

Natural Conversations as a Method of Coming to Know Indigenous Communities

Rachel Eni and Gladys Rowe

Abstract: This paper explicates a methodology developed as a collaborative exploration into indigenous community and what it means to be a member of community. Based on indigenous ways of knowing and being within the world, natural conversations was implemented as a method by which to come to know about a particular community's way of life. Specifically designed based on indigenous understandings of health, family, community and land, including the interconnections between each of these, the root of natural conversations is that members of an indigenous community are themselves the experts about their community. Within the framework of indigenous standpoint the research begins and ends with the experiences and lives of community members, honouring and privileging these voices. Kaupapa Māori analysis of the methodology is presented in order to explore applicability and suitability of this method for use within Māori settings.

Keywords: community health; indigenous standpoint; Kaupapa Māori analysis, natural conversations

Introduction

This paper outlines a methodology developed with a Northern Manitoba First Nation who came to this project with a goal of understanding how colonial events in the late 19th to the 21st century (including imposition of the federal reserve system, residential schools, TB sanatoriums, child welfare policies and practices and hydro-electric developments) have affected health and socioeconomic circumstances of the community. This Northern Manitoba Nation has been impacted by over four generations of hydroelectric dam development and by other colonial events imposed by Canadian provincial and federal governments. Each of these complex events has deeply affected not only individuals and families, but also the way in which the community as a whole functions as a result. This indigenous community feels the impact through the ways people care for themselves and each other, relate with one another, and whether or not they ultimately feel control over their future. The development of this methodology came from a desire to understand and therefore create change as an entire community, beginning from the understanding that in order to know where you are going, you have to know where you're from. This paper explicates the integration of a community-designed, participatory, multi-method research project founded on core indigenous values, and the technical aspects of Health Impact Assessment (HIA), all of which simultaneously assessed the effects of past, current and proposed impositions and the resulting human impacts.

There are core values that together provide a foundation of what it means to live within and belong to a particular community; values such as respect, balance, interdependence and connection with the land. Each of these values provides a way of interacting and engaging in relationship with friends, family, community and the natural space around you. Grounded within an indigenous perspective of community which distinguishes itself as a specific way of living and being within the world, this research methodology is privileging and reflective of indigenous voice and direction. The foundation of an indigenous community is upheld and shared through honouring and passing on generational knowledge regarding what it *means* to live within and belong to a community. Such a worldview can be transmitted through elements of culture, story-telling, life experiences, histories, ancestral teachings and everyday

events. Each of these interconnected pieces is taken together and in relation in order to create and maintain what is valued as community. With this as a foundation, meaningful inquiry into the roots of an indigenous community should thus be based on an understanding of indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world.

A key element to the implementation of this inquiry has been the concept of *natural conversations*. Natural conversations are a manner within which to come to know about a particular indigenous community's culture, story-telling, histories, ancestral teachings and everyday events. The method assumes that members of an indigenous community are experts about their community, and that there is understanding and respect for the ways in which knowledge is constructed, reflected upon and implemented. Natural conversations come to life through the primary direction and involvement of the indigenous community itself. Unlike traditional Western qualitative methodologies, not only is the information provided by the research participants, but the method itself, the ways in which the stories are conveyed, are directed by those represented in the research. Based in the natural give and take of conversations as an exploratory tool, an exchange takes place about what it means to exist as an indigenous community while at the same time being cognisant to nurturing relationships and interconnections. Rather than guiding the conversations in an area where the researcher wishes to gather more information (suspecting as well that the researcher has already formulated a worldview within a foreign interpretation of the order of the world, replete with theory, hypothesis and guiding research questions), natural conversations value the wisdom and knowledge of all participants to weave a story and share what is meant to be shared at each gathering (allowing for unfolding of an interpretation of the world that may be quite different from anything the researcher knows to be true and may in fact contradict the researcher's understanding of the order of things in the world). The freedom to flow with natural conversation makes available the opportunity for connections to occur where perhaps the facilitator was not previously aware and in another setting would not have been probed.

With the community's goal of developing an understanding of the health and social effects of current and historical colonial impositions, it is critical that an inquiry was developed based on the indigenous community's ways of knowing and being in the world coupled with community priorities and the expectation of a meaningful participatory and action oriented process. Based on the foundation of natural conversations, the method relates a community with their ancestral history through the mapping of historical, community and family interconnections. This methodology allows for the expression of a picture of well being through a detailed depiction of relationships, customs, values and forced adaptations to a foreign way of life. Within the framework of indigenous standpoint the research begins and ends with the experiences and lives of the community, honouring and privileging their voices. Specifically designed based on indigenous understandings of health, family, community and land including the interconnections of each of these, this project incorporates the following methods, each supported and directed by the community:

- (1) Historical document search and review of events impacting this indigenous community
- (2) Family histories as shared by four generations of community members including qualitative interviews with different age groups considering their lives over time, capturing life from the 1930s to the present day
- (3) Teaching and sharing circles engaging participants utilising artistic and resource-based activities
- (4) Story-telling circles
- (5) Ancestral histories
- (6) Comprehensive health survey

The combination of methods that make up the overall method we call natural conversations allows for families to map and interpret themselves in relation to their entire community, emphasising interconnections, relations and ancestral significances. A timeline is developed

to include any political and social events which have occurred within and outside the indigenous community that as a result of their occurrence have impacted the families and the community overall. The ability to then place this understanding within a contextual timeline allows for a visual contextualisation building and strengthening the fabric of community. This is achieved by mapping the progression and current location of values, social norms, perceived and actual responsibilities. The health and wellness of the community intersect with these events.

Application

The following explanation of the application of natural conversations includes the rationale for each of the methods used in collecting the data as well as examples of this tool in use. The combination of methods involved more than 200 community members. Some of the members participated in all of the methods; for example, each method other than the survey included an average of about 10 to 30 participants. Workshops included 40 to 60 community members and 120 surveys were completed. Data collection occurred largely in the indigenous community; however, some data collection efforts extended to include community members no longer living in the community (i.e., living in cities and towns across the province). Data for this project is currently being analysed for the completion of a social, cultural and health impact analysis hydroelectric developments on a Northern Canadian indigenous nation living within the territorial area of the developments.

Historical document search and review of events impacting this indigenous community

An archival search was completed through numerous sites including the University of Manitoba archives, provincial and federal archives, historical documents held by the community itself and documents held by the church in the community (including records of births, deaths, marriages, and communications etc.). These documents were reviewed, summarised and discussed with different groups in the community. Such a purposive review not only provides important information on the formation and interactions by outside bodies with the community, but also impositions and legislation which created circumstances in the community, which may not have been understood at the time (e.g., hunting and trapping restrictions). Inclusion of historical photographs spanning 60 to 70 years of community history was an integral part of the historical review and resulting discussions with members. These photographs provided a rooted context from which to discuss the stories, people and events that have shaped the community.

This historical document search provided a picture of colonial events, which have shaped the reality of this community today. Beginning with the history of contact and the role of the ancestors as traders and guides, and the relationships that developed out of contact at an influential trading hub in the Canada's north, relationships were forged that relied on interdependence and interconnections. Strong and interconnected networks were established founded on trading opportunities, marriages and as interdependent supports. Treaties as imposed by the government began a process of dividing and disconnecting these strong networks into adversarial relationships which placed each indigenous nation in competition with each other for ever decreasing resources, promoting the omnipresent environment of exclusion.

Colonial influences in the history of this community that continue to affect present day generations emanate from policies and practices of both the federal and provincial governments including legislation and regulations enforced which were often contrary and imposing to indigenous worldviews and based in paternalistic ideologies. This includes the imposition of child welfare into the community in the 1950s, following compulsory

attendance of children 5 to 16 years of age at residential schools and continued inadequate funding for familial support ever since. The development of the North through the creation of hydroelectric dams, converter stations, generating stations and power lines have continued to impact health and wellness through an influx of workers, destruction of land, resources and houses.

Family histories as shared by different generations of community members including qualitative interviews with different age groups considering their lives over time, capturing life over time periods 1930 to the present day

Family histories are a community cornerstone. They often provide a starting point for conversations. Relating stories about who you are and how you fit into the community through your relations is an expected form of introduction (e.g., I am the daughter of... granddaughter of...). Through each of the research activities the idea of family history and relations was interwoven, beginning gatherings and circles with stories of how we are connected.

At one gathering of staff in the community including health and social service supports the group of over 60 community members were facilitated through a *Connections* exercise. The exercise was more or less spontaneous and was suggested by a community member as an exercise to build cohesion and trust within the group. The connections exercise began with people sitting in a circle of chairs. The community members were instructed to move into family groups. At the edges of each family group a middle person provided a connection (through marriage etc) to the family group directly beside them. This continued around the circle until each family was connected all the way around. Then the exercise was completed again but in a new configuration. Time permitting, it would be possible to complete the connections in many new ways, in many cases providing family connections and histories which were previously unspoken to many who were unaware of the connections they possessed. Interestingly, within small indigenous communities, an exercise connecting families such as the one described here can stimulate healing, particularly in cases where shame or exclusion due to individual prejudices or family feuds stemming generations back have created wedges between individuals or families.

Another way in which family histories were gathered was through the physical manifestation of a family tree with each of the communities' families. A facilitator would sit with family members as they added what they knew about their family tree including dates of birth, death, marriages, etc. The facilitator would repeat this process with other members until the tree was completed. This family tree model not only allowed for a sense of history and connection to be created – allowing for younger generations to take part in learning about their ancestors, but it also allowed for intergenerational issues to be brought to light (for example: alcohol or drug use, adoptions, etc.) to create a space for awareness and healing within community as a whole.

Teaching and sharing circles that engage participants utilising on artistic and resource based activities

Teaching and sharing circles offer forms of engagement that are meaningful across the lifespan and create environments of learning and listening that perpetuate the values upon which a community is based. Opportunities to engage different age and gender groups in the community took place including youth, men, women and elders. Various means of facilitation took place, which allowed for interactions between and within the generations.

Examples of ways in which this method was used include a three-day youth gathering where music was used as a means of communication and celebration, discussion of historical and familial connections took place through several circles that incorporated numerous storytellers and community members. Refreshing for both the youth and the facilitators was a walk through the natural environment, which encompassed the space where they live. The youth

were able to share stories of resource use, being out on the land and stories about their connection to the land that they live upon. In this workshop, youth were the experts of their place and the creators of their stories.

In another circle process, which expanded to include several gatherings over the course of 12 months, men and women were brought together to discuss their connections to community with the main question in mind of *Where do we go from here?* The use of meditation, candles, role plays and art allowed for the creation of a safe environment within which to explore intimate connections, fears and understandings about what it means to be a community and future possibilities. Within this framework members were able to explore the foundational question of identity: *Who does belong to this collective?*

Story-telling circles

People naturally congregate and share stories. Sitting around a fire, in a living room or any other comfortable setting provides an excellent environment in which to pass down legends and teachings upon which the community can make meaning of the current situations they face. By relating the story back to any circumstance, stories can give people, families and community an insight and guidance into how to move forward from any point. Story-telling circles that took place with many of the youth of this community occurred with youth sharing stories about their time on the land, and with older community members sharing experiences from the history of the community itself including how the community was founded and the experiences that have taken place since.

Stories were attached to geographic places, points on the map came to life and although elders complained that the youth no longer appreciated the natural environment, youth told stories that connected them as deeply as the older generations were in theirs. Interpretations of similar spots on the earth might have been similar or they might have differed through the generations. Often, changing times were evident in the stories of the different generations. Legends were lost to many of the youth, however. And in videotapes of elders speaking the legends, often we heard elders apologising for taking so much of our time to relay the stories. This latter point is of interest as it evidences an impact of changing values – the effect of a colonised people leaving past behind.

There were many story-telling circles that were facilitated through the course of this project including a gathering of elder women from the community. Some of the elders possess a wealth of knowledge about multiple generations and the life cycles of community both of which are critical to the perpetuation of health and balance in a community. Transmission of core norms, values and beliefs through the sharing and recording of such knowledge is essential and provides the mechanism by which a community maintains health. The reclamation and transmission of this foundational community knowledge is even more significant where past major hydroelectric developments continue to detrimentally affect the transfer of this knowledge and subsequently the health of generations of families in this Northern Manitoba First Nation. Life is an ever-evolving cycle with natural adaptations occurring over generations. Events, interactions and impositions all affect life cycles and development of both individuals and of a community. In this particular community, however, more than a normal share of imposed or forced adaptation to unnatural changes was evident. The effect on community stories and their transmission through the generations is certain to be significant.

Women came to a deeper level of understanding about the impact of interactions and impositions upon them as women, as caregivers and as political agents. The opportunity to gather together elder women to elicit reflections on their life experiences, as those who hold together the fabric of the families, allows for insight into the ways in which the community has been forced to rapidly adapt to impositions beyond their locus of control. Typically, communities and families evolve gradually over generations. This experience was unique in

that there were major multiple influential impositions, which occurred over a relatively short time period. In reading the rich life histories that have been recorded, we have come to understand that families and the community were forced to adapt, forced to change, forced to keep up with the times – yet they lacked the resources and supports to allow them to adequately do so. Over this time span families witnessed rapidly changing health, communication and relationship patterns, and values. These are the themes that were explored intimately through the story-telling circles.

Ancestral histories

Ancestral stories were a main story-telling type shared by the elders as well as others in the community. Epidemiologic studies refer to a heavy burden of premature mortality rates within indigenous communities. In terms of lived experience, this rate of high deaths occurring before the expected lifespan has been lived, is necessarily interpreted in terms of the meaning of individual lives on this earth plane and then in the spirit plane beyond us. Stories connecting community members to presences in the spirit world were not only common, but also they were an enjoyable and fulfilling way to share deep emotion, at a soulful level. One example of the power of spirits was evident in the following story told to the first author by one of the band counsellors:

We'd been fighting to have a social and health impact assessment for decades. And when those hydro workers told their machines and destroyed the gravesite of our ancestors that was the ancestors coming to our aid, saying it's time to be heard. After that incident hydro gave us the resources we need to investigate how all these developments are affecting the wellbeing of our people.

Through such stories, it is clear that those who have already passed on have a voice and are capable of affecting matters in this world. Throughout the story-telling, sharing and teaching circles we ensure that the stories and the memories of our ancestors are not silenced. By remembering and honouring those who have made our lives possible, even when they have passed on to the spirit world we understand that our lives have been made possible because of the events in their lifetimes and those who came before them. Our history is rich and vibrant – by creating a safe space for these stories to be passed on we examine how these histories are struggling within the colonial histories that have been imposed on the community.

Ancestral histories are the roots of community. They provide insight into the foundation of a community's worldview, values and belief system, which has impacted the growth of future generations. For the purpose of creating a picture of the interconnections of community this is where the story begins. Questions that were explored include: Which families gathered in particular areas? Where do the roots of the community come from? The original settlers of the area have come from different areas and experiences, all gathering together to form a new community. This is the history that provides strength for a community to understand those ancestors who have moved on to the spirit world – it is their shoulders upon which this community has been built. Ancestral histories let you know with conviction that you are here today because of those who have come before you. It is a humbling experience to listen to the stories of the ancestors.

Comprehensive health survey

The comprehensive health survey was one piece in the mapping of connections in the community. While it is based on a quantitative method of measurement it provided a language for community to communicate with government and policy makers. This health survey was a tool used by the community to strengthen their search for understanding of health impacts. This tool was implemented on the request of the community leadership. However, it did not proceed unchallenged. Many community members complained that a quantitative survey was a Western tool that contradicted indigenous values. Others believed that the tool was a hydro or government strategy to get the information they needed to continue colonisation. As a

result, some community members made themselves inaccessible to surveying while others provided critical comments to the process of surveying. As a result, there are many questions we are currently asking including: *What is the impact/damage on the community itself in implementing a Western research tool?* This question is relevant in that currently there are several surveys being regularly implemented in Canadian First Nation communities.

Synthesis with Kaupapa Māori research principles

Tino rangatiratanga: self-determination

Natural conversations are based on the principle of self-determination whereby the community has the power and independence to control their own culture, aspirations and destiny. The challenge of self-determination in this First Nation is multiplied with a sort of omnipresent and encompassing hydroelectric corporation. Within the present environment and a history of Euro-Canadian colonisation that includes residential schools, the reserve system (under local control of Indian agents), tuberculosis and hunger epidemics and the federal sanatoriums, church and missionary conversions, community members struggle to relocate and re-conceptualise individual and collective identities. Today, this Northern Canadian hydroelectric corporation has the power to upturn the land and pull its resources out from the roots, to flood the land and to inundate the community with workers that continue to fuel the hydro machine. In this mess, the community must (re-)discover itself as a people, as a nation. Many community members feel that the only sensible option is to join forces with the colonial machine, but this comes at a cost to the community overall. This is a major struggle within self-determination: can an indigenous nation find balance while living at the epicentre of the hydro constructions? More encompassing, to include the wider political implications faced throughout the indigenous world, is the problem of colonisation/globalisation and exploitation of minority populations and the ways in which indigenous communities are battling with this frontier. Within this community, the struggle is set within hydro constructions but just as the web is cast to form connections between the local and international earlier in the paper, a similar pattern occurs so that it is hydro construction in this community, mining developments in another, as so forth around the globe.

Taonga tuku iho: cultural aspiration

Cultural aspiration was central to this project in that community ways of knowing, doing and understanding the world are valued based on their own reflection, validity and relevance. Within the context of hydro development, valued in Canadian society and, for what the developments offer, i.e., electricity, valued as well, for the indigenous nation, the First Nation struggles to uphold their cultural aspirations. Modernity (within neo-liberalisation) moves society as a whole in a singular direction, i.e., one that is monetarily based. What happens within this mono-focus is that variation suffers the threat of extinction. Hydroelectric development is constructed on flooded lands. Much of the community's culture is flooded and is overshadowed by the constructions. Without the kind of research methods that we are implementing much can be lost forever. For example, the hydroelectric corporation and the provincial government settle claims issues with 'compensation'. Compensation does not revive or protect cultural aspirations; rather, compensation gives money in return for lost culture – land, natural foods, trapping, fishing, hunting, language, traditional medicines, spiritual ceremonies and gatherings on the land – are traded in for money. As such, Nations assimilate into the money system. With our methods, the conversations about cultural aspirations come to the forefront.

Ako Māori: culturally preferred pedagogy

This principle places value on the teaching and learning practices that are preferred and unique within the community. This does not necessitate that such practices come from tradition, rather that they are ways which are preferred by the community overall. The First Nation's director of education, his staff and parents were involved in discussions, oral and

written presentations on the topic of a culturally preferred pedagogy. What we created was a template for a learning environment that brought together a collective of individuals who are simultaneously students as well as teachers. The older students (adolescents) of the community would travel the traditional land territory to meet with other Cree adolescents from the other five Cree Nations to share and to build on the pedagogy: one that is at once inherited and constructed. The meeting of the Nations is based on the fact that colonisation (sustained by hydroelectric corporation) divides the Cree Nation into separate and isolated communities – this method allows for the larger collective to reunite. Discomfort with the present school system is based on the continued failure of First Nation children to advance in the Canadian school system, the disjointed and lack of community relevant curriculum and the alienation of families from their children's education. The newly designed pedagogy brings students back to the land and brings text to life in every aspect of scientific, mathematic, artistic and literate study.

Kia piki ake i ngā raruraru o te kainga: socio-economic mediation

The principle of socio-economic mediation asserts the need to mediate and assist in the alleviation of negative pressures and disadvantages that are experienced within indigenous communities. As such, engagement in the research method itself is a positive benefit to the First Nation community. The method acknowledges the need and success of the community to design and implement its own way of researching and of developing initiatives. The method brings community members to discuss traditional socio-economic systems, colonial interventions that have usurped independence (interdependence), and new ways to address socioeconomics in the region.

Whānau: extended family structure

This principle, which acknowledges the relationships that each individual has with one another as well as the relationships that exist with the world around them, also provides direction on the nurturing and responsibility of relationships of researcher, researched and the research itself. The development of family trees in the community and the sharing of stories and legends is a foundation of our method. These activities allowed for a knowledge sharing that honours the principle of extended family structure – bringing back together a people once divided and conquered.

Kaupapa: collective philosophy

This principle refers to the collective vision, aspiration and purpose not only of the research, but more importantly aspirations of the community as a whole. As such the research should be considered a vital piece contributing to the overall 'kaupapa'. The problem with so many Westernised approaches to research is that the data depends on a few people (or a sample of people) to speak on behalf of the whole. One of the issues presented at the development stages of our research was the loss of voice of many of the community members. In order to ensure that every community member had ample opportunity to add to the development of a collective philosophy, we employed several interconnected activities within the overall method. Research was conducted on the land in order to attract the voices and interests of the hunters, fishers and trappers, in the kitchens and churches, in homes and community centres, in the diners, etc. Group activities and individual activities were creatively employed.

Ata: growing respectful relationships

The principle of ata relates specifically to the building and nurturing of relationships. It acts as a guide to the understanding of relationships and wellbeing when engaging with Māori. One of the most significant impacts of colonisation and ongoing hydro developments in the region are a destruction of trust and respect in relationships. The development of respectful relationships within and between generations was a focal point for the research. Breaking away from Western-style science, the research could not always be about data-collection; rather the research had to consistently employ activities and strategies for development of wellness in the community. The data collection methods drew from indigenous epistemology

and ontology meaning that indigenous ways of knowing, understanding and engaging with the world are present in the philosophy behind the research. As such, researchers brought music (i.e., drumming), teas, nature walks, sharing circles, drama and art-based activities – activities that focused on building relationships to the community. In the activities, the researchers, all of us relations of the First Nation, opened up and shared our life stories, perspectives and hopes for the community, breaking down artificial scientist–community member barriers.

Summary

This participatory, community-designed multi-method research project is founded on indigenous standpoint whereby emphasis is placed on the wisdom and value of the knowledge of community. As a whole, community members are experts on their lives and the events and experiences within which they are privy to every day. Natural conversations as a research method in indigenous communities is appropriate as it allows for knowledge construction, knowledge reflection and re-construction – all imperative for thought provocation inside a world replete with on-going colonisation, inequitable access to health and socio-economic resources and neo-liberalisation. Within such a climate, knowledge must necessarily be allowed a space for critical (re-)discovery. The activities completed sought to understand the experience of community and the resulting impacts of generations of external impositions and hydroelectric developments on the community as a whole. Based on this work, natural conversations were explored for use within a whānau setting. Examination through the seven principles within Kaupapa Māori research principles provides several points of connection and collaboration as seen above. Considering the researchers' focus on natural conversations as a tool by which to interact and implement the examination of impact upon multiple generations as it pertains to health, relationships, healing and community knowledge, it is clear that, across international experiences, connection can be drawn. Potential limitations to this style of research are that the research requires more time than a typical western methodology and greater participation of more of the community membership. Oftentimes, Western (government or institutional) funding bodies do not necessarily allow for such a commitment of time and resources. Further, the researchers of the present study were relations of the community and were cognisant of the history of the nation and the relational dynamics between families and individuals, whether or not outsider researchers can gain entry into such depth (perhaps such researchers might find greater access to trust?) is yet to be determined.

Author Notes

Funded by the Māori Health Joint Venture: a joint initiative of the Health Research Council of New Zealand and Ministry of Health, HRC Contract No.08/601.

Rachel Eni is an Assistant Professor in the Department Family Social Sciences, Faculty of Human Ecology and the Research Director of the International Indigenous Health and Social Justice Research Group at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.

Gladys Rowe is a Research Coordinator in the International Indigenous Health and Social Justice Research Group, Faculty of Human Ecology at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.

E-mail: eni@cc.umanitoba.aca