

Article

Reconciling Positionality: An Indigenous Researcher's Reflexive Account

Russell A. Evans

Odette School of Business, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4, Canada; russell.evans@uwindsor.ca

Abstract: As researchers, we take the subjectivity we have formed over time into each research project. These subjective traces are a product of our lived experiences, gradually shaping our perceptions and interpretations of the world. Despite being an Indigenous scholar, my lived experience has not primarily occurred within Indigenous settings, resulting in biased subjectivities emerging while researching First Nations communities. This paper describes my subjective traces and reflects on the biases I uncovered while researching Indigenous communities. The reflection consists of three main sections: a personal background, a description of experiences in the research sites, and a discussion of what the reflections mean to the decolonization of academia. Overall, I hope that the insights in this reflection go beyond the mere recognition of Indigenous voices and encourage Indigenous researcher activism toward advancing and diversifying academia.

Keywords: indigenous; reflexivity; positionality; qualitative research

1. Introduction

“The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.” (Gramsci 1999, p. 324)

The above quote by Antonio Gramsci describes the subjectivity that we all possess inside of us. As researchers, we take these traces with us into each research project. The traces are a product of our lived experiences, gradually shaping our perceptions and interpretations of the world. This paper provides a personal reflection on the traces that Gramsci refers to by recounting my experiences as an Indigenous qualitative researcher working within First Nations (FN) research sites in Canada. The research sites included three FN communities and a Tribal Council. Each site receives funding support from the federal government for most of its core administrative costs. The research included a pilot study in 2013 and 8 weeks of visits to five research sites in 2016, after which I performed interpretive analyses of the data I collected from interviews, internal documents, and firsthand observations.

Before travelling to the research sites, I began to reflect on how my experiences and perceptions of Indigenous populations might manifest themselves during my upcoming time in the communities. In this paper, I reflect upon my racial and cultural background and how it influenced my overall experience during the data collection process. I mainly focused on my time working in the three Indigenous community offices because they significantly challenged my preconceptions about my identity and living there. Community sites were the spaces where I assumed I would feel most like an insider; instead, I felt more like an outsider to the residents, at least at first. My navigation of the social landscape was much more challenging in remote community sites than I had anticipated. In this paper, I reflect upon my interactions with members of the FN community sites and how my previous assumptions informed these interactions about each community. My social and cultural assumptions were positively affected by each interaction and connection I made



Citation: Evans, Russell A. 2023. Reconciling Positionality: An Indigenous Researcher's Reflexive Account. *Genealogy* 7: 79. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040079>

Received: 31 July 2023

Revised: 12 September 2023

Accepted: 14 September 2023

Published: 24 October 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

while working in the communities. Many of the assumptions I had previously held were contradicted, while others were negotiated, challenged, and reconstructed throughout my experience.

This paper also hopes to highlight the importance of research as a ceremony and the significance of integrating Indigenous perspectives and values into the research process. I hope to contribute to the previous work on Indigenous research methodology by scholars like Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson. [Kovach \(2021\)](#) and [Wilson \(2008\)](#) emphasize the need to move away from Eurocentric research paradigms and toward research methodologies that respect Indigenous knowledge systems and traditions. Like Wilson, I seek to promote the idea that research is not just a detached academic exercise but a profoundly spiritual and interconnected process that should be approached with cultural sensitivity and respect for Indigenous worldviews. According to [Wilson \(2008\)](#), Indigenous research methods are vital to Indigenization efforts within academia. They challenge colonial legacies, center Indigenous voices and knowledge, and create pathways for more inclusive and respectful research practices that reflect the diversity of human experiences and perspectives. Kovach's work emphasizes the significance of understanding Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and cultural practices when conducting research within Indigenous communities. She advocates for researchers to approach their work with cultural humility, respect for community protocols, and a commitment to reciprocal relationships ([Kovach 2021](#)).

This paper consists of three main sections: a background, a description of the research sites, and a discussion of what the reflections mean for my future research. First, the description of my cultural background and experiences provides insight into how my identity and positionality might have influenced the research process. Next, my experiences working within the research sites are chronicled through narrative accounts and analyses focusing on instances where my fore-meanings and prejudices had to be negotiated ([Marotta 2009](#)). My fore-meanings include perceptions about what I expected to observe when I arrived at the Indigenous research sites and what I would feel after interacting with participants. The final section contains personal reflections on the role of identity and the importance of context in the performance of qualitative research in Canadian Indigenous settings. Overall, I hope the insights in this reflection will encourage additional interpretive research projects within FN community contexts.

2. Background

During my childhood, I was raised in a home where my mother's Indigenous background was never seen and rarely discussed. My mother had grown up in a small FN reserve community in northern Ontario under the care of her aunt. She left the community at the age of 13 to live with her biological parents in a small cottage they had built on the shores of the Montreal River. After she married my father, her "Indian Status" was taken away as the Indian Act policy at the time required. The policy stated that if a status Indian woman married a non-Indian man, the woman would no longer be registered as an Indian under the Indian Act.¹ It was not until the 1985 amendment to the Indian Act took place that she was able to regain her Indian Status, along with thousands of other women who had also been disenfranchised.²

My struggles with my cultural identity began when I was very young. I questioned whether I was more "white" like my father or more "Native" like my mother. My mother did not practice traditional or spiritual ceremonies, meaning my exposure to Indigenous culture and language was subtle and infrequent. My mother did attempt to teach me some things she had learned while growing up in her reserve community. She taught me how to snare and clean rabbits, how to clean fish, and where the best places to find wild blueberries were. I occasionally had the opportunity to learn about Indigenous languages and culture from my grandmother when she visited. My mother would refer to my grandmother as *nookomis*, the Ojibway term for grandmother. My grandmother's name was Josephine, and she never learned to speak English very well but taught us a few words to help us

understand her. For instance, nookomis (my grandmother) often asked my mother or one of my older siblings for aniibiishaaboo (tea) when she wanted a drink.³ At other times, she would ask my older sisters, “giwashkwebii?”, the word for intoxicated, before entering the house because she would not visit if my parents were drinking.⁴ Now that I am older and can better appreciate the language, culture, and traditions of my Ojibway background, I wish I could have had more time to learn from my grandmother (nookomis) while she was alive.

I considered perceptions about my cultural identity before beginning the research project. The reflections on my cultural identity made me question what social position I was coming from as a researcher. I was still determining whether I should consider myself an insider or an outsider of the Indigenous social groups. This consideration was vital because I was about to begin working closely with other Indigenous people, sometimes for weeks. On the one hand, my racial background allowed me to consider myself an insider. However, I lacked the cultural knowledge and life experiences this study’s participants described. Also, I grew up in a vastly different geographic and socio-economic situation, which had to be considered as I reflected on my perceived positionality and self-identification. Before visiting the research sites, a critical reflection helped me recognize when participant responses differed from my beliefs or assumptions. Knowing my own biases and reflecting on where they originated forms a significant component of the process of being reflexive (Berger 2015). The following section describes how positionality, identity, and ideology are all critical considerations of the reflexivity process.

3. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an awareness of the internal factors that drive our emotional responses to stimuli and shape our relationships with others (Akter et al. 2022; Etherington 2006). In the research world, reflexivity involves knowing that we, as researchers, play a role in constructing meaning and that it is impossible to be completely objective during the research process (Ide and Beddoe 2023; Jordan 2006). The perspectives and biases that a researcher carries with them will always have some level of influence on the outcomes of research. Influence occurs because researchers bring their values, beliefs, personal experiences, and perceptions, which cannot be turned off or ignored. Berger (2015) describes reflexivity as

“The process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher’s positionality, as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that their position may affect research process and outcomes” (Berger 2015, p. 220)

Berger’s definition reflects the importance of researcher positionality. The personal and professional experiences of the researcher shape their general worldviews and their views of the specific topic under study. As a research process, reflexivity becomes a strategy for ensuring research quality when using subjective research methodologies (Akter et al. 2022; Ide and Beddoe 2023). It is imperative when the researcher has similar life experiences to those of the research participants. In this study, reflexivity is essential because of my shared racial identity with the study’s participants.

Race is just one component of a complex mosaic of factors that affect our perceptions of culture and identity. From a social perspective, culture is a learned phenomenon acquired through participation in an ethnic or racial collective (Kallen 1995). Discussions on the cultural identity of groups or collectives in the academic literature are often reduced to binary discourses, such as east–west, savage–civilized, traditional–modern, and orient–occident (Eppley 2006; Said 1978). The limitation of such a binary conception of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups is that it forces identity into one of two rigid categories. It essentializes cultural groups and falsely assigns the same attributes to every member of each category. Members who identify, or are identified, as part of a specific ethnic or cultural group will undoubtedly have similar attitudes and behaviours (James 2003). However, it is

false to assume that all members of a specific cultural group can be represented by a single discursive category, all acting and thinking the same.

Cultural identity at the individual level is different from the collective level. However, it is also complex, contradictory, and highly dependent on context (Hall 1996). Individuals identify themselves as part of a cultural group through the similarities and experiences they perceive to have in common. Duku (2007, p. 4) defines individual identity as follows:

“Identity... is a bimodal phenomenon, linking internal self-perceptions to the perception of self as part of a social environment—the construction of which involves a distinction between the self and other, or between us and them.”

The bimodal nature of identity in the above quote describes the comparison between perceptions of self and specific socially constructed contexts. In pluralistic societies, individuals may simultaneously self-identify as members of multiple cultural groups. Bhabha (1994, 1996) describes these multiple identities as being in a “third space,” an interstitial space, somewhere in between a person’s multitude of identities. From this interstitial space, individuals have equal access to each group they identify with, depending on what the social situation calls for (Daskalaki et al. 2016). Individual cultural identity is the sum of our memberships to various cultural collectives. Societies, at a broader level, indirectly affect our perceptions about group affiliation, depending on the social positions of our associated cultural groups (James 2003).

Positionality refers to the space an individual occupies within society and is a product of the sum of their identities, beliefs, and experiences (Hurley and Jackson 2020; James 2003). A researcher’s positionality is determined through a grand mosaic of identities, coupled with how they perceive their status in the world and how others see them (Berger 2015; Hurley and Jackson 2020). Social position can be based on individual characteristics, such as race, gender, age, education, ability, language, etc. In turn, an individual’s social position influences their personal beliefs, experiences, biases, and ideologies that determine one’s positionality. To be reflexive about positionality, researchers must be able to recognize and acknowledge the subjectivity of beliefs and biases that emerge during the research process. The social position of the researcher to the participants in the study is referred to as their insider or outsider status (Eppley 2006; Hassan 2015). The researcher’s status with the group they work with can be critical in determining the research project’s success level.

Insider or outsider status is a constantly changing social construction based on the past relationship between the individual and the group under study (Eppley 2006; Hassan 2015). Others may infer the “insider” status through the researcher’s visible characteristics, language, or shared cultural capital (Duku 2007). A researcher may also perceive an affiliation with specific social groups and self-identify as an insider. When conducting qualitative research, being an insider of a social group under study has many advantages. First, insider status allows quicker and smoother access to the research sites by limiting the amount of opposition before being welcomed into the social space. An insider also has shared life experiences with the social group, providing insight into some responses received throughout the research process. Members of the ingroup have shared meanings and perspectives that outsider researchers might need to recognize. Finally, participants may be more likely to trust an individual who is a member of their social group, resulting in the potential for more honesty and detail in their responses. Insider status may also have disadvantages because the researcher is susceptible to the inherent biases of membership to the ingroup. Employing reflexivity as a strategy to counteract the risk of researcher bias is very important for insiders because of the potential for higher emotional stakes in the process.

An outsider researcher is not a member of the group or community being studied. They come from an external or distant perspective and may have limited prior knowledge or experience with the culture, context, or community they are researching (Eppley 2006). As an outsider researcher, they must strive for objectivity and distance from the subject matter. They aim to minimize their own biases and preconceptions by approaching the research with fresh eyes (Eppley 2006). While objectivity can be a strength, outsider

researchers may face challenges in understanding the nuances of the community or culture they are studying. They may require more time to build trust and rapport with participants (Duku 2007; Hassan 2015). Outsider researchers also benefit from employing reflexivity during qualitative research. Their perceptions and fore-meanings about a group can influence them, which may result in skewed interpretations and bias. Outsider researchers have the potential to contribute to Indigenous research, but Indigenous scholars stress the need for cultural sensitivity, humility, and ethical engagement (Smith 2021). They must engage in meaningful collaboration and build trust with Indigenous communities and researchers to ensure the research is conducted ethically and respectfully (Kovach 2021; Wilson 2008). Outsider researchers should recognize their outsider status and the potential for cultural misunderstandings or biases. Constant critical reflection and self-assessment can alleviate the influence of outsider researchers' positionality, much like it does for insider researchers.

Reflexivity is critically important for moderating the influence of biases and beliefs researchers may carry into a research project. Personal identity, past experiences, and positionality can influence subjective analysis outcomes and skew knowledge production (Berger 2015; Hurley and Jackson 2020; Ide and Beddoe 2023). Racially, I am Indigenous, but I do not share the cultural and geographic experiences of many Indigenous participants in my study. In some ways, I perceived myself as an insider researcher because I expected my racial background to allow me to quickly build trust with Indigenous participants and provide initial access to the research sites. I also found many shared experiences with participants who reconnected with their Indigenous roots later in life. My identity, however, differed significantly from those individuals who had lived in the reserve community their whole lives. In these instances, I found it more appropriate to view my perspective as an outsider during the interpretive analysis of their responses. As in Duku (2007), I had to conduct interpretive analyses as a cultural other in many cases, even though I mainly considered myself part of the ingroup. The following section documents how contradictions between my preconceptions and actual experiences were negotiated while navigating the research sites.

4. Findings

This section draws on personal experiences, notes, and participant statements to provide insight into my experiences at the research sites. First, I discuss the importance of reflecting upon my subjectivity before engaging with participants, such as how I needed to be aware of what biases I was bringing to recognize them and improve the legitimacy of my interpretations. Second, trust-building activities with participants and residents are discussed to indicate how "outsider" feelings were overcome. Building trust allows participants to potentially feel comfortable enough with me, as a researcher, to disclose detailed and possibly sensitive information during their interviews. Building trust also indirectly persuaded participants to welcome me as part of the cultural group. Finally, I discuss how my perceptions about identity were affected by the local social norms before concluding with a vignette describing an experience where I felt accepted as an insider.

Before engaging with community members, I had assumed that my Indigenous background would limit the number of barriers I would encounter within each research site. I considered myself an insider due to my racial identity, which would give me an advantage as I sought to gain the trust of gatekeepers and community participants. I knew what to expect because I had visited the sites numerous times and had not experienced much culture shock. Although I struggled with my self-identity, I was better positioned to understand and appreciate local customs and traditions than a non-Indigenous researcher. I realized I was drawing on a previously internalized representation of Indigenous culture and collective identity rather than remembering that each individual has their attitudes and behaviours. As a result, I could identify personal biases, assumptions, and beliefs about Indigenous contexts that I hoped to recognize and defuse as I encountered them in the research sites. Additionally, I brought with me my understanding of the process of

conducting qualitative research, the importance of reflexivity, and how my positionality might impact the research and the knowledge outcomes. I knew I would have to gain the trust of the individuals I was interviewing and working with to gain the insights I sought.

During initial interviews, I worried I would not get to the heart of my study's intended focus. I felt that the first couple of interviews did not include enough content on reporting. My first attempt to remedy the situation was to pressure participants to express their views on reporting. My impulse to apply pressure to the interviewees caused me to take a moment to try to understand what it was that was driving my actions. I concluded that I was allowing my desired research outcomes to determine how I conducted the interviews. After some thought, I decided that I did not want to coerce interviewees into responding in the way that suited me, so I allowed them to have more influence over the content and direction of the interviews. Of course, I continued to include questions about reporting, but if the interviewee had little to say on the topic, I refrained from pushing too hard. To my surprise, the conversation almost always returned to the issue of reporting on its own.

The interview process improved as I became more aware of my subconscious judgements and biases. While conducting interviews, I would make notes on what participants were saying and the body language they were projecting. I also noted those times when I felt I was making a judgement about their response or I felt an emotional response to what they were saying. Biases and judgements tended to occur when the interviewee's response did not align with what I expected to hear or contradicted my own beliefs. For instance, during the first few interviews, I made notes in my journal whenever the interviewee cursed. At first, it was rare for an office employee to swear, and perhaps it indicated the interviewee's passion for the subject. I later realized that many employees within the research sites cursed while they were in the office. I had made a judgement about swearing based on my Western worldview on workplace norms about language. As time passed, while I remained conscious of my emotional and judgemental reactions to cursing, I eventually became desensitized.

Upon entering research sites, one of my first realizations was that my Indigenous self-identification needed to provide the level of access to the research sites I had hoped for. I encountered apprehension when I began to ask questions about how the office worked and details about individual roles. Participants were uncomfortable with either having me in the office or with the questions I was asking. I also felt some tension when responding to questions about my research or what outcomes I expected. At first, I replied to these inquiries as I would in any other research setting, providing details of the overall topic and what aspects of the issue I was particularly interested in. Many reactions within the research sites were positive, where individuals saw the research as important and potentially impactful to community governance. Individuals also revealed negative perceptions about universities, academic studies, and outsider researchers, which they described as self-interested. Such views were understandable given the tumultuous history between academics and Indigenous populations (Menzies 2001, 2004; Struthers and Peden-McAlpine 2005). I also noticed conceptual differences between myself and the residents when I spoke about the urban area I was from since they were accustomed to a more rural way of life. I knew that I would only be able to gain the trust of many members of the local community if I changed how I presented myself to the participants.

To distinguish my research from negative local perceptions about academics, I positioned myself as a student hoping to learn more about how the community functioned and understand relationships with government agencies. Presenting myself as an interested Indigenous student and eager to learn eased much of the tension I initially felt from apprehensive participants. I also ensured I was present in social spaces where I could easily and frequently be seen. Being present usually meant sitting in the band office waiting area, chatting with receptionists, or greeting everyone I encountered. Building rapport with the receptionist was very beneficial for the research because they could influence the perceptions of others far more than if I had not had their help. My perception was that

when other office members saw the receptionist talking to me, they seemed to let their guard down and began to speak to me as well.

My attempts at trust-building began well before the first interview and continued long after the final interview was completed. Conversing with community members in the office made the interview process more fruitful. The trust and rapport I established resulted in many volunteers for interviews and provoked more openness and honesty. To formalize my attempts at trust building, each interview began with reassurances of the anonymity of participants and the confidentiality of the research process. I continued each interview by briefly describing my upbringing, followed by questions about the interviewee's experiences and background. The purpose of starting with personal questions was to get the individual comfortable talking about themselves and to frame their responses for later interpretative analysis according to their personal experiences.

One surprising outcome of the interview process was the similarities between my background and the backgrounds of many participants. Many participants had also grown up in families where only one of the parents was Indigenous. In almost all cases, it was the interviewee's mother who had been a "registered Indian" and who was forced to relinquish their Indigenous status due to Indian Act provisions. Like myself, those participants only reconnected with their Indigenous roots in adulthood. The similarities between our experiences provided many talking points, promoting deeper conversations, trust, and connections. As a result, interviewees frequently invited me to join them at local community events, social gatherings, and even into their homes for meals and other gatherings. I was happy to accept as many invitations as possible because they allowed me to participate in the social world outside of the office within each research site.

In addition to trust building, the benefits of participating in the social world of the participants included allowing me to observe activities, inspire thoughtful questions to ask, and create memories of the sites (Johnson et al. 2004). However, the level of researcher participation can become problematic if not correctly gauged. As a result, the balance between the time I spent participating in activities and the time I spent passively observing was carefully tracked. Although some participation was necessary to provide an understanding of the participants, too much involvement could lead to emotional attachments with the group of people being studied, affecting my interpretations of the research data. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) provide a scale for researcher participation, ranging from non-participation to complete participation. Complete participation is also referred to as the researcher "going native," where identity as a researcher is shed, analytic interest in the topic is lost, and the individual becomes fully immersed in the culture under study (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).⁵ I stopped short of complete participation by restricting my social participation to group activities and avoiding one-on-one private interactions outside of the work environment. The participation level I chose required some immersion in the setting but yielded insights into the social norms and rules of the research sites that I would not have gained otherwise.

During interactions with participants in the office setting and attendance at community events, I only observed a few instances where traditional languages were spoken. Exceptions occurred at the beginning of some community meetings, however, when an Elder would begin the meeting by praying in Ojibway. Aside from such formal gatherings, I would only hear an occasional phrase or word spoken in a traditional language, which challenged my preconceptions about the local communication styles I expected to observe. What was interesting, however, was that the more I interacted with community members, the more I noticed that a unique contextual vocabulary existed that I was previously unaware of. Local community residents had their own coded language, which I had not noticed during previous interactions. The idea of a local or private coded language is explained by Schütz (1944, p. 505):

"Every social group has its private code, understandable only by those who have participated in the common past experiences in which it took place."

When I heard an unfamiliar term, I asked what it meant. In most cases, individuals were happy to explain, likely realizing that I would not be aware of the lived experience of

reserve life. My previous understanding of a term differed from its local meaning in many cases. For instance, the phrase “going camping” was not familiar to members of one of the research sites. When I asked one individual if they would be “going camping” over the weekend, they responded sharply, “We don’t go camping; we live on a reserve; we *are* camping.” I interpreted the individual’s response to mean that what I perceived as “going camping” (i.e., stripping off the luxuries of the modern world to live in the wilderness for a weekend) was the daily reality for people who lived on the reserve. From then on, I did not ask other community members if they would be “going camping.”

As my time in the communities continued, I gradually improved my understanding of local terms and meanings. I learned that one of the social and cultural norms within the reserve communities I visited was the use of nicknames. Family, acquaintances, and other community members would refer to a person’s nickname rather than their legal given name. During my first four weeks working in the communities, I had heard some of these nicknames being used but was unsure who they were referring to. During the fifth week, I started associating the specific individuals with their nicknames. However, I did not want to seem rude or insensitive, so I refrained from using a person’s nickname. The following vignette describes an instance where my understanding of the local term “nish” allowed me to gain favour and trust with residents regarding the use of local names. “Nish” is a term used in each research site to describe individuals and behaviours perceived as being Anishnaabe.⁶ The story recounts the moment when I was first invited to use an individual’s nickname, which I viewed as a rite of passage toward acceptance.

On the day of the event, I spent most of my time in the community’s band office boardroom, observing and listening to social interactions. The boardroom was in a central location between the Band Manager’s and Finance Manager’s offices. From that location, I could hear many verbal interactions between staff members and the two managers. While taking notes, an employee I had previously interviewed named “Donna” came into the boardroom.⁷ “Donna” informed me that she had invited a few other people to her home that evening for snacks and homemade wine and asked me if I would like to join them. It was an excellent opportunity to build rapport by interacting with community members outside the office. I accepted the invitation, and a few hours later, I was sitting with a group of community members in the home of a band office employee.

Apprehensive initially, I eventually grew comfortable with the surroundings and participating in group conversations. In total, six people were in the room; “Donna” and her spouse, another office employee, “Cathy” and her spouse, and “Cathy’s” brother-in-law. Everyone in the room had spent most of their lives in the community, and, at times, I found it challenging to understand what they were saying. Our conversations revolved around sports, hunting, fishing, and family, and we enjoyed many laughs throughout the evening. I started to feel, however, that I was not adequately contributing to the conversation, so I started trying to think of something funny to say. I finally got my opportunity after “Donna’s” spouse described his comically feeble attempt to climb a tree during a moose hunting trip the previous autumn. “Donna” teased that “he liked to think he was Spider-Man™ or something.” Hoping to impress, I quickly blurted out, “Maybe we should call him Spider-Nish instead.”

At first, everyone was quiet, and I began to have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Had I said the wrong thing? To my amazement, and after a heart-stopping delay, everyone in the room began to laugh. After a few moments, we all began to sing a rendition of “Spider-Nish” to the tune of the Spider-Man™ cartoon theme song from the 1960s. After I finally contributed to the evening’s conversation, I felt much more relaxed and began to speak a lot more. Later in the evening, “Donna” looked at me and chuckled, “Spider-Nish,” she said, “That’s a good one!” “Thanks ‘Donna,’” I replied. “Oh no, call me ‘Deedeens,’” she responded, her local nickname.⁸ By the end of the evening, I had been invited to use the local nickname for each guest. From that night onward, when I interacted with anyone from that gathering, I referred to them by their local name. Word travelled fast, so by the end of my time in the community, five additional community members had asked me to call

them by their local names. Unfortunately, I did not spend enough time in the communities to earn my local nickname, but it is something I can aspire to.

Reflecting upon one's identity, positionality, and experiences is critically important before visiting sites to conduct research. Awareness of personal subjectivities that may affect the research process and outcomes is critical for employing reflexivity. Reflexivity is vital when the researcher is conducting studies on topics that are "close to home" (Johnson et al. 2004) or require active participation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Participation in the social world of the community-built trust inspired questions and allowed me to experience their social norms and discourses. Overall, preconceptions about my Indigenous identity were challenged, negotiated, and adjusted throughout the research process. Reflexivity allowed me to recognize and address the personal characteristics that might prove problematic during the research project. I carry forward the lessons I learned about the impact of researcher prejudices on outcomes and the nuances of working in Indigenous settings.

5. Discussion

While in the research sites, I gradually became more aware of the socially constructed assumptions about the Indigenous population I brought with me. Although I attempted not to, I continuously made judgements and reacted emotionally to what I saw and heard. Over time, I began to catch my emotional reactions earlier, becoming better at recognizing when my internal dialogue was being judgemental. When working with Indigenous populations, reflexivity allows researchers to recognize those views and fore-meanings based on secondary sources rather than what participants say (Ide and Beddoe 2023). Employing reflexivity is especially important in research sites where the researcher has a similar background and comparable life experiences with the participants so that observations and interpretations are as clear from bias as possible.

Researchers must be aware of political, social, and cultural tensions that exist within the contexts where they work. Family membership, the role of tradition, economic development, relations with the Canadian government, and local government transparency are just a few of the areas of contention I witnessed. Organizational tensions arose during the research process as administrative managers expressed concerns about the operations and governance of the community by the Chief and Council. Conversely, some Councilors appeared to downplay the role of administrative managers. Both groups exhibited a degree of skepticism regarding each other's competencies. It is worth noting that the Chief and Council members were democratically elected and governed by standards primarily outlined in the Indian Act. Their roles were part-time and limited to a two-year term. Additionally, they typically had lower levels of formal education and spent minimal time in the office. Conversations with managers showed a noticeable undercurrent of frustration when discussing the Chief and Council's technically superior role as their bosses. Managers often emphasized the importance of the Chief and Council gaining a deeper understanding of effective reserve management and member well-being.

Acknowledging that colonialism disrupted traditional Indigenous governance systems in Canada is essential. The imposition of European colonial structures, such as the Indian Act, undermined traditional Indigenous forms of self-governance and authority (Alfred 2005). This disruption is evident when examining one governance issue where individuals could simultaneously hold salaried and elected positions. The double role was a central area of complaint for many community members, creating a source of contention and animosity. Colonialism often disrupts or dismantles traditional Indigenous social structures and governance systems. This disruption can lead to power imbalances and divisions within Indigenous communities as people navigate new systems imposed by colonial authorities (Smith 2021). Within the organizational chart of the research sites, portfolio managers reported to the Band Manager, who reported to the Chief and Council, who were the group with the most political authority. Band Managers had to supervise and report to individuals who were both their administrative employees and political bosses simultaneously. Despite complaints, individuals holding dual positions accepted

the perceived conflict of interest they created; thus, allowing individuals to hold dual roles created tensions within the band offices and the communities. However, the need for more potential employees and elected leaders made the situation unavoidable from a governance perspective. Researchers entering FN sites need to be aware of the scarcity of human resources and how they may lead to similar contextual conditions within their chosen research settings.

One of the assumptions that I challenged before visiting the research sites was that all Indigenous populations shared common ideologies about the world. During my time in the research sites, I discovered that while there was a shared foundational belief system, various perspectives were also encountered. For example, community members who grew up in the reserve community held negative perceptions about other community members raised outside the reserve. On-reserve members considered themselves insiders, and they viewed off-reserve members as outsiders. Despite being members of the same community, if you had not endured the struggles of growing up on the reserve or did not currently live there, you were not considered a cultural equal. Researchers must know the prejudices between individual members and groups within the same FN site.

Within the reserve community, on-reserve members described internal tensions based on economic and political ideologies, family affiliations, and the role of women in government. Economically, bitter disagreements emerged from discussions over what style of economic development to pursue and the role the Chief and Council should play in that development. Additionally, one or two families seemed to possess disproportionate political power and influence within the communities. Members of the most prominent families held many management and political leadership positions. Members of smaller families expressed feelings of being “left out” of the community’s power structure and that they had little influence on the development and direction of their community. Perceptions about the role of women in government positions were also not consistent with my pre-held beliefs. Participants described numerous instances of sexism and misogyny within their community and workplace. Future researchers must know their perceptions about economic development, politics, nepotism, and women’s rights. The views expressed within FN research sites may elicit emotional responses and judgements if the researcher is unprepared.

6. Conclusions

Indigenous community settings offer a wealth of possibilities for future research projects because they offer unique social, cultural, and historical contexts. The ideological and behavioural differences between settings could shed light on the lasting effects on culture, ideology, and group dynamics. Overall, future academic research conducted by and for Indigenous populations will pull researchers into research sites where they will need to be sensitive to context and employ reflexive strategies to interpret and understand the uniqueness of each potential research site. Reflexive accounts are essential to Indigenous research methods crucial in the broader process of Indigenization of academia (Wilson 2008). The integration of Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and methodologies into educational institutions and research practices contributes to a more inclusive, respectful, and culturally sensitive approach to research and education, recognizing the unique worldviews, histories, and ways of knowing of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous research methodologies are critical for centering Indigenous perspectives within academic research (Kovach 2021).

Researchers have not challenged their positionality (i.e., studying the “margins” from the safety of the “center” (Gandhi 1998)) to work directly with Indigenous populations. Future research within FN communities can capture the perspectives of those living on the margins of colonial societies. Qualitative research in Indigenous settings contributes to post-colonial scholarship because it takes researchers directly into unfamiliar contemporary settings rather than relying on historical archival information often written by the dominant group. As a result, non-participative studies about Indigenous populations in Canada rely

heavily on the “visible” history, such as historical documents and media. Studies focused on researcher participation will instead showcase the point of view of the “non-visible,” or occluded, person by collecting firsthand accounts of their attitudes, ideologies, and belief systems (Boehmer 2005). Researchers who participate in the social setting have the opportunity to bridge the gap between conceptual ideas about Indigenous communities and the actuality of how individuals live within these settings.

Indigenous communities have been reluctant to work with non-Indigenous researchers due to negative perceptions about the exploitative nature of academics (Menzies 2001, 2004). Many Indigenous settings, however, are becoming more open to working with academia to showcase successes and shed light on challenges (Struthers and Peden-McAlpine 2005). Academic institutions have also implemented more robust ethical guidelines and research protocols, reducing the potential harm to Indigenous populations. Also, Indigenous organizations like the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) have developed stringent data sovereignty principles such as ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP), which asserts that First Nations should have control over data generated during research with their populations.⁹ A potential outcome for the current research project is that it may inform academics, consultants, and other external stakeholders about building stronger working relationships with the members of Indigenous research sites. Universities are positioned as institutions that could work with Indigenous groups to provide an avenue for respectful and mutually beneficial outcomes. A potential benefit for the researcher and the First Nations population could be developing research questions specific to each site’s needs and interests. Indigenous cultural teachings and ceremonies could also be drawn on as theoretical lenses, allowing the research to be customized to the participatory group. I hope future researchers in FN settings will draw upon insights from the current research project, leading to positive experiences interacting with participants while producing impactful research.

This paper hopes to contribute to previous work on the decolonization of Western methodologies, the experience of Indigenous identity, and the valuing of Indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars in these areas include Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eva Garroutte, and Martin Nakata. In her book “Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,” Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) critically examines the history of Western research practices and their impact on Indigenous communities. She advocates for a decolonized research approach rooted in Indigenous perspectives, worldviews, and priorities. In addition, Cherokee scholar Eva Garroutte’s work is significant in the field of Indigenous studies and has been influential in raising awareness about the experiences and perspectives of Native peoples (Garroutte 2003). Finally, the Cultural Interface framework, developed by Nakata (2002), seeks to understand the interactions and tensions between Indigenous cultures and Western systems, particularly within educational contexts. The framework emphasizes recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives within educational practices. The work by these scholars represents only a fraction of those who have profoundly influenced the field of Indigenous studies and inspired researchers, scholars, and activists worldwide to engage in research that respects and values Indigenous knowledge and voices.

This paper reviews my experiences as an *Anishnaabe* qualitative researcher working within Indigenous settings.¹⁰ It describes the importance of reflexivity in producing qualitative research, especially in culturally sensitive spaces. Throughout my time in the research sites, I attempted to be aware of those situations where my biases or fore-meanings negatively influenced my interpretation of my experiences. Acknowledging my own biases allowed me to take responsibility for the influence that my positionality has on the research outcomes and production of knowledge. This paper consists of a review of my characteristics and beliefs, how reflexivity was employed, and how it can improve future research in Indigenous contexts. Given my emotional attachment to the culture, my social position and personal experiences as an Indigenous individual could have been problematic. However, through recognizing, acknowledging, and attempting to understand subjective

judgements and biases, I mitigated as much of their impact on the research outcomes as I could. As I encountered circumstances that contradicted my fore-meanings about Indigenous populations, I learned to challenge what I thought I knew and open my mind to new possibilities of understanding. I hope this paper will contribute to the broader conversation regarding the need for Indigenous research perspectives within academia and build on the work of scholars like Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and others. Overall, I hope that this paper adequately reflects the new meanings and perspectives gleaned throughout the research process and that the contents of this project inform future Indigenous research methodology, reflexivity literature, and our broader understanding of First Nations communities in Canada.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University on 11 April 2014 (GBUS-413-14; Romeo: #6102093).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (15 September 2010). The Indian Register. Retrieved 18 August 2017, from <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032475/1100100032476> (accessed on 12 September 2023).
- ² Bill C-31 reinstated those who had lost their status prior to 17 April 1985 because of discriminatory provisions in the old Indian Act; they were entitled to apply to the Department of Indian Affairs to get their status back (Miller 2000).
- ³ When spoken, the term *aniibiishaaboo* sounded like “nee-bee-sha-boe”. Spelling verified at <http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu> (accessed on 12 September 2023).
- ⁴ When spoken, the term *giiwashkwebii* sounded like “kwish-kavey”. Spelling verified at <http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu> (accessed on 12 September 2023).
- ⁵ The term “going native” has origins in British imperialist discourse during the 19th century and has derogatory connotations (Menzies 2001). It is used here for illustrative purposes only.
- ⁶ Pseudonyms are used to refer to the individuals involved in the anecdote; their real names remain protected.
- ⁷ See Note 6.
- ⁸ Names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals. *Deedeens* is the Ojibway word for blue jay.
- ⁹ First Nations Information Governance Centre. *The First Nations Principles of OCAP*. Retrieved from <https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training> (accessed on 12 September 2023).
- ¹⁰ Anishinaabe, also spelled Anishinabe or Anishinaabeg, is a term used to collectively refer to a group of Indigenous peoples in North America. The word “Anishinaabe” comes from the Anishinaabemowin language, which is the language of the Anishinaabe people (Gross 2016).

References

- Akter, Shahinoor, Jane Louise Rich, Kate Davies, and Kerry Jill Inder. 2022. Reflexivity Conducting Mixed Methods Research on Indigenous Women’s Health in Lower and Middle-Income Countries-An Example from Bangladesh. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21: 1–9. [CrossRef]
- Alfred, Taiaiake. 2005. *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Berger, Roni. 2015. Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 15: 219–34. [CrossRef]
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1996. Culture’s in-between. In *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Edited by Hall Stuart and Paul Du Gay. London: Sage Publications Limited, pp. 53–60.
- Boehmer, Elleke. 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daskalaki, Maria, Christina L. Butler, and Jelena Petrovi. 2016. Somewhere in-between: Narratives of place, identity, and trans-local work. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25: 184–98. [CrossRef]
- DeWalt, Kathleen M., and Billie R. DeWalt. 2002. *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

- Duku, Ntombozuko Stunky. 2007. Outsider from within: Reflections on my fieldwork journey in a native/foreign Eastern Cape school governance research context. *Education as Change* 11: 3–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Eppley, Karen. 2006. Defying insider-outsider categorization: One researcher's fluid and complicated positioning on the insider-outsider continuum. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 7: 1–8.
- Etherington, Kim. 2006. Reflexivity: Using our 'selves' in narrative research. In *Narrative Research on Learning: Comparative and International Perspectives*. Edited by Sheila Trahar. Oxford: Symposium Books Limited, pp. 77–92.
- Gandhi, Leela. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Garrouette, Eva Marie. 2003. *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1999. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited by Hoare Quintin. Chicago: International Publishing.
- Gross, Lawrence W. 2016. *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. The question of cultural identity. In *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Edited by Hall Stuart, Paul Du Gay and Kenneth Thompson. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 595–634.
- Hassan, Rukhsana. 2015. 06 Issues in Ethnographic Research: Female Researcher's Dilemma in A Rural Setting. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues* 14: 1–16.
- Hurley, Erica Samms, and M. Jackson. 2020. Msit No'kmaq: An Exploration of Positionality and Identity in Indigenous Research. *Witness The Canadian Journal of Critical Nursing Discourse* 2: 39–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ide, Yayoi, and Liz Beddoe. 2023. Challenging perspectives: Reflexivity as a critical approach to qualitative social work research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- James, Carl. 2003. *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Ethnicity, Race and Culture*. Toronto: Thompson Educational.
- Johnson, Nancy, Nina Lilja, Jacqueline A. Ashby, and James A. Garcia. 2004. The practice of participatory research and gender analysis in natural resource management. In *Natural Resources Forum*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., August, vol. 28, No. 3. pp. 189–200.
- Jordan, Amy B. 2006. Make yourself at home: The social construction of research roles in family studies. *Qualitative Research* 6: 169–85. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Kallen, Evelyn. 1995. *Ethnicity and Human Rights in Canada*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Kovach, Margaret. 2021. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Marotta, Vince. 2009. Intercultural hermeneutics and the cross-cultural subject. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 30: 267–84. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Menzies, Charles R. 2001. Reflections on research with, for, and among Indigenous peoples. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25: 19–26.
- Menzies, Charles R. 2004. Putting words into action: Negotiating collaborative research in Gitxaala. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 28: 1–2.
- Miller, James Rodger. 2000. *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Native-Newcomer Relations in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Nakata, Martin. 2002. Indigenous knowledge and the cultural interface: Underlying issues at the intersection of knowledge and information systems. *IFLA Journal* 28: 281–91. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Schütz, Alfred. 1944. The stranger: An essay in social psychology. *American Journal of Sociology* 49: 499–506. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2021. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Struthers, Roxanne, and Cynthia Peden-McAlpine. 2005. Phenomenological research among Canadian and United States Indigenous populations: Oral tradition and quintessence of time. *Qualitative Health Research* 15: 1264–76. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.