Listening Between the Lines:
Reflections on Collaborative Interpretation and Qualitative Research

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Abstract: An enduring premise of qualitative oral research is respectful listening, flexibility in terms of the interviewers’ agenda and community control and collaboration in terms of the findings. This paper will examine my evolving practice and approaches to listening, interpreting and collaborating with particular focus on “listening between the lines”.

In the fall of 2005 I was approached and asked to write an article on an aspect of qualitative research directly related to my own experience and learning for inclusion into a collection of essays on qualitative research. The most consistent thread weaving in and out of my experience of qualitative research is my interest in and my passion for listening to the stories and the life experiences of others. During the 1980s I facilitated workshops in north western Ontario on conducting community research and soon after, I found myself developing and creating hour long radio documentaries for CBC radio which provided a forum for community members to relate their experiences and stories on issues affecting their communities. This work as well as my interest in interviewing would lead me into teaching and studying oral historical methodology.

Throughout the past 25 years, there seldom have been opportunities for personal reflection on how my own approaches to qualitative research as well as my own style of interviewing have evolved and changed. There is no question that many aspects of doing research with Aboriginal communities and organizations have changed drastically in the past 10 to 20 years. While there are still researchers who will practice community-based or participatory research in tokenistic ways, there has been much work done by Aboriginal communities themselves to guide and determine their own agendas while still collaborating with non-Aboriginal institutions. It is against the backdrop of changing collaborative and community-based research approaches that I reflect on my own experiences.

First of all, this paper will provide some background information in order to situate myself within the research frameworks I have worked within. Some background to the First Nations Partnership Program at the University of Victoria is also important in order to understand my more recent influences to qualitative research. This paper will then describe what is meant by “listening between the lines” when interviewing and how four specific elements within decolonizing frameworks greatly encourage the success of intercultural listening in qualitative research: 1) taking as much time as necessary to collaborate, get feedback and fully discuss issues that arise, 2) quality of collaboration, 3) a reciprocal situated response to interviewing and analysis, 4) being flexible and open to change.
**Situating Myself**

Research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism and has been used to exploit and misrepresent Aboriginal peoples worldwide. (Smith, 1999, p. 1) As a non-Aboriginal woman most often doing research and interviewing with Aboriginal peoples, there is a particular need for situating myself within this work.

My heritage is a mix of Irish and English roots. My parents both grew up on farms, my mother in Saskatchewan and my father in Ontario. I have heard Aboriginal people talk about “blood memories”, which are associations one has to the land and culture despite where and how one has been brought up. Despite the fact that I grew up in a suburb of Toronto, I have inherited my parents’ love of quieter rural areas, and as soon as I could I left Toronto and took summer jobs in northern locations. When I finished high school, I left to find work in the Yukon Territory. It was here that I began to find work doing research with Aboriginal organizations and the direction of my life began to change.

In the late 1970s I was offered my first research position with, what was then, the Council for Yukon Indians. As Julie Cruikshank (1990) talks about in *Life Lived Like a Story*, the 1970s was a time when it was still acceptable for non-Aboriginal anthropologists and researchers to be doing fieldwork and interviewing with Aboriginal communities (13). Much has changed since that time in terms of communities creating their own policies for research ethics, protocol and collaboration. My own approach to research has been shaped by the communities and organizations that I have been fortunate enough to work with.

Most recently, from 2003 to 2005, I worked as a Research Associate with the First Nations Partnership Program at the University of Victoria. Some of the qualitative aspects of the research undertaken, such as interviewing, interpreting and collaborating with some of the partnering Aboriginal communities, will be a focus of this paper.

**The First Nations Partnership Program**

First Nations Partnership Programs (FNPP) is the name given to the programs delivered using the Generative Curriculum Model. The partnerships involve a two-year, university accredited Early Childhood Education training program that is delivered in First Nations communities through partnerships with the University of Victoria. It has been specifically designed for communities who are motivated to participate actively in co-delivery of training within their own region or territory, and to play an active role in bringing cultural content and considerations of community specific knowledge into the training curriculum (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood, Opekokew, 1993).

Following a program evaluation completed in 2000, partnering communities requested a follow-up research project to measure the results of their investment in training and to document and share their successes in improving community-based supports for both children and their caregivers. This research involved university-based field investigators who worked directly with community-based collaborators who were given basic training in research. Together, group forums and interviews were conducted and documents were gathered for review. After the
A university-based team analyzed the data, preliminary reports of the project findings were sent to participating communities for feedback and discussion (Ball, 2005).

My work specifically focussed on investigating and contributing to discourse about the embodiment of culture in programs that have an explicit goal of cultural transmission, hoping to go beyond a list of tangible curriculum elements to an understanding of the forms of innate cultural authenticity exhibited by First Nations child-care practitioners (Ball & Simpkins, 2004).

With this focus in mind, “listening between the lines” took on new meaning. It is in the process of interviewing and interpreting data that one needs to look beyond and between the words to recognize and acknowledge the personal, historical and community-specific context of the interviewee.

In the past, I would have shied away from attempting interpretation or analysis of “what is not said” in intercultural contexts. Wouldn’t I simply be inserting a layer of my own cultural bias into the analysis of data? We all know that these types of cultural assumptions made with little or no consultation are a major reason why research has become a nasty word to many Aboriginal communities. How does one go about interpreting gaps in an interview and in the data within a decolonizing framework? There are four elements within decolonizing frameworks that have emerged from my own experience, that have greatly encouraged the success of research undertaken: 1) taking as much time as necessary to collaborate, get feedback and fully discuss issues that arise; 2) quality of collaboration; 3) using a reciprocal situated response to interviewing and analysis, 4) being flexible and open to change throughout the collaborative process.

**Time for Collaboration and Feedback**

First of all, the time invested on the part of all the partners is key to the successful long-term outcomes of the project. In my role as a research associate with the FNPP project I was fortunate to walk into an existing history and relationship that had been built and nurtured between the University of Victoria and a number of Aboriginal communities in Saskatchewan and British Columbia. The FNPP began back in 1989 when the Meadow Lake Tribal Council of Saskatchewan asked the University of Victoria’s School of Child and Youth Care to join with them to come up with a new way of thinking about and promoting child well-being in Aboriginal communities (Pence, 1999). They were seeking a training program that would embody valued aspects of their traditional and contemporary Cree and Dene cultures and languages, and that would also draw upon useful knowledge from the mainstream theory, research and practice. What emerged from that process was a pilot project and a model for generating curriculum that is bicultural and relies on local knowledge, perspectives, and experiences contributed by Elders and other community resource people (Pence & Ball, 1999). The creation of the generative model of curriculum was years in the making, going through changes after much discussion with the communities involved. Taking this time ensured a model that reflected the needs of those communities and as well ensured that control of the project stayed with the communities. As communities in British Columbia came on board, the same investment of time, discussion and perspectives took place.
Subsequently in the follow-up research that took place several years after each training program had finished, a truly collaborative research model was used (Ball, 2005). A hindrance or drawback on the part of university partners typically is the restrictions on time spent in collaboration which is so often dictated by funding and report deadlines. Even with some of those limits, the time for feedback and consultation was prioritized.

Collaborative Model
This follow-up project was made up of a team of university and community researchers who carried out the interviews with FNPP graduates, parents from the child-care centres and education and child-care coordinators within three regions in British Columbia (Ball, 2005). While the communities came up with the initial research questions, the university researchers were also able to integrate their own questions within that framework. Ultimately is it important for the community to determine priorities and that the focus of the research remain with the community partners and the institutional partners work with those priorities in shaping their own research.

Outsider and insider worked together within a continuous dialogue that kept everyone focused on community concerns and considerations. Working within a team of people from both the university and the communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, one could take some risks by asking and contributing questions in a respectful manner. This team of people continually clarified, questioned, added to and discussed what certain gaps within the interviews meant within that culture or that region. There is no question that the control over the direction of the research must stay with the Aboriginal communities. As an outsider within a trusting and respectful collaborative team, the university researchers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were sometimes able to identify elements of community-specific knowledge that contributed to the cultural knowledge within childcare practice. Community-specific knowledge is often part of the everyday knowledge within the community such as behaviour, gestures, ways of being which are difficult for the person immersed in this knowledge to identify. The collaborative process made it possible for the community researchers and the interviewees to recognize that their own experience, their own ways of being was the embodiment of culture in these programs, no matter what their differing experiences of being Aboriginal was.

While the non-Aboriginal researcher may be able to talk about and identify a respect for salmon, for example, we are often unable to move beyond the cognitive domain and show or explain what it means in practice to respect the salmon (Atleo, 1997, p. 7). The insight and knowledge of the insider or Aboriginal community collaborator is extremely important in all phases of the research to ensure more accurate cultural representation. The contribution of community knowledge is integral to and the backbone of the research practice undertaken (Ball, 2005).

Flexibility and Reciprocal Situated Response
As every research project and every community is unique, the approaches to interviewing, interpreting and collaboration call for a “situated response” (Hermes, 1997, p. 23-25). Those of us who have been using qualitative methodologies know all too well that there are no templates. Each community and culture is unique and involves differing and adaptive approaches. Responding to the situation, the history, culture and community-specific knowledge of the
community in a reciprocal manner allows one to listen and observe the unique elements in the community-based project.

When interviewing for the FNPP follow up project, I quickly realized that the questions that were so interesting to me, were quite irrelevant to the interviewees, so the emphasis of the interviews changed. I approached the interview as a guided conversation whose goal was to elicit from the interviewee the stories and experiences that were relevant to them and that could be used in qualitative ways.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, it is part of a decolonizing approach to research to be flexible and open to a change of plans (Ball, 2005; Davis, 2004; Smith, 1999). Davis illustrates this by describing a project that was shelved essentially because the Aboriginal community did not want their stories to be a part of a web-based educational project. Community representatives “indicated that the researchers’ pedagogical concerns regarding how non-Aboriginals heard the story were not a community priority”. As the funding was directed towards the creation of web-based educational sites for the sharing of these stories, the group in question had to let go of the funding and respect the wishes of the community (Davis, 2004, p.14). I suspect there are also stories of similar projects where the work went ahead by making small changes and rationalizing why they could not shelve the project. Researchers both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal must be willing and open to drastic changes in the direction of the research.

Conclusion
The words, voices, stories and perspectives of community members are more prevalent now as researchers interpret and present qualitative research experience. Now it is commonplace and essential for community-based research to include the voices of community members.

“Listening between the lines” means finding ways to recognize and acknowledge the personal, historical and community-specific context of the interviewee. Participating as a member of a collaborative community-based team has perhaps had the biggest impact on my own approach to qualitative research. Working with Aboriginal communities is always a humbling experience because each time I learn much about myself and about how to respond to the unique circumstances of each culture, community and project. As Smith (1999) says “the challenge is to demystify and decolonize” (p. 16). For all researchers, I believe this to be an on-going process. It can be a much richer and productive experience to do this when there is a diversity of opinion and knowledge shared within the research process. This cannot be rushed. “Listening between the lines” calls for the time and patience to listen and let the context of the interviewee unfold naturally and continually responding and collaborating in a reciprocal and respectful manner.

Notes:
1. Any opinions expressed in this paper are my own and not necessarily that of the First Nations Partnership Program. I would also like to thank my colleagues at FNPP, Dr. Jessica Ball and Silvia Vilches for the many stimulating discussions that pushed my thinking and approaches to qualitative research into new directions.
References