional motivation suggests that an individual’s motivation is based on how well that person did the same task in the past and what kind of attributions were made for the past success or failure. Weiner (1996) classified these attributions along three causal dimensions including: (a) locus of control, (b) stability, and (c) controllability. These three attributional classifications were used as a foundation in the construction of the following research questions posed to the graduates:

1. How do Swinomish graduates describe their learning experiences at La Conner High School?
2. What kinds of school supports were most helpful and what made school more difficult; to what do they attribute their school success?
3. How have Swinomish family members, friends and teachers been involved in each participant’s education, and how critical are these relationships to each student’s success?
4. How do Swinomish cultural and educational traditions impact school success?
5. What program or curricular changes, as perceived by Swinomish graduates, would enhance school success?

The interview process of my research was designed in three parts including: (a) an initial interview, (b) a follow-up interview, and (c) a final interview/text check.

In an effort to maximize the quality of responses from the Swinomish participants, with the knowledge that many Native Americans are much more likely to share their beliefs and experiences with a member of their own Tribe, I made the decision to enlist the help of two Swinomish educators to serve as co-researchers. Including these co-researchers in the interview process aided in building triangulation into the verification process. Creswell (1998) defines triangulation as the “use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (p.202). The decision to use Swinomish co-researchers is also supported by the Tribal Participatory Research (TPR) model developed by Fisher and Ball (2003).

The TPR model has hermeneutic underpinnings and is based on the investigative process of Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is characterized as a “dynamic process that develops from the unique needs, challenges, and learning experiences specific to a given group” (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 187). A key component of the TPR model is the importance given to community inclusion. This inclusion is designed to increase Tribal community input into the research model by utilizing Tribal oversight, the training and employing of community members as research staff, and the use of culturally appropriate research methods. The use of Tribal members as co-researchers was considered an optimal practice by Fisher and Ball (2003) because of their “acceptance within and understanding of the community and because of their potential commitment to projects that may have positive effects on the community” (p. 212).

The task set before my Swinomish Co-Researchers was to conduct the initial interviews. Traditional Native American teaching methods were encouraged which included reflective listening and minimal encouragement. Interviewers encouraged each participant to address their perceived attributes of success in school with an emphasis on attaining information based on Weiner’s (1996) theory of attribution including: (a) locus of control, (b) stability, and (c) controllability. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in person. To help insure that questions were culturally appropriate, development of the questions was completed utilizing input from the Swinomish Health, Education, and Social Services Committee, the Swinomish Cultural Committee, and the Swinomish Tribal Senate.

After the initial interviews were analyzed and initial themes had been formulated by the research team, I conducted a follow-up interview with each participant. The purpose of this interview included three parts. The first was to converse with the participants about any information from the initial interview that needed clarification; I gave special attention to gaining more information related to attribution theory including the participants’ perceptions pertaining to: (a) locus of control, (b) stability, and (c) controllability. Second, I shared the initial themes that emerged as a result of the initial interview checking to see if the participants agreed with the initial decisions made

about theme inclusion. Third, I gave all participants an opportunity to add, change, or remove any information they were not comfortable with.

The purpose of the final interview with each participant was to review the language of the final text of the study, checking to see that each person felt that the document fairly represented their story. This final interview and the preceding follow-up interview played an important role in the verification procedures of this study. Referred to as member checking, this part of the verification process helped to bring credibility to the study by involving the participants in the analysis, interpretations, conclusions and accuracy of the study (Creswell, 1998).

Each of the Swinomish researchers and myself, acting alone, conducted an unfocused overview of the text of each interview in an attempt to draw meanings articulated in the dialogue with as few presuppositions as possible (Jackson & Patton, 1992; Kvale, 1996).

After successive readings, tentative interpretations of the text were made. This process is sometimes referred to as the hermeneutic circle, and is often described as a spiral or reflexive process in which the researcher seeks to uncover progressively deeper levels of meaning in the text (Hoshmand, 1989; Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1984). The goal of this process was to first identify initial themes. Themes that continued to be supported in successive readings were retained by each researcher. Themes that did not have broad support were set-aside for later discussion. Once the two co-researchers concluded their original independent analysis, they brought their findings together for an initial comparison and analytical discussion with me.

Mutual themes found and agreed to by the research team (consisting of the two researchers and myself) were retained. The remaining themes, plus the previous themes, set-aside by each researcher, were discussed by the team to evaluate if there was sufficient evidence to warrant inclusion. Themes were retained only if the research team was able to come to consensus about their trustworthiness. Determining trustworthiness in this study depended on the consistency of what participants said about the same thing over time and by comparing observations with interview data (Patton, 2002).

Following the development of consensus on initial themes and their causal attributions as described in the previous section, I returned for the second interview with the study participants to present the research team findings and to elicit each of their thoughts and concerns. I then returned with the participants' comments for a final discussion with the research team before writing the first draft of the findings of this study.

Once trustworthy interpretations were made, the task was to find the language that accurately described the findings with precise descriptions of the themes and their attributional causes being the goal for the final product (Kvale, 1996). To further assess the trustworthiness of the themes, causal attributions, and the chosen language, I again met with the study participants to review the initial text, checking to make sure that they believed it told their story accurately and truthfully. As an additional check for trustworthiness and cultural appropriateness, the initial text was reviewed by the Swinomish co-researchers, the Swinomish Tribal Senate, and by the following committees as recommended by the Senate: the Swinomish Health, Education, and Social Services Committee; the Swinomish Cultural Committee; and the Swinomish Community Resources Committee.

In 2006 having Swinomish co-researchers was not only an honor, it was considered a best practice. But, as you read through the research process described above you see a project that searched for ways to include tribal voices in a white man's research process. I now know my research protocol fell woefully short in treating the Swinomish as full partners. Now, after working with Will as chair of his 2023 doctoral research, I can wholeheartedly recommend the indigenous research methodology that he used. His methodology insured that the Swinomish were not only partners, but deciders in what and how the research should be done. In the following, Will explains the use of this indigenous research paradigm.

In traditional research paradigms, you might find some chapters or sections called: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, and Conclusion. In an Indigenous research paradigm these elements are included, but they are distributed throughout the research and revisited as needed to build the relationship between you, the reader; me, the researcher; and the research. Being in relationship is important so that you get to know me, to know my experiences, to know my values, to know my beliefs, and to know my background through stories.

Dr. Wilson writes the following about his book: "The main focus of this book rests with the positive effects of maintaining, transmitting and clarifying an Indigenous way of doing and being in the research process" (Wilson, 2008, p. 19). An Indigenous research paradigm is cyclical and continuously returns to themes, literature, stories, and other elements that help guide and inform the research.

The use of stories comes from the oral tradition of storytelling. The Creator has gifted us with stories that our ancestors have passed down from one generation to the next. Our languages were never written; we didn't have letters or written words to write them down. Our culture has resisted erasure through stories; our people have resisted erasure through stories and our ways of knowing. Oral traditions have preserved our ways of life. The Blackfoot word for storyteller is *aytsinihkii* (Yellowfly, 2022; Franz, 2004, p. 101). The Blackfoot word for knowledge keeper is *esskiniibiists iyiniip* (Yellowfly, 2022; Franz, 2004, p. 352). The language of the Swinomish people is Lushootseed. The Lushootseed word for storyteller is *dx^osyəhub* (Bailey, 2022). I use these terms in Lushootseed and Blackfoot to be respectful and in relationship with the Swinomish people and the Blackfoot people.

Speaking of *dx^osyəhub/aytsinihkii-esskiniibiists iyiniip*, Dr. Shawn Wilson (2008) explains,

The use of an Indigenous research paradigm when studying Indigenous peoples requires the holistic use and transmission of information. Consequently, I present the information in this study in a way that is more culturally appropriate for Indigenous people by taking the role of storyteller rather than researcher/author. Indigenous people in Canada recognize that it is important for storytellers to impart their own life and experience into the telling. They also recognize that listeners will filter the story being told through their own experience and thus adapt the information to make it relevant and specific to their life. When listeners know where the storyteller is coming from and how the story fits into the storyteller's life, it makes the absorption of the knowledge that much easier. (p. 32)

All of my lived experiences have shaped who I am and how I relate to the rest of the world. I bring these parts of my family, of my ancestors, of my background, of my experiences, all of me, into this research. This converges with my experience serving as superintendent for the La Conner School District, in La Conner, Washington.

I knew that working in the La Conner School District was where I needed to be. Our ancestors were guiding me, helping me, supporting me, teaching me during the application and preparation for the hiring process for the position of superintendent. The La Conner School District is located on the homelands of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community and near their reservation created by the Treaty of Point Elliott on January 22, 1855 (Treaty, 2022). As I came to know from the student demographics, students from the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community make up about 40% of the student population in La Conner. I also came to know that Native Americans have been cited as performing well-below non-Native students based on measurements set by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) for as far back as data exists (Report, 2022).

Together with the OSPI data, I brought my authentic self to be in relationship with the Swinomish. Authenticity is important, which Dr. LaPier brings up in her book, *Invisible Reality* (2017, p. xii). But then who has authority to speak? asks Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald in her book, *Indigenous Storywork* (2008). Storywork, a term coined by Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), is the process of storytelling, listening, and meaning-making from the stories. It builds on the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy that form a framework for understanding the characteristics of stories, appreciating the process of storytelling, establishing a receptive learning context, and engaging in holistic meaning-making.

Dr. Archibald talks about who has authority to speak in her book when citing Basil Johnston, an Ojibwe *dx"syəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip* and author.

Words are medicine that can heal or injure.... To instill respect for language the old counselled the youth, "Don't talk too much," ... for they saw a kinship between language and truth. The expression is not without its facetious aspect but in its broader application it was intended to convey to youth other notions implicit in the expression. "Don't talk too much," for the injunction also meant "Don't talk too often.... Don't talk too long.... Don't talk about those matters that you know nothing about." Were a person to restrict his discourse, and measure his speech, and govern his talk by what he knew, he would earn the trust and respect of his [or her] listeners People would want to hear the speaker again and by so doing bestow upon the speaker the opportunity to speak, for ultimately it is the people who confer the right of speech by their audience. (Johnston, B. 1990, p. 12, as cited by Archibald, J, 2008, p. 19)

Honoring these words, it is important as *dx"syəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip* to be authentic and truthful. This is important as well in the context of the Indigenous research paradigm that requires that we are accountable to our relationships. Reciprocity or accountability to our relationships is seen in the truthful nature of our writing and storytelling. Kirkness and Barnhardt wrote in 1991 about the importance of the four R's-- respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. About the importance of respect, reciprocity, and relationships as embedded in the work of Native scholars, Wilson (2008) writes:

Evelyn Steinhauer quotes a personal communication with Cora Weber-Pillwax, who says, "A researcher must make sure that the three R's, Respect, Reciprocity and Relationality, are guiding the research." Evelyn explains. Respect is more than just saying please and thank you and reciprocity is more than giving a gift. According to Cree Elders, showing respect or kihceyih towin is a basic law of life. Respect regulates how we treat Mother Earth, the plants, the animals and our brothers and sisters of all races.... Respect means you listen intently to others' ideas, that you do not insist that your idea prevails. By listening you show honour, consider the well being of others, and treat others with kindness and courtesy. (p. 58)

In the 2021 version of an updated book first written in 2009, Margaret Kovach talks about stories and how the three R's relate: "Story nurtures relationship. Story kindles reciprocity. Story compels responsibility. Story thrives where there is respect. Story is a gift. And in research, this changes everything" (p. 156).

An Indigenous research paradigm is cyclic in nature, continuing to return to previous people, thoughts, and ideas to add to, reflect on, consider more or closer connections, bring about more clarity, honor, and respect. The

cyclic nature is like tipi rings, medicine wheels, lunar cycles, rhythms of life, and ways of knowing, all circular. Each time we circle, we learn from the teachings and engage with the communal knowledge of our culture, our Elders, our cosmos, our ancestors, and our connections to all things physically, spiritually, and mentally.

Crowshoe & Manneschmidt write in their book, *Akak'stiman* (2002), about the interrelationships that occur resulting from circular forms in ceremony and lifeways: "Every ceremony took place in the shape of a circle, facilitated by the floor plan of the tipi" (p. 36). Circular and spiral patterns and movements are natural, come from nature, and are part of ceremony. This circular structure is a part of our culture and ways of knowing.

The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community also holds to circular structures resulting from ways of knowing. In the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community publication, *13 Moons First Foods and Resources Curriculum* (2019), the text also speaks to the rhythms of life following a circular pattern, 13 moons of a lunar cycle.

Integration and Repetition bəʔilid – Activities celebrate and amplify the beauty of the culture. The 13 Moons curriculum events are often designed as complementary activities that are integrated into existing community events such as Earth Day, the annual clambake, and elders' luncheons. Following the Coast Salish teaching principle of "repeating" bəʔilid, the curriculum is designed to reinforce knowledge through repetition within the season round and from year to year, revisiting places, plants, and animals at different phases of the Swinomish lunar calendar.

This principle, bəʔilid, also represents the cyclic nature of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, which this Indigenous research paradigm follows.

The purpose of my research entitled, *Indigenous Success in La Conner Public Schools* (2023), was to engage with Swinomish Elders, adults, education specialists, parents, family members, community members, and high school seniors in helping determine how the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community measures success of Swinomish students attending La Conner Public Schools. I hoped to understand what the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community considers success to be for Swinomish students attending La Conner Public Schools. I did this while maintaining awareness of Indigenous methods and relying on them to develop this study and to gain new knowledge through research. Then, based on this new knowledge, I developed recommendations that align with what the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community values as success for Swinomish students attending La Conner Public Schools.

I leave a quote here for you to ponder as we continue our journey together as researcher and reader, building on our burgeoning relationship:

"It is time for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research to break free from the hegemony of the dominant system, into a place where we are deciding our own research agendas" (Wilson, 2008, p. 17).

Isskanaitapssti, "Relationship. Every action affects everything interrelated," (Bastien, 2004, p. 203).

"Long, long ago, before our fathers or grandfathers were born, before the white people knew anything about the western half of North America, the Indians who told these stories lived on the Western plains" (Grinnell, 2005, p. 124). Continuing in the theme of storyteller, I relate the following Blackfeet story as told by Grinnell.

The Blackfeet believe that the Sun made the earth – that he is the creator. One of the names by which they call the Sun is Napi – Old Man. This is how they tell of the creation:

In the beginning there was water everywhere; nothing else was to be seen. There was something floating on the water, and on this raft were Old Man and all the animals. Old Man wished to make land, and he told the beaver to dive down to the bottom of the water and to try to bring up a little mud. The beaver dived and was underwater for a long time, but he could not reach the bottom. Then the loon tried, and after him the otter, but the water was too deep for them. At last the muskrat was sent down, and he was gone for a long time; so long that they thought he must have drowned, but at last he came up and floated almost dead on the water, and when they pulled him up on the raft and looked at his paws, they found a little mud in them. When the Old Man had dried this mud, he scattered it over the water and the land was formed. This is the story told by the Blackfeet. (Grinnell, 2005, p. 97)

This is a creation story of the Blackfeet. It speaks to the relationship that Natives have had with the animals, the earth, the cosmos, and the spirit beings since time immemorial. Relationships are important in Indigenous communities. Physical relationships and spiritual relationships are often depicted in stories that have been passed down for generations for learning about the ways of being and the ways of knowing. Stories create and maintain relationships.

These ways of knowing are premised on seeking understanding of the complex levels of kinship relations that constitute a cosmic world of balance and harmony. Indigenous ways of knowing are the Tribal processes that align Niitsitapi [lit. "real people," i.e., Indigenous people] with their alliances from which all knowing and knowledge is obtained. (Bastien, 2004, p. 1)

As Dr. Bastien points out, these alliances are an important relationship that have served Indigenous communities to live according to their ways of knowing, according to the relationships that exist within the cosmos. Through stories and lived experiences, Indigenous communities have gained the knowledge necessary to embrace their ways of knowing.

The responsibility of seeking knowledge is fundamental to the identity of Niitsitapi. Knowledge is generated for the purpose of maintaining the relationships that strengthen and protect the health and well being of individuals and the collective in a cosmic universe. (Bastien, 2004, p. 2)

The concept of access to new knowledge is predicated on the relationship through alliances with the cosmos, and there is a reciprocal relationship that is formed. "Knowledge that is generated from these relationships can only be understood and acquired through living and communicating with the natural and cosmic alliances" (Bastien, 2004 p. 5). Bastien speaks about how knowledge is an embodiment of the relationships with our ancestors, religion, the cosmos, and community and self.

The diversity, equity, and inclusion work brought me into relationship with the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians, where I became friends with several people who remain important to me. I first met Tracey Boser, a Stillaguamish Tribal member who served as the head of the Cultural Department. Tracey was supportive of the relationships we were developing which promoted the success of Stillaguamish students attending the Arlington School District. In this work, I met many other great friends. One of these friends is Ray Rehaume, who works for the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians in the Cultural Department. One day, Tracey and I were talking and she mentioned that they had a pipe in their archives from a Blackfeet Tribal member who had wandered through the area in the 1980s. She mentioned that this pipe really belonged with someone instead of sitting in the archives. Later, Ray began talking about the pipe as well. He asked me if I knew any pipe transfer ceremonies or songs. It makes me sad that I didn't know any. I did some online research, but I couldn't find anything.

While I was finishing out my time in Arlington, a few really good friends invited me to a going away gathering in Legion Park in downtown Arlington. At that going away gathering, we were enjoying food and great conversation, when Ray Rehaume; Stephanie Ironheart, a Sauk-Suiattle Tribal member; and others arrived. They requested to talk and said some really kind words about me, which were so authentic and touching. Then, the truly unexpected happened: Ray pulled a bundle from his bag and began to unwrap it. There on the table on the bundle wrapping lay the pipe from a Blackfeet Tribal member that had been stored in the archives for so long. Ray, Stephanie and others began singing in Lushootseed. It was such an honor, and I could feel the importance and all of our combined ancestors in spirit attending this gathering. It was much bigger than the human participants who had gathered. I was in tears and truly grateful and humbled to receive a medicine pipe transferred to me by Ray, Stephanie, and the others in attendance. This was meant to be, just like accepting the position in the La Conner School District. This story lives here to honor everyone who has had some part in this story, for which I am so very thankful.

This story is about relationships that develop, grow, and create a connectedness that transcends the actual relationship. The idea of transcendence is seen in the above story in how the pipe was brought to the area in the 1980s and through relationships in the 2020s created a connectedness that could only have happened through the sacred and cyclical nature of the existence of the pipe.

In the long passage below, Wilson (2008) describes how this cyclic nature is ceremony, how it is research.

I am mentioning this because I would like to use what I believe is the underlying symbolism of the circle to illustrate an idea (I hope that I am not being dogmatic myself in doing this). For me, putting ideas in a circle or wheel indicates that they are interrelated and that each blends into the next. It also implies that the ideas flow from one to the next in a cyclical fashion. A change in one affects the others, which in turn affects new change in the original. All parts of the circle are equal; no part can claim superiority over, or even exist without, the rest of the circle. So forget for a moment any dogma you know about medicine wheels, so that I can use the symbol of the circle to explain an Indigenous research paradigm.

A research paradigm is made up of four entities: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. But rather than thinking of them as four separate ideas or entities, try to think of them in a circle. The entire circle is an Indigenous research paradigm. Its entities are inseparable and blend from one into the next. The whole of the paradigm is greater than the sum of its parts. Now that I think of it, perhaps that is another distinction between our paradigm and western ones, which scientists and philosophers seem to have no trouble dissecting.

As I write and contemplate, I can see how my research ceremony has led to a raised awareness of what Indigenous research is. Relationality seems to sum up the whole Indigenous research paradigm to me. Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. (pp. 70-71)

Reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth. Thus an object or thing is not as important as one's relationship to it. This idea could be further expanded to say that reality is relationships or sets of relationships. Thus, there is no one definite reality, but rather different sets of relationship that make up an Indigenous ontology. Therefore, reality is not an object but a process of relationships...

It is important to recognize that the epistemology includes entire systems of knowledge and relationships. These relationships are with the cosmos around us, as well as with concepts. They thus include interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas. Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos. Indigenous epistemology is our systems of knowledge in their context, or in relationship. (Wilson, 2008, p. 74)

It is important to address authenticity and validity. Through my life story, you will come to know [Kakyosin -- come to know in Blackfoot], through our relationship that develops over the course of this writing, my own struggles with authenticity as a Native man living in the 21st century. What makes a modern Native authentic? What gives me the right to research and write about the success of Swinomish students in La Conner Public Schools? How can we be sure of the validity of the sources?

Just because I am Native, does that give me the right to write about other Native communities? Following an Indigenous research paradigm that requires relationships and accountability to those relationships sets up a research study from a Native perspective that is authentic. Building trust through relationships has been a strong part of my life as a Native, that was given to me by my mom, Lila. True relationships require accountability to those relationships. The people with whom you have relationships are your source of guidance, support, wisdom, experience, love, and hope. To those same people, you are their source of guidance, support, wisdom, experience, love, and hope. This is the reciprocity that comes from the accountability to the relationships we develop.

As an educator who has learned more about patience from working in an alternative high school setting, I have come to understand what relationships can do to lift up the voices of students who had been tossed aside. I also understand what relationships can do to lift up the hearts of students, staff, community members, friends, and family when life brings them down. This is authenticity.

As an educator who has worked as a director of equity and student success, I have come to understand what it means to advocate, promote, and engage others in courageous conversations about bias and microaggressions, about race and racism, about allyship and antiracism, about hope. All of this work is built on my relationships with the land, the water, the sky, people, the cosmos.

Dr. Roslyn LaPier tells us about how we Blackfeet relate to our people who have died.

The Blackfeet believed that human bodies die and decompose but the individual essence or soul of the human person lives on. Referring to a dead ancestor does not mean the person is “dead and gone”: it instead implies that the body is gone but the individual’s essence lives on in another part of Blackfeet territory. (LaPier, 2017, p. xx)

It brings great power and support to know that my Naaahsinnooniiksi [ancestors in Blackfoot] are in relationship with me, are here with me, are guiding me, and helping live a good life. This also means that through reciprocity, I am living the life of responsibility to my Naaahsinnooniiksi, and to all Indigenous ancestors. I am also living the life of responsibility to our next seven generations.

Moving from discussing authenticity to validity, we have to consider if the research will hold validity. Throughout the research study I have utilized an Indigenous research paradigm that requires respect, relationships, and reciprocity; I continuously circled back to the impetus engaging me in this work -- to ensure Native students, families, and communities see and experience greater success in public schools. By continuing to keep my relationships with the Swinomish people at the forefront throughout this research, I validated the purpose of this research with their guidance, support, knowledge, experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and values.

Authenticity and validity require that my purpose in approaching this research study with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community was authentic, and that I brought my authentic self as a Native man who is coming to understand the relationships, the alliances that are necessary to undertake the responsibility of the new knowledge that develops through the relationships of the *dx^wsyəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip*. With this study comes accountability to the *dx^wsyəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip* and to the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community.

Relationships, stories, and words mark qualitative inquiry. Many qualitative approaches, such as feminist methodologies and participatory action research, value the relational. This includes Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies, which adopt a relationist and non-isolationist approach, assert an Indigenous epistemology (Archibald et al., 2019; Oliveria & Wright 2015; L.T. Smith, 2012; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019).

Indigenous methodologies, based as they are on Indigenous epistemologies, distinguish themselves from qualitative approaches embedded in Western history and intellectual tradition. (Kovach, 2021, pp. 24-25)

In this research, I/we created a focus group who developed the purpose statement. When we think about relationality, or relationships, developing a purpose statement for a research study using a focus group allows the group to grow capacity, lean into the work, and develop a relationship as a team, as a focus group. Creating a purpose statement in a focus group is in relationship and enables the gaining of communal knowledge through that relationship. Through these relationships, I began to develop an understanding of the values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that contribute to this study, and gained insights that aided in analyzing the research data.

Thinking about the validity of the study, we have to consider what makes a study valid. In an Indigenous paradigm and being accountable to the study, ensuring that what *dx^wsyəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip* contribute is transcribed and vetted by each *dx^wsyəhub/aytsiinikii-esskiniibiists iyiniip*, is essential in making sure the study is valid. Although I facilitated this study, the content came from the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. The research was done with Swinomish *dx^wsyəhub/aytsiinikiiesskiniibiists iyiniip* and not to the Swinomish people.

This same focus group developed the research questions for this study using a talking circle, which is also about the relationships.

There are two intertwined themes in Talking Circles which are essential to Indian culture. First, respect for the individual is evident in that each person is given an equal chance to bring forth their concerns and each is listened to with respect. The second theme is that each individual is a vital part of a great community. The whole weight of the talking circle affirms the inherent value of each individual to the group as a whole. There is not pressure to agree or reach a consensus: the important thing is that each person be heard by their community and that no voice be lost. (Swinomish, 2002, p. 275)

I also gathered additional focus groups to address the purpose statement and research questions developed by the initial focus group. By stepping into this research with the plan to develop the purpose statement and the research questions in the focus groups and by the focus groups, the research was not done to the Swinomish people, it was done with mutual respect as the focus group members created the purpose statement and research questions in relationship with the researcher and each other.

Staying with the concept of relationality, even the individual interviews are first about the relationship with the people being interviewed. Further, reading literature to gain a deeper connection with the research creates a relationship with the literature, as well as with the Indigenous scholars who have contributed to the literature. By committing to using mainly Indigenous scholars, I am honoring and respecting their work and lifting up their voices; and, through these acts, I am building relationships with them. Additionally, as a Native man committing to using an Indigenous research paradigm while engaging in research with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, I hoped to demonstrate relationality. This research would be completely different if I were not Native and I were not using an Indigenous research paradigm. By engaging in this research, the entire premise is to ensure that the Swinomish people had voice and ownership in the study. The relationality of the Indigenous approach to the research and the Swinomish people and Swinomish students, aligns with the Indigenous research paradigm.

Kiitomohpiipotokoi -- “Roles and responsibilities, ‘what you have been put here with.’ The assumption of responsibility comes with it,” (Bastien, 2004, p. 207). Briefly, if Indigenous scholars are to be freed from the need to constantly justify our research and knowledge systems from a dominant system perspective, it may be necessary for us to be clearer in our articulation of exactly what our paradigm entails. (Wilson, S. 2008, p. 12)

In an in-depth conversation with Gerry Ebalaroza-Tunnel (personal communication, 2021), which was not unusual for us, Gerry spoke about a particular book I’ll talk about shortly. We have served together as leaders in diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have helped each other when down, encouraged each other when we needed encouragement, and uplifted each other when the work got heavy. Gerry inspired me to be on this path and walks beside me as I write these words: “As a scholar who identifies as ‘Indigenous’ amongst other ethnic identities, I continue to learn to embrace the power of my positionality as a privileged, educated, woman of color” (Ebalaroza-Tunnel, 2022, p. vi).

Gerry walks this world with AloHā. You’ll have to read her dissertation to really understand what this means. When we talked late last year, I was just beginning to situate myself in the beginning stages of this dissertation. I was approaching this dissertation from a very traditional, colonized perspective. I needed to talk with Gerry to begin decolonizing my thinking, to decolonize this dissertation, and to continue my own path of personal decolonization. I knew Gerry was exactly whom I needed to speak with. We arranged a phone call, and I asked her about her literature review. She was getting close to defending her dissertation. She suggested I read Shawn Wilson’s book, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008). This was lifechanging.

As Shawn Wilson writes in his book:

One thing that became clear through this study and that I discuss in the next chapter, is that Indigenous research is a ceremony and must be respected as such. A ceremony, according to Minnecunju Elder Lionel Kinunwa, is not just the period at the end of the sentence. It is the required process and preparation that happens long before the event. It is, in Atkinson’s (2002b) translation, *dadirri*, the many ways and forms and levels of listening. It is, in Martin’s (2003) terminology, *Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing*. It is the knowing and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected. It is the voice from our ancestors that tell us when it is right and when it is not. Indigenous research is a life changing ceremony. (Wilson, 2008, pp. 60-61).

I am forever grateful to Gerry for her inspiration and teaching that connected me with Shawn Wilson’s work. Later, Gerry and I were talking some more and I mentioned that I wanted to move toward the direction of an Indigenous paradigm. At that time, I was still considering the following purpose statement (which by the way is so inconceivable now that I have learned from Shawn Wilson and others that I can’t believe that I started here): The purpose is to determine the cause of the continued inequities experienced by students from the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community attending La Conner Public Schools as evidenced by trend data in areas such as attendance, academic achievement, WAKids, 3rd grade reading data, 9th graders on track, graduation rates, discipline data, participation in advanced level courses, and to recommend changes necessary for students to experience success at the same level or greater than non-native peers.

After my conversations with Gerry, it was apparent that this approach was based on colonial values and ideas that didn't really reflect my core, my Indigeneity, connections to our ancestors. During the spring of 2022, I called Dr. Gerry (she successfully defended her dissertation on December 11, 2021) and we caught up. I told her how proud I was of her. I also knew that I needed to ask Gerry if she would serve on my doctoral committee. She said yes. And from that point forward, we were on this path together. Then in mid-July of 2022, as I was preparing to attend EDAD 652 – Research Institute Seminar II at Western Washington University, I set up a time to talk with Gerry again. We had to present our research proposal to our colleagues, to the new cohort of doctoral students, as well as to the Dean, Assistant Dean, and others. I needed to respect and honor the ancestors by approaching this presentation through the lens of an Indigenous research paradigm. I needed to hear Gerry's words of encouragement and to hear that I was on the right path. I knew in my heart how Gerry was going to react, but I still needed to hear it. I suffer often from this notion of imposter syndrome; and Gerry built up my confidence, which I desperately needed from a successful Indigenous scholar, colleague, and friend. Thank you Dr. Gerry!

Following the call with Gerry, I called Dr. Tim Bruce, my doctoral committee chair, to talk about how I hoped to be able to present my research proposal using an Indigenous research paradigm to guide me. He was super supportive and gave me a thumbs up. It seemed like time flew by, and then we were in our summer institute. Tim introduced the session, thanked everyone for coming and asked if anyone wanted to go first. My hand shot up. I was really nervous, but I knew that, if I wanted to have an impact, I needed to go first. I had collected meaningful and sacred items, rolled them in a blanket that I had been honored with from the Stillaguamish Tribe and brought them to the front with me. I began my presentation by introducing myself in Blackfoot (always important to respect our ancestors and use our Native languages as often as possible), and then I slowly unrolled the bundle of meaningful and sacred items. I told the stories associated with a very old eagle feather entrusted to me by my very close friend, Linda Elves, with a deer rawhide rattle that I had made, with a smudge pot I use to cleanse and bring positive energy, and with a medicine pipe that was transferred to me by Ray Rehaume. The room was quiet; I was breathing fast, trying to slow down my speech and center on the importance of that moment. Living in two worlds isn't always easy. You don't feel like you are really a part of either, until you really take hold of what is rightfully yours, your Indigeneity. While I was nervous and excited at the same time, I could see that the scholars in the room were really engaged, listening, learning, and becoming a part of the connectedness where everyone is experiencing the same moment, the same messaging, the same power of relationality. You see, research is ceremony, and through ceremony, we are all connected.

This is Tim: I would like to thank Will for sharing his expertise and knowledge about current indigenous research strategies. Will and I both had the incredible opportunity to connect with the lives and culture of the Swinomish, to hear their stories, and to learn about how our public school might better meet the needs and goals of their students, families, community, and tribal leadership. As we both listened and learned with the Swinomish, a journey rich with Native pride was told, revealing more than a story about how to better serve Swinomish students, but a story that depicted an ancient and gentle culture; a culture where members selflessly work for the betterment of the Tribe and the relationships that reach beyond their homelands.

In 2006, utilizing Swinomish co-researchers and asking for input and approval from tribal leadership concerning the research questions and protocol was considered groundbreaking. I sought to be respectful of tribal culture and values. The Swinomish were gracious and honored my work, but it fell short of my goal of doing research in full partnership with the Swinomish.

Will's research provided me with a second chance at being involved with a paradigm that takes a giant step forward. As Will previously shared: "It is time for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research to break free from the hegemony of the dominant system, into a place where we are deciding our own research agendas" (Wilson, 2008, p. 17).

As indigenous research methods evolve and more tribes insist on deciding their own research agendas, I am reminded of a poem shared with me by Father Pat Twohy, a much-loved Catholic Priest who served the Swinomish for over 40 years.

On the sea and on the rivers,
In the mountains and in the cities,
In courtroom, classrooms, and legislative halls,

A living People stands and fights for its place on this earth,
For its unique identity and sovereign dignity.

Both old and young seek out and follow
The ancient ways of understanding and generosity,
That shaped and guided their great-great-grandparents.
Long Houses are filled with dancers
And Songs warm up the Churches.

Carvers, painters, speakers, teachers, writers
Find forms, colors, and words to embody
New Visions coming to a living People. (Twohy, 1999, p.102-103)

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