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## **Reclaiming First Nations Research: The Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute<sup>1</sup>**

Brian Walmark<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

“We have been studied to death,” is a complaint heard too often in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit circles across Canada in spite of efforts by the academic community to develop strategies to address historic and contemporary grievances with respect to research and the research process at the community level. For decades, academics put First Nations communities under the microscope in all manners of research that provided little if any benefit to the “subjects” of their work. However, research was and continues to be important for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities as it shapes policy necessary to promote development and capacity at the local level. Questions with regards to research remain: Who identifies the research questions, who leads these projects, and who controls the purse strings? Is it the academic institutions or the Aboriginal communities?

In 2004, the Chiefs of Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) took steps to address these questions by creating the KO Research Institute (KORI). KO is a small tribal council that serves six remote First Nations in northwestern Ontario including Deer Lake, Fort Severn, Keewaywin, McDowell Lake, North Spirit Lake, and Poplar Hill. KO is a leader in First Nations connectivity, telecommunications, and the development of community-based broadband applications such as digital education and IP-based telemedicine. Community interest in research in Ontario’s far north came as a result of the work of K-Net Services to migrate broadband and information communication technologies (ICT) applications to remote and isolated First Nations in that region. The Kuhkenah Network is the largest managed broadband network in Canada and adapts broadband services to address local priorities such as improving access to health care through telemedicine (<http://telemedicine.knet.ca>) and educational and training opportunities through digital education (<http://kihs.knet.ca/drupal/> and <http://education.knet.ca/g8/g8moodle1/>). As this work attracted the attention of academic researchers, the Chiefs of Keewaytinook Okimakanak wanted to develop research capacity at the community level to document and share community success stories that relied less on the expertise of outsiders and more on the cultivation of local knowledge and teachings. KORl was created to facilitate this process.

The chiefs mandated KORI to facilitate research capacity at the community level. To achieve this goal, the leadership directed KORI to “build bridges” between supportive academics and First Nations communities and to train and employ community-based researchers who live, work, and raise families in their respective First Nations. To do this, KORI employs participatory action research (PAR) methodologies that speak to traditional knowledge and practices.

While PAR methodologies have come under attack in recent years by scholars who argue that some international aid organizations, academics, and consultants have exploited PAR to extract information from Indigenous communities (Cooke and Kothari 2001), PAR has proven to be useful for the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute. This methodology has enabled KORI to conduct research projects with communities that respect local priorities and concerns over the institutional imperatives of the academy. In the short time since it was established, KORI has partnered with different university academics, First Nation organizations, and communities to undertake community-based research in broadband migration, telehealth, digital education, and prescription drug abuse.

This paper will briefly outline the challenges of traditional academic research and efforts to address these challenges by the Aboriginal community by creating documents and groups such as OCAP (First Nations Centre 2007) and KORI. It will also explore the development of the community-based researchers in the Sioux Lookout district and, finally, will review the efforts of KORI to seek out and work with academic researchers across Canada and around the world.

## **Challenges of Traditional Research and Aboriginal Communities in Canada**

Research has become a “dirty word” in many First Nations communities (Smith 1999). Historically, academic researchers have extracted data from Aboriginal communities much like mining and forestry companies that harvest the rich natural resources of the traditional lands of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. Too often, academic researchers would develop a research question, find funding, and then seek out a First Nations community to become the object of their study. The researcher (usually represented by their graduate students) would arrive in a community to distribute surveys, conduct some interviews, and perhaps facilitate a focus group or two. Sometimes the chief and council were aware of the research; most of the time, they were not. Once enough data was collected, the researcher would return to their university, analyze the data, and publish the findings. The community seldom benefited from the research in any material way short of a few part-time jobs for community members who guided the researchers through their work in the community.

As the struggle by First Nations to assert their treaty rights intensified in the 1970s, more and more academics were attracted to the study of Aboriginal issues. To address some of the more obscene research abuses against Aboriginal commu-

nities, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the National Science and Engineering Research Council in Canada (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) drafted a report titled *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (CIHR et al. 1998). Section 6 deals specifically with research involving Aboriginal peoples. In spite of recent reforms, the Tri-Council Statement continues to serve the interests of the university community and academics who desire to work in the Aboriginal community over the interests of Aboriginal communities.

Each university in Canada that accepts funding from the Tri-Council partners is required to form a research ethics committee to oversee academic research. These committees are composed largely of academics and administrators with few if any Aboriginal community members outside of the university community itself or appointments from regional Aboriginal organizations. After the Tri-Council released the statement, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) developed its own research guidelines based on a nationwide consultation with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis communities across Canada. These principles, known as Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP), were based on traditional understandings of learning and were designed to protect the interests of Aboriginal communities. While the university community has embraced the Tri-Council Statement, there is far less enthusiasm for the OCAP principles in the day-to-day practice of research.

While the academic community debated how best to conduct research *on* Aboriginal communities, the leadership of Keewaytinook Okimakanak directed the KO Research Institute to work with elders and other community members to document a series of research guidelines for academic researchers interested in working *with* First Nations in Ontario's far north (KORI 2007). These draft protocols are posted, but continue to develop and take shape as more community members engage in local research.

## **The Need for Research Capacity at the Community Level**

The traditional way of conducting academic research has seldom served the interests of First Nations communities nor has it addressed the priorities and needs identified by the communities themselves. First Nations communities have all of the knowledge and experience to address the challenges confronting them; what they lack are the resources to address these challenges. Control of funding to conduct research has been, and continues to be, held in the hands of universities. The challenge, therefore, is to empower community members to conduct research based on locally identified issues and to provide them with the resources to do the work that needs to be done. Empowering communities and supporting local priorities remains the cornerstone of the work by KORI. Community-based researchers are central to this vision. Just as KO Telemedicine trains and employs members to operate and manage telehealth idoc suites at the community level, and just as

K-Net Services trains and employs community members to operate and maintain the local broadband networks, the community-based researchers are knowledge workers who understand the local political, social, and cultural dynamics of their First Nations. The perspective of the community-based researchers cannot be learned, much less appreciated in the short two- or three-day visit typically utilized by academics conducting research in the north.

Whether they acknowledge it or not, academics depend on local people to conduct First Nations research at the community level. In the past, an academic would drop into a First Nation community to gather data for research that was conceived, designed, and developed in universities and funded by government agencies far removed from the day-to-day realities of life on-reserve. During the data-gathering phase, academics would depend on local people to introduce them to the local leadership, champions, elders, and others who could provide them with data to enhance their research. Academics seldom compensated these people for their knowledge, their time, or their connections. Any shortcoming in data collection would be blamed on these local guides, rather than on the failure of the academic team to properly consult with the chief and council prior to the visit, or to provide adequate resources to the community to conduct the field portion of the work, or to provide paid employment for the community-based researcher to participate in the project beyond the one or two days the research team was actually in the First Nation.

## **Building Bridges with the Academic Community**

KORI inherited its first research partnership from K-Net Services, the telecommunications department of Keewaytinook Okimakanak. The Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) was a multi-year SSHRC-funded project that brought researchers from the University of Toronto, Concordia University, and community-based agencies working with IT to develop policy recommendations that would address the broadband needs of community users.

As a result, KORl forged research partnerships with CRACIN members such as Susan O'Donnell, PhD, of the National Research Council (NRC) to establish Researching ICTs with Aboriginal Communities (RICTA), a SSHRC-funded knowledge cluster. In March 2005, KO and the NRC brought academics from across North America to visit Deer Lake First Nation, a leader in community use of IP-based telehealth and digital education. The RICTA members witnessed how Deer Lake members are shaping ICTs to address access to health care and education. RICTA maintains active online research collaboration with members posting research and sharing findings at conferences around the world. One of the many legacies of RICTA is the VideoCom research partnership between academics and First Nations agencies, such as K-Net Services, KORl, and the

Atlantic Help Desk, to explore the use of IP video conferencing and digital video by people living in remote and isolated First Nations communities.

In addition to its relationship with CRACIN, KORI has forged research partnerships with other post-secondary institutions such as the University of Guelph and Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. Building on the foundation established by K-Net Services and Ricardo Ramirez, formerly of the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at Guelph, KORI has lead a variety of participatory action research projects including Indigenous radio and telehealth.

The research relationship with Lakehead University has focused on the Faculty of Education and a series of SSHRC-funded projects including Digital Education with Remote Aboriginal Communities (DERAC) and an Aboriginal research grant to study First Nations digital education.

KORI's ability to work with both Guelph and Lakehead was made possible by the decision of K-Net Services to provide both institutions with PolyCom video conferencing units. As a result, students and faculty members at both universities could regularly participate in workshops, meetings, and other online gatherings that were important steps towards building relationships between First Nations and these institutions. These are not formal agreements with institutions, but rather are relationships built between academics and the KO team.

After almost two years of collaboration, researchers from KORI and the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University won a SSHRC Aboriginal research grant (ARG) to work with First Nations communities to study digital education in Ontario's far north. The focus of the community-based digital-education research project was the Keewaytinook Internet High School (KiHS). KiHS is the first ministry-approved digital high school in Ontario. KiHS was created when community members engaged in a series of sharing circles to discuss ways in which remote and isolated First Nations could adapt ICTs to improve access to health care, education, and training opportunities. The purpose of the ARG is to revisit those sharing circles. Many people who participated in those original sharing circles said they wanted their youth to remain in their communities for their high school education. They also wanted their youth to receive high-quality education that would prepare them for college or university without the need to enroll in the access programs offered by post-secondary institutions for Aboriginal students in Canada. They wanted to know how broadband could be used to resolve these challenges and others created by the legacy of the residential school system. One of the outcomes of these discussions was the Keewaytinook Internet High School. Almost ten years later, KiHS is providing youth living in remote and isolated First Nations communities in Ontario's far north with the opportunity to study ministry-approved credits under the direction of accredited teachers without having to travel south to pursue a high school diploma. KiHS has been evaluated by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Department of Indian Affairs (Canada) and has demonstrated itself to be an effective secondary school program.

By revisiting the sharing circles, the digital education research project aims to give voice to community members so they can identify what they like and do not like about KiHS, and what improvements could be made to the application so that it better addresses community needs. The research team, led by community-based researchers, will accomplish this by interviewing key informants, conducting sharing circles, and analyzing data collected by KiHS administration over the years.

The SSHRC Aboriginal research grant includes funding for the training and employment of community-based researchers who live and work in the participating First Nations and who are responsible for data collection at the community level. The funding of community-based researchers is recognition of the essential work done by local people in the research process. Like graduate students who go on to become researchers in the university community, the training of community-based researchers provides First Nations communities with a research capacity that can be utilized by the leadership to address a wide variety of issues long after the formal research project is completed.

The Aboriginal research grant is certainly the largest research project that KORI has participated in. However, it is a transitional phase for KORI. Prior to this project, KORI presented research opportunities to the First Nations it serves by creating teams of community-based researchers and academics. However, as its reputation grows, the leadership is bringing research problems to KORI and KORI is assuming a more supportive role as the First Nations assume a greater leadership role in the research process. The Fort Severn Polar Bear Community Research Project is one led by the First Nation where all phases of the research plan have been completed by community members and supported by KORI and academic researchers.

## **Conclusion**

The First Nations that Keewaytinook Okimakanak serves have been employing participatory methodologies informed by traditional knowledge and practices for more than a decade. The leadership continues to expect that KORI will conduct its research work in a manner consistent with those practices. Since its creation, KORI has developed a number of research projects using participatory methodologies with academics at various universities across Ontario. There remain some serious challenges. Research funding agencies seldom support the work of community-based researchers. Consequently, academics will fund their own graduate students but few are prepared to pay for the training or employment of community-based researchers. Instead, academic researchers expect KORI to seek out its own funding to participate in projects, and the opportunity to promote knowledge workers at the community level is missed. It also means that community-based researchers are denied paid employment and their participation is not acknowledged by the wider research community. As such, First Nations are denied an opportunity to build capacity in research at the community level.

There is also the need to reconcile the gap between the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and the principles of OCAP, which best serves the interests of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. The Tri-Council document continues to protect the universities, while OCAP speaks to the needs, goals, and aspirations of the communities. Some of these issues may be resolved in time with heightened awareness by academics and funders alike.

However, the most serious threat may be the very success of the community-based researchers and their work. As their skills in the understanding and application of participatory methodologies grow, community-based researchers may come to be seen by the academic community as little more than vehicles to conduct the “community portion” of *their* research. There is a danger that the academic community will begin to employ community-based researchers to “extract” traditional knowledge from the First Nations in Ontario’s far north unless we heed the warnings of Cooke and Kothari (1998). Most academics know and can recite from memory the right words when it comes to the ethical treatment of Aboriginal Peoples in the research process. There is scant evidence as yet to conclude that this newfound awareness is any more than cosmetic, and little more than a licence that maintains the research status quo between academic researchers and Aboriginal communities. Careerism, the pursuit of tenure and promotion, and the need to “publish or perish,” continue to trump the research priorities and needs of the communities.



## Endnotes

- 1 Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Keewaytinook Okimakanak.
- 2 The author wishes to acknowledge financial support for this article from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC Project Number 856-2007-0022).

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