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**Conducting Participatory Action Research with Canadian Indigenous  
Communities: A Methodological Reflection**

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**Conducting Participatory Action Research with Canadian Indigenous Communities:  
A Methodological Reflection**

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**Abstract**

A central challenge with participatory action research (PAR) pertains to discrepancies between principles and practice. What sounds simple in theory (e.g., establishing a respectful collaboration) is often much more complex in real community settings. The challenges, lessons learned, and successes of PAR were examined within the context of a large national research project that involved 8 First Nation communities and academics. To engage in the process of reflective examination, two methodological approaches were utilized: (1) a qualitative interview study with 19 project members about their experiences within the project, and (2) a secondary qualitative analysis of the author's own experiences and observations (as recorded in research journals). This paper summarizes some of the barriers to conducting PAR with Indigenous communities (i.e., themes of distrust/personal safety concerns, community readiness, waning motivation, financial stress, power differences, and differing norms/expectations), as well as some of the lessons that were learned about how to overcome these challenges and cultivate strong, healthy research relationships.

Because of the long history of Euro-American colonialism and paternalism toward First Nations, the issue of conducting research with Indigenous communities has evolved into a rather delicate situation (Mihesuah, 1998). Robinson (1997) discusses the unusual paradox that while many First Nations people feel they have been "researched to death", they also complain that there has not been enough of the "right kind" of research. The former refers to the fact that, for years, academics, government researchers and corporations have been collecting immense amounts of data from Indigenous peoples with very little of it ever benefiting the oppressed and impoverished First Nations, in spite of initial promises. On the other hand, many Indigenous communities are now engaged in revitalizing endeavours to regain self-determination and, in this context, many see the value in research methods that can help them to bring about desperately-needed social change and community healing.

Participation Action Research (PAR) is a promising alternative in which a new brand of respectful research relationship may be nurtured. Yet, PAR presents challenges in translating principles into practice. It is not enough for non-Native academics simply to have good intentions or to try to "show respect" and collaborate, as too often, this manifests as paternalism in a new guise (Menzies, 2001). Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) describe the need to negotiate an "ethical space": an equal and inclusive common-ground between worldviews. Privileged members of society are challenged to acknowledge their unquestioned assumptions and social relativity before humbly entering into the 'negotiation'.

Research, like schooling, once the tool of colonization and oppression, is very gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages, histories, and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to

an alternative way of knowing and of being. (Smith, 2005, p. 91)

## Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities (USIC) Project, 2000-2008:

In 2000, a small group of academics led by Dr. Schmidt at Cape Breton University collaborated with a steering committee of prominent Canadian Indigenous individuals to design an optimistic vision for a PAR-based project. The group's goal was to use PAR to identify and study successes in a diversity of First Nations so that they in turn could serve as role models and/or sources of inspiration for other Indigenous communities. A focus on the positive was selected specifically to counter the predominantly negative news-stories (typically featuring child protective services, addiction, suicide, violence, and poverty) that are too often are the only images portrayed of First Nations in the media. Rather than further perpetuating the atmosphere of hopelessness and despair, as Chataway (1998) stated:

A focus on strengths lends power to those strengths, and creates energy to produce more. Science can illuminate the beauty in people's lives, help to clarify their values and goals, and provide resources for their journey toward these goals. (p. 18)

Eight diverse Indigenous communities from different regions of Canada agreed to participate and 5 remained in collaboration with the project through to its conclusion in 2008. It should be clearly stated that these were not the "*most* successful" First Nations in Canada, but rather: (a) they were nominated as being highly successful in 1 or more specific area (e.g., revival of traditional language, and/or economic development, and/or governance, and/or physical health, etc.), and (b) their local leaders agreed that the project was of

interest as well as something that they could accommodate at that particular point in time. Others who initially expressed interest eventually concluded that they were too busy with other commitments. Thus, timing and availability played a significant role in determining which First Nations were chosen to participate.

After permission was granted by the local chief and council, a small group of community members from each of the participating First Nations was hired, trained in research methods by USIC academics, and provided with on-going support via email, telephone, and occasional in-person visits. A local advisory committee was established to assist the researchers, and one person was hired as researcher supervisor for each community. Those selected to receive research training tended to be young mothers or unemployed / underemployed individuals, who could accommodate the unusual hours (i.e., whenever people are available) associated with community research. A triangulated methodology was utilized which included: (1) Focus Groups that explored the question "What are the strengths of your First Nation?", (2) Case Studies to explore the development/history of each community's core strengths (including how challenges were overcome), and (3) a Survey which asked individuals to rate their First Nation on a wide variety of topics such as governance, housing, culture, mental and physical health, etc.

## **How successful was USIC in PAR theory versus practice?**

As the project progressed, it became evident that although words such as "collaboration" and "empowerment" were frequently used by the academics, many community-level researchers did not feel like their voices were being heard. Dissatisfaction was most commonly expressed through subtle means

such as whispered side-comments and facial expressions, withdrawing from contact / absences from scheduled phone meetings, and privately through one-on-one conversations. Many community-level researchers did not feel comfortable voicing their critiques during group meetings, especially with high-powered individuals present such as professors, chiefs, and members of the steering committee. Thus, pre-existing power differences and social inequalities continued to affect decision-making and the course of the project, in spite of the positive-sounding rhetoric. Too often, silence was misinterpreted as signifying group consensus, as opposed to disempowerment of the most marginalized group members.

Rather than ignoring this discrepancy between principle and practice, an additional research project was designed to evaluate the USIC project in terms of its successes, as well as other things that, in retrospect, really should have been approached differently from the start. A central objective of this reflective step was to provide the community-level researchers with an outlet in which they would feel safe voicing all of their ideas, questions, and criticisms of the project that had previously gone unheard. Our hope was that others may benefit from the entire group's collective learnings about how to conduct successful PAR with Indigenous communities. Thus, in spite of some short-comings, the USIC research project was concluded in an optimistic and respectful manner.

### **Method**

**Participants:** Nineteen USIC collaborators participated in this reflective evaluation of the USIC project. The group consisted of 10 community-level researchers, 6 community-level research supervisors, 2 USIC administrators/academics, and 1 community-

level advisor. In terms of ethnicity, 14 were First Nations individuals (from 6 different First Nation cultures: Anishinaabek, Coast Salish, Cree, Mi'kmaw, and Tlingit), and 5 participants were non-Native. In terms of gender, the sample consisted of 11 women and 6 men.

**Qualitative Data-Collection Process:** One focus group and a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. Individuals were asked to reflect upon their experiences within the USIC project, which included (a) the challenges they faced, (b) solutions for handling said challenges, (c) their perceptions about the quality of the data collected (i.e., Was it representative? Were people being honest?), (d) things that should have been done differently in retrospect, (e) things that were done correctly, (f) surprises encountered, and (g) advice for future researchers contemplating similar PAR projects with Indigenous communities. The focus group and interviews were conducted in-person whenever possible, however, given the geographical distances between communities and personal preferences of some participants, one phone interview and five email interviews (i.e., typed responses to a set of questions) were also included. Following transcription of the taped interviews and focus group, a grounded theory analysis was conducted to identify common themes that emerged from the participants' collective contributions.

**Additional Analysis of Research Journals:** The author of this study (a non-Native female academic who worked in various capacities in USIC while completing graduate school) also chose to conduct a qualitative analysis of her research journals. This was done in order to integrate some additional observations into the scope of the main research inquiry (albeit from the perspective of a non-Native who frequently

worked one-on-one with community-level researchers to complete data analyses and written reports). This final qualitative analysis was completed following the interview/focus group study.

### **Results**

**a. Six Challenge Themes:** Four reoccurring themes about barriers to research emerged from the interviews and focus group with USIC collaborators, while another two themes were found in a qualitative analysis of the author's own research journals.

#### **Theme 1: Distrust and Safety Concerns.**

Given how long First Nations people have been marginalized in North America, it is understandable why several of the barriers to PAR related to issues of distrust and personal safety. These included distrust of:

(i) *Academic Researchers:* One interviewee stated that it was difficult "getting people to accept research as a good word, not an evil one." All participating First Nations had previous experiences with researchers who had broken promises: Following data collection, many researchers never again returned having earned their degree or secured their publication. They did not share reports, ask the community to check for accuracy, or respect the community's ownership of the information provided. Such negative experiences bred distrust and suspicion with regard to all research. As such, enticing community members to participate in research presented a challenge. One researcher stated that some people in her community simply "don't do surveys". It was also not uncommon for people to agree to participate but then to back out or not show up to scheduled appointments. Many people were hesitant and uncertain about participating. "The most frequent exclamation or comment was: "Not another survey?! [...] What was the

*result of the last survey we did??"* – Community researcher #2

(ii) *Local collaborators:* Due to their easy accessibility, distrust for academics was often displaced onto the community members who were known to be their collaborators. Community researchers talked about the barrage of questions and comments they received from their fellow community members. Citizens also asked the researchers repeatedly when the final reports would be available. While positive that people seemed eager to see results, the researchers talked about the pressure this made them feel to deliver on USIC's promises and remain accountable. They also stated that it required immense patience to respond politely to the same issues over and over again. "There's always some sort of a barrier or somebody questioning "why?" you know? I feel that there's no trust." – Community supervisor #1

(iii) *Government:* The project's largest financial contributor was a national academic board, but supplementary funding also came from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Interviewees noted that this branch of the government has had a very detrimental effect on the lives of many First Nations people. Levels of distrust varied from both community to community and from person to person. While community leaders gave consent for a 'hands-off' level of INAC involvement, there remained individuals who were still uncomfortable with the arrangement. "Some communities have been through some really negative processes with DIA and INAC. [...] If you've been done to the backdoor by INAC, it's gonna be hard to bring that relationship into a positive mode." – Community researcher #1

(iv) *Privacy:* Concerns also emerged as a result of hiring local community

members to collect the data. Although few First Nations people will share private information with complete strangers, gossip can be a major problem in small communities. As such, it was essential that community members trusted the local people hired as researchers to maintain confidentiality. Additional responsibilities were also placed on local researchers to protect information that was not meant to be shared outside the community. *“Privacy rights are an issue and people have often mentioned this to me. There are things that are shared locally; however, there are personal things that are not meant to be shared.”* – Community researcher #9

(v) *Emotional Safety*: Participants stated that a few survey questions were upsetting for individuals struggling with depression and other unresolved emotional issues. As a safeguard, each research team had created a list of their local counselling resources. In one instance, however, survey distribution triggered near community-wide hysteria because Elders in this community had never discussed their residential school trauma. As a result, a few questions (that had not caused problems in the other communities) set off an intense reaction and the project came to a halt. Researchers spoke of feeling deeply shaken by the pain they had inadvertently triggered. Fortunately, a local group was contacted that helped the Elders begin to participate in healing circles. After much discussion, the Elders granted permission to resume distribution of the survey. *“A lot of people are still hurting. A lot of people have a lot of old pent-up memories and stuff. There’s just a lack of trust.”* – Community researcher #4

### **Theme 2: Community Readiness to**

**Engage.** Just because a Chief and Council gave permission for a project like USIC to commence, it did not mean that ideal

conditions for PAR were present, nor that the community was genuinely ready.

*i. Council Support*: Research tended to progress most smoothly when the Chief and council members publically endorsed the project, acting as advocates and advisors. In contrast, other researchers described the challenge of working with a “hands-off” Council that did not appear to be as actively interested in the research. In these situations, access to the leaders was limited to monthly Council meetings which at times impeded progress. One community even withdrew after the Chief and Council discovered that negativity toward the leadership was being expressed in the focus groups: *“The people that were criticized didn’t take it well and pretty much shut down the project. The community needed some of those big problems dealt with before they could think about the strengths of their community.”* – Academic administrator #1

*ii. Political stability*: In some First Nations when a local election occurred, the same group of people was re-elected and the research continued unencumbered. In other communities, local elections were contentious and all research came to a halt; the level of community distrust rose sharply and many citizens no longer felt comfortable disclosing personal opinions. Researchers felt this presented a challenge in patience because there was nothing to do but wait for the environment to normalize. One community withdrew from the project following an election because the new Chief and Council opted not to continue the research partnership.

*iii. Varying abilities of the supervisors*: The community-level supervisors had very different levels of experience, self-confidence, and access to resources. Some were novices who felt intimidated by the many responsibilities

they were given. And whereas some supervisors took to the research methods very quickly, others needed more time and support to gain proficiency. Some individuals were able to clearly articulate their needs, while others became avoidant in the face of problems. Missed deadlines and phone meetings were sometimes a signal that something was not right and needed attention. It was not safe to assume that because things went well in one community, the same type of support would be sufficient in another.

**Theme 3: Maintaining Motivation and Productivity:** USIC was very ambitious in its aim to complete multi-method research in 8 First Nations, and the lengthy project strained motivation, resources and relationships. At the outset, motivation was high, but as difficulties emerged and as the newness of the endeavour wore off, fatigue and loss of enthusiasm became increasingly problematic.

*i. Nature of participatory work:* Interviewees cited the time-consuming nature of the project as a major challenge. The process of first convincing people to participate was lengthy. Then collecting, analyzing, and writing-up data often turned out to be much more work than was originally expected. In community research, things rarely go exactly according to plan, and activities that sound simple, in theory, often prove otherwise. *“Just the running-around stuff... like people call you when the survey’s done: “Can you come pick it up?” So I go [to] pick it up and they won’t be home. [...] Like I’d have to get a ride down there and meet them at certain times and then they wouldn’t show up. Or they’d have the survey but it wouldn’t be done and I’d have to go through it and say, “Well, okay, you didn’t answer this and here’s one you*

*didn’t answer...” – Community researcher #4*

*ii. Researcher turn-over:* Supervisors and academics spent a significant amount of time training community members to conduct the research according to USIC methods and standards. It proved a test of their patience to then watch as people quit the project – thus, facilitating a need to hire and train others to take their place. People quit the project for a variety of reasons: to attend university, for better paying jobs, etc. Others couldn’t balance the demands of the job with family obligations. Some felt that the financial compensation wasn’t adequate, or they discovered research wasn’t something they enjoyed. *“It’s tiring. It may be too much to ask of young, mostly female community members. It’s a lot to ask when they’re trying to learn how to do research at the same time and raise their families and sometimes go to school.” – Academic administrator #1*

**Theme 4: Financial Stresses.** As stated above, low wages paid by the USIC project resulted in community-level researchers leaving when other jobs presented themselves. When USIC was designed, it proposed to pay typical postsecondary student wages to community-level researchers. Thus, wages were low and, as opposed to an hourly wage, researchers received payment for completing tasks such as interviewing, transcribing and delivering reports. Although it sometimes took many days to get one person to complete a survey, only a modest sum of money was received for each survey. While this inspired some researchers to work harder (so that it became worth their while financially), others became frustrated. Postsecondary students accept low wages because they may have additional financial support, and they know that the work experience will help them to earn their

degree. Non-students, who are living far below the poverty line with families to support, in contrast, do not have the same luxury. Researchers often could not afford to cover expenses such as gas mileage, even with later reimbursement.

The slow-pace of compensation through a university's financial department also became problematic. Forms needed to be completed in full, signed by multiple parties, faxed in, and processed on the university's biweekly payment schedule before any wages were deposited. Some community-level supervisors revealed that they had paid researchers out of their own personal savings to avoid losing them. In other cases, local supervisors simply did not have the financial means to do so, and as a result, trained researchers were lost to better paying jobs. A lack of realistic financial planning in the beginning stages of the project meant that supplementary fundraising became an ever-increasing challenge for project administrators as the project went on. *"Ensure funding. Funding, funding, funding is big one. If you can't, they'll stop. You'll lose some of the very best people you have. People can only sacrifice so much."* – Community supervisor #3

#### **Theme 5: Pre-existing Power Differences.**

As stated in the introduction, the author began to observe throughout the course of the USIC project that unequal power relations were affecting whose voices were heard (versus not) when project decisions were made. Professors, chiefs and other high-ranking Indigenous officials were accustomed to asserting their opinions and public-speaking, but many community-level researchers initially lacked this level of confidence and experience. They felt intimidated, self-doubting and disempowered. When speaking with such people individually, however, it became

evident that they were self-censoring and not voicing valid concerns, questions, and suggestions to the larger group. Often they would wait until for a private conversation with a visiting academic, along with an informal setting in which to talk confidentially – at which point, they would proceed to disclose their frustrations.

#### **Theme 6: Differing Norms, Expectations and Priorities:**

*i. The communities' pace versus deadlines:* First Nations research requires working at the pace as set by the community, so that for example, if a community member passes away, everyone may stop work for several days to show respect and observe local practices. This has to be patiently respected, regardless of research deadlines. Other times, the research shut down during Council elections, or when the community returned to the land to hunt and fish. A pull between project deadlines and working at the communities' pace, sometimes created a tension that was felt by all members of the project. Researchers worried that their communities weren't being respected and that the quality of data would suffer, if there was too much pressure regarding deadlines. They warned that their Councils would withdraw support for the project if academics became pushy and demanding. On the other hand, the academics who had negotiated deals with funding agencies (in return for delivering products by certain dates) felt pressure to meet the deadlines in order to keep the project afloat financially. One academic administrator commented: *"Funders need timelines and papers need timelines and people you work with, but it sometimes just isn't [possible]. That was really frustrating."*

*ii. "Indian time" versus "Academic Time":* Academics who work with First Nations sometimes describe the challenges of



“Indian Time” (i.e., working with people who prioritize family above career, and who operate more spontaneously than with advance scheduling). Indeed, the project’s academics wished at times that the data collection would progress at a faster pace. A related challenge for the First Nations occurred, however, when professors and students operated on “Academic Time” (i.e., according to their own autonomous schedules). The communities often expressed frustration over the slow pace of data analysis, writing and editing. Delayed final reports made the First Nations nervous because of the precedent set by previous unscrupulous academics.

## **b. Solutions to Address Core Challenges:**

### 1. Strategies for Building Trust and Accommodating Community Readiness

#### *i. Cultivate respectful relationships:*

Academics learned that trust can be gradually earned if one disproves negative stereotypes (about outsiders, academics, “the White Man”, etc.) via one’s own actions. Rather than getting upset or defensive (i.e., escalating tensions), it was a much better strategy to accept that these negative stereotypes exist due to historical precedent and then go out of your way to prove yourself different (i.e., humble, kind, open-minded, respectful, trustworthy, etc.) through your own actions. Respect and trust needed to be patiently earned, rather than expected or demanded, even if it required a lengthier stage of informal planning and getting to know the community before data-collection commenced.

*ii. The OCAP principles: Ownership, Control, Accessibility, Possession (Schnarch, 2004):* Open and transparent disclosure was another way of easing of concerns about the trustworthiness of the supporting academics. Controversial funding sources were discussed immediately rather than

downplayed. Academics also learned the importance of notifying community supervisors ahead of time if they planned to share preliminary results (even positive comments about community strengths) at conferences, because this allowed the communities to retain control over what information was shared and with whom. The researchers also signed a confidentiality agreement with each participant, thus teaching citizens about participant rights and ethical research practices. And rather than waiting to submit a final report, draft summaries of preliminary findings (as data collection was still progressing) were welcomed with interest and appreciation by community leaders. The drafts gave community members a chance to provide feedback about language clarity and other issues, thus giving them a hand in co-creating final documents and enhancing the research’s usefulness to the community.

#### *iii. Hire well-liked local researchers who genuinely care about the project:*

Interviewees stated that hiring citizens who are well-liked and respected within the community was a key factor in establishing trust. It also helped to hire people who genuinely believed in the value of the project because, as the “face of the project”, enthusiasm seemed to spread when the researchers were highly motivated and excited about the project. Hiring individuals from one (or more) large extended family also helped: “Most people knew people in my family like my great-grandfather and certain other family members. Like: “Oh, that was your grandma? Oh, gee! Come on in!”[...] As soon as they figured out who I was and who I knew and where I came from, they opened up.”- Community Researcher #4

#### *iv. Provide support based on Community Preferences:* Community

readiness cannot be forced, and as such, it may be helpful for academics to anticipate that challenges and delays will occur at all stages of research. One can then be ready to help generate ‘back-up plans’, while remaining positive, patient, flexible and persistent. It was important to listen to the preferences of each community and then provide suggestions and support in ways that respected those unique needs and inclinations. Always “asking rather than assuming” helped to accommodate the immense diversity among First Nations. As one administrator stated: “*It’s not a cookie cutter approach or it’s not just top-down, where you come in and say “Well, this is what works.” You still have to have some flexibility.*”

## **2. Strategies for Maintaining Motivation and Productivity**

*i. Collaborate on research design and cultivate ownership:* The importance of involving community-level researchers during the research design stage was one thing learned in retrospect. Even though academics worked with the community researchers to compile a list of detailed responses that they could give to frequently-asked-questions, researchers stated that they still grew frustrated trying to explain and defend research methods that a professor at a distant university had designed. Data quality sometimes suffered when researchers were unable to convince individuals why they needed to respond to all questions, or when questions had not been adequately adapted to each community. Ideally, academics should have presented the proposed research tools to the researchers in each community at the outset and asked for suggestions on how they could be improved. As well as heightening the quality of the research tools and delivery, this would have helped to cultivate a stronger sense of

project ownership within the researchers, thus assisting with their motivation and making it easier for them respond to community members’ questions and concerns.

*ii. Progressive training as research skills develop:* In retrospect, several participants noted that the community researchers could have benefited from more on-going training (especially in data analysis techniques) as they gained proficiency with the methods. Although requiring an investment of energy from supervisors and/or supporting academics, it may have helped the researchers’ motivation, empowerment and sense of ownership over the research. “*That would have helped because once they really had their feet planted in what the research was about and had experienced what their own strengths and weaknesses were, they would have been able to be much more active learners in the training.*” – Academic administrator #1

*iii. Sufficient wages for low SES individuals:* Ideally, consideration of this issue should begin when completing initial funding applications. Wages that are typically-paid to post-secondary students for research-assistant work are not sufficient (even as part-time employment) for individuals who may be living far below the poverty line and struggling to secure the basics. It is not at all empowering to feel unheard, and/or taken advantage of due to low wages and delays in receiving payment.

*iv. On-going communication and encouragement:* Community supervisors often took responsibility for lifting researchers’ spirits because on-going communication proved the best way to combat dwindling motivation. Monthly conference calls also provided a chance for researchers to share their triumphs and frustrations (albeit only for those who were

comfortable sharing with the group). When one team was experiencing difficulty, other teams shared what had worked for them. When they could be afforded, national project meetings and community visits from supporting-academics also boosted spirits and energy. A project website with a private online chat-room were created to enhance communication, however, the majority of community-researchers could not afford regular internet access. With rapid advances in technology, the internet may now be a more viable way for collaborators to keep in touch.

### **3. Strategies for Breaking Down Power Differences**

*a. Living on-reserve:* The author of this article resorted to arranging room-and-board situations with families on-reserve as a form of cost-savings, however, it quickly became clear that living in the community with a family came with additional benefits. Trusting relationships were established much more quickly. This in turn allowed the visiting academic to get a better understanding of community dynamics, and to tailor support to best meet local needs. Power differences, distrust, and shyness were reduced when the privileged outsider put herself in the somewhat vulnerable position of depending on community members for rides, for access to meals, and for general entry into the community. I also tried my best to fit in with my host families and be a good houseguest, which entailed helping out with household chores, including babysitting. The communities carefully observed throughout this process and in the end deemed me “a good person with a gentle spirit”. Once a trusting relationship was established, the research progressed more smoothly. Indeed, it was while living on-reserve that a number of community researchers began to disclose

their frustrations and concerns about not feeling heard.

*ii. Accessible language:* Language has the ability to empower and invite individuals into a conversation, just as it also has the power to exclude and intimidate. One administrator theorized that USIC succeeded because it was presented to the communities as a “strength-project” (an optimistic term) rather than “research” (a word which can have negative connotations in First Nations). While living on-reserve, I began introducing myself as a “student” who goes to “school”. I deliberately avoided using words like university, Ph.D., and graduate student on the grounds that everyone has been a “student” at one time in their life. By downplaying my status, conversations were easier to start because it was easier to find commonalities with people. Self-deprecating humour was also useful for similar reasons.

*iii. Boosting morale when needed:* Remaining optimistic and boosting the morale of others who might not be feeling confident can be one of the most important aspects of a supporting academic’s job. Sometimes people get discouraged and motivation starts to dwindle if there is no one offering encouragement to keep going. As one researcher commented about her supervisor: “*I can always go to him and there is no such thing as a stupid question. He’s always totally encouraged me.*” – Community Researcher #1

Researchers also talked about how USIC challenged them to complete complex tasks of which they often thought they weren’t capable. But with support and encouragement, many became competent interviewers and focus group facilitators who presented their work at local meetings and academic conferences. “*I have also been able to become more comfortable when*

*addressing groups of people. Working on this project has given me the opportunity to meet more people and made me extra proud of my First Nation.*” – Community Researcher #5

Similarly, researchers spoke about how they learned to boost the morale of participants when they were feeling shy and uncertain. In addition to emphasizing repeatedly that there are no right or wrong answers, many also began to employ self-deprecating humour to defuse tension and reassure people from the start that the sharing would take place in a safe and non-judgemental atmosphere.

### **Conclusion:**

USIC was a successful PAR project in many respects. Interviewees spoke positively about how the project promoted respect for local knowledge and enhanced community pride. Citizens said that they learned new things about their community and became reacquainted with friends and family. By hiring community members, the First Nations had ownership over the material they produced and local people took responsibility for safeguarding the collected data. Citizens were, in turn, proud to see community members carrying out the research. *“People are proud to be a part of the USIC project and of being seen as a strong First Nation. That in itself was often seen as a great accomplishment.”* – Community researcher #5

And yet pre-existing power differences, barriers to trust, and other misunderstandings did not resolve themselves simply because PAR methods were used. Mohawk Elder and professor Dr. Marlene Brant-Castellano warns: “Research that reinforces powerlessness is basically harmful to health” (as cited in Reading, 2003). Ermine et al’s (2004) “ethical space” challenges academics to find ways of

facilitating on-going dialogue in which even the most socially- marginalized parties feel safe, valued and heard. This study confirms that it is always important to ask others for their opinions, rather than assuming you know.

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