

Review article

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# Ethical Entry and Exit of a Native American University Community for Purposes of Qualitative Research

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## Abstract

The problem of entry into Native American communities whether located on the reservation or not has grown in recent years because of exploitation by researchers for centuries. Many Native Americans think of the word “researcher” as a dirty word because of past abuses by researchers such as denial of access to data, denial of final approval prior to publication. Therefore, access to the materials and people needed to conduct sound research with the Native population is often denied on this basis [1]. My dissertation project “Native Americans and College Success” followed guidelines culled from numerous sources. I experienced no problems in obtaining research participants, no issues with participation in focus groups and no issues in eliciting feedback from my participants about the dissertation. One reason many researchers ignore widely available protocols for conducting Native research is fear of the inability to publish at the end of the project. This article addresses these fears and lays out a protocol both the subject and the researcher can live with.

**Keywords:** Qualitative; native american; grounded theory; indigenous; ethical research

## Introduction

The study, “Native Americans and College Success”, focused on the factors and experiences of those Native students who succeeded in college and how these factors and experiences were connected. I explored areas that, to date, had been researched in a quantitative manner only and had not been connected to one another within the research. The researcher also explored areas lacking in the research literature. Through the utilization of grounded theory these gaps were filled. The characteristics of Native American college students and their support systems that contributed to students’ success in college were explored and described fully. These characteristics were grounded in the environment that has made such traits essential for the success of Native American students. Finally,

this study focused on the factors and experiences of those Native students who did succeed in college and how these factors and experiences were connected.

## Person of the Researcher

I am Caucasian, and the Native community allowed me into this community through Native American faculty associates I had at the University. Through my associates and the research participants, I contacted participants and utilized connections these participants had with one another to gain a wider pool of research participants. Charmaz believes that it is vital in qualitative research for me to collect the data available through the participants. As an instructor teaching classes on various reservations in the Midwest, I became

interested in what factors comprised a successful experience for a Native American college student. This interest deepened as I learned that many of the Native Americans, I spoke with had negative experiences with four-year degree-granting institutions that were reflective of my own experience as a first-generation college student. In 1979, I attended a small Midwestern private college; however, in 1982 I dropped out without a degree. I found that Native students' feelings of alienation paralleled mine as an undergraduate student.

There were several reasons I did not fit in with the students of this small, private Midwestern College. I was 17 years old at the start of my studies, from a small town of fewer than 600 people, from a poor family, a first-generation college student, and I was gay. The parallels I heard in the stories from these students and friends were striking. The conversations I had with Native students while I was teaching on the reservations gave me a glimpse into the issues they faced on small, Midwestern university campuses, and while similar to what I had dealt with as an undergraduate, the Native American students' issues were significantly different from those I had faced. I felt that a study of the Native American college student's experience would be a beneficial addition to the scarce published literature. Survey I derived the survey instrument from the knowledge base explicated in the literature review. I further honed and refined the survey instrument during the study and continued to alter the survey as the interviews progressed. This alteration was in keeping with the constant comparative method of grounded theory where the questions were altered as the research proceeded [2]. I designed the instrument to initiate an open-ended dialogue with the participants.

### Participants and Community Entry

I approached the Native elders at the University as appropriate entry to a Native community begins with the elders of the community. At the University, these elders were at many levels in many different departments. They had never before been asked to approve a study prior to data gathering. Typically, the researcher would get approval from the IRB (Institutional Review Board), and then begin finding Native students for the research. I obtained dissertation committee approval and IRB approval in the Summer of 2008. I then began the process of obtaining approval from the Native elders at the University. The elders were a group of helpful people who wanted to see the research go forward; however, the commitment I made to them, and that I had made in my initial proposal was I would not move forward with this project without the approval of the Native elders at the University. Therefore, the wait for the group to find a time to meet was an anxiety ridden period of time for me. The committee wanted the IRB approval documents, a copy of the proposal, a copy of the participant interview, and a brief interview with me.

I met with the group in October of 2008 and received the approval for the project that I asked for. The conditions I set forth, and that they accepted were the following:

a) I would not move forward with data collection without their approval.

b) The raw data would be submitted to the subjects prior to data analysis.

c) The subjects would be able to withdraw at any time, up to final publication of the document.

d) The subjects would be allowed to modify or remove their quotations if they did not wish that particular information used in the final publication.

e) All publications arising from this project would require final approval from the subjects before publication.

The committee stated that these protections were adequate, and that they felt the study was vital for the purposes of recruitment and retention on campus. Native research must include a component of direct utility in the community in which the research was conducted [3,4]. Approval from the elders in hand, I requested and obtained contact information of Native students who might be interested in participating in the study. I contacted twenty Native students, thirteen of whom participated fully in the study. Those who did not stated they were too busy to participate in the research. The study consisted of thirteen Native American students who were currently enrolled full time at a Midwestern University. Each student was in good academic standing with the University. I had many Native contacts who aided in the process of obtaining willing participants in this study. The open-ended survey utilized guided the discussion by topic and focused the discussion in each topic area as it related to the student's experiences at the University. The survey I used in the interview process was sent to the students one week prior to the interview.

I also invited eligible students to participate in this study via snowballing [5]. Another name for snowballing is chain referral (Family Health International). Native faculty and supportive students asked interested students to contact me and set up an initial talk to determine if the students were comfortable with me and if they truly wished to participate in the study. All thirteen students were comfortable going directly to the final interview immediately following the initial discussion. The initial meeting to visit was culturally congruent because Native cultural focus in professional dealing was on relationship building first, business at hand second [6]. I asked the students at the conclusion of the formal interview, if they knew of other Native students from backgrounds (e.g., location, tribe, gender, year in college, college program, etc.) which differed significantly from their own. The snowballing method resulted in locating students who had a high level of interest in the research project and achieved maximum variation in the participants.

Respondents were of both genders, from different levels in college (freshman through doctoral levels), mixed SES conditions, different reservations, different tribes, both urban and reservation backgrounds, and different academic disciplines. The utilization of a broad range of participants provided the maximum amount of qualitative data available from the population of Native students at a Midwestern University. This also yielded rich data that is broad in scope. I bracketed my experiences when describing the experiences

of these participants. Bracketing means that I separated my bias from participant experience. I assembled a focus group of participants and asked if the preliminary analysis of the data was unbiased and presented an accurate picture of their experiences. Finally, I asked Dr. Sevensing, a faculty member at the University who did a qualitative dissertation recently, to review my raw data, analysis, and coding, and along with checking that the conclusions were reasonable given the data collected, she also searched for any biases that were subsequently eliminated from the final product.

## Data Collection

I interviewed participants in a location chosen by the individual participants. Five of the participants chose to be interviewed at my office; eight of the participants chose to have the interview conducted at the University's Native Centre. I personally transcribed all interviews in full without truncation. Interview procedure. I told participants that any of their personal quotes which they did not deem appropriate in the final research product would be paraphrased or removed. These procedures ensured that the participants would retain control of the data from collection through publication. At no point did participant requests to alter information substantially change the data in this study.

## Description of participants

Thirteen Native students, eight females and five males, from a variety of tribes participated in these interviews. These tribes included: Cherokee Nation, Cheyenne River Lakota Nation, Dakota Nation (Standing Rock), Navajo Nation, Menominee Nation, Oglala Lakota Nation, Seneca Iroquois Nation, Siksiki Blackfoot Nation, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate and the Yankton Sioux Nation. Students were from the following major areas of study: Adult and Higher Education, Alcohol and Drug Studies, American Indian Studies, Art, Elementary Education, Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, Nursing, Physician's Assistant, Pre-Medicine, Pre-Occupational Therapy, Psychology and Social Work. Students ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-three years of age. All participants had family members who were college graduates, all had family support for their college efforts, and all had mentors who helped them throughout their college program. I asked the participants to choose a pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality in this dissertation. The students chose the following pseudonyms for purposes of this dissertation: Nadine, Tashina, James, Black Weasel, Sundancer, Landon, Casey, Lily, Maria, Makpiya, Madeline, Gabby and Joe.

Four of the students were from urban backgrounds: Nadine, James, Black Weasel and Gabby. Nine of the students were from reservation backgrounds: Tashina, Sundancer, Landon, Casey, Lily, Makpiya, Madeline, Joe and Maria. Prior to data analysis, all participants agreed to review their transcripts to verify that the information contained in the transcripts was accurate and fully represented their point of view appropriately. Although I conducted interviews during data analysis, which is allowed by the constant comparative method of grounded theory [7], I did not analyse or incorporate the data collected until each participant had one week to review the transcript and request deletions or additions. Alterations were limited to correction of items such as

dollar amounts and job titles. There were five alterations of this type. No participant elected to have their personal data deleted. The actual interview included having participants read and sign the consent form and select a pseudonym. I taped the interview using the pseudonym chosen by each participant.

I fully transcribed all thirteen interviews personally. I did ask the students if I could send the interview recordings to a professional transcription service in California [Descriptionist]; ten of the thirteen participants were comfortable with this option, although I did not utilize the service in the end. Two of the interviews were not recorded electronically, one female participant requested no taping, and as I interviewed one male participant, tape recording that particular interview did not feel like a good fit; therefore, I did not tape record that interview. I conducted the majority of the interviews in the Native American Cultural Centre (NACC) at a small Midwestern University. Students were also interviewed in my office on campus; the decision concerning the interview location was up to the individual student. This was necessary so that the students were in control and felt comfortable during the interview process. Different venues did not affect the outcome of these interviews in an unfavourable fashion; rather, the participants' ability to control the process increased trust in me.

The only issue that arose at the NACC was acoustic in nature and slightly affected the quality of the recordings. I did not collect information from participants who were current students in my classes, performing interviews between semesters when students wished to interview for this project who were current students of mine. The goal was to eliminate the impact of the student-instructor relationship during this study.

## Confidentiality

Cultural confidentiality norms apply within the tribal setting, and in settings in which the tribal members had decided to place themselves, such as a university setting [8]. These norms do not specify that material discussed about and between relatives who were either at a member's same social level in the tiospaye or below that member's level will remain confidential [9]. Therefore, confidentiality of the students was and will continue to be strictly maintained by me. In addition, participants were requested to maintain confidentiality, especially in the focus groups. I asked the participants to use pseudonyms during the interview, analysis, coding, and final writing processes. I destroyed all links between the names of the students and pseudonyms after successfully defending the dissertation. To maintain contact with the students for approval of future publications, I have maintained a list of their email addresses, unlinked to their pseudonyms.

## Data Analysis

This study was a grounded theory study and as such did adhere to the most highly structured research criteria available in qualitative research methodology. "Grounded theory is judged on the basis of fitness, understanding, generality, and control". Glaser and Strauss' criteria of grounded theory are discussed below. Fitness, the first criteria, means the theory must be an appropriate

fit for the area of knowledge to which the theory is contributing. The theory must be carefully induced from the data collected and the theory arrived at in the end must have practical applicability in the area researched. A theory which lacks everyday applicability is not practical and therefore has no place in the research literature. Through this study, I strove to produce research that could be utilized as the basis for further research in the topic area of Native Americans and college success.

In addition, this project produced data that could be utilized in selection and recruitment of Native Americans who will be more likely to succeed in college. Further, I endeavoured to environmentally situate the data and make sense of environmental issues that colleagues reading this study can utilize to alter the campus environment to create a successful experience for Native students. Understanding is the second criteria of a grounded theory study and means the research will be fully understandable by those persons who work in the field of inquiry which the study covers. Lack of understanding of the theory would result in the inability to utilize the theory in the field and this would violate the criteria of fitness. The research publications will be written in such a manner that the materials will be readily understandable and capable of utilization by parents of Native students, tribal councils, tribal elders, campus faculty, and the Native students themselves.

Generality, the third criteria, means the theory is not so abstract as to be meaningless, but at the same time abstract enough that it can be adapted to a variety of situations. This requires a large number of diverse qualitative data be gathered to lend flexibility and transferability to the theory. The ability to transfer this research to other colleges is of vital importance to me and to the participants. Outside entities should consider this research as a design template when attempting to apply these results to other campuses. Secondly, this research illuminated topic areas that were likely to be of interest on other campuses, promoting transferability to other institutions. Finally, the results of this study will have high transferability to small Midwestern colleges with primarily Caucasian student bodies who are reaching out to Native student populations. The fourth criteria, control, in grounded theory means the real-world consumers of the research will be able to use the research information in their practices [10].

For example, in this study, listing the variables the Native students, administration, faculty, and Native families cannot hope to alter would not be useful. As a result, the factors of interest in a grounded theory study must by definition be those that were part of the participants' systems, and must be of use to those working with Native students. The analysis proceeded from open coding, which labelled the phenomena, to axial coding, which put categories together and in which I formed categories of data that had meaning. Next, I moved to selective coding in which the researcher draws storylines from these discrete categories of data. The storylines were then linked and situated in the conditional matrix, which contains the external environmental conditions surrounding and influencing the phenomena of interest. I combined the circular nature of the conditional matrix with the spiritual importance of circularity in Native culture when building the matrix. An essential

outcome of this study was diagramming the categories within this matrix and verifying the accuracy of the matrix with the participants.

This project was shaped inductively, as is true of qualitative research, as I experienced both the data and the participants in the moment of the interview. Theory emerged from the ground up as the process moves through the vital process of hands-on immersion in the data. This hands-on immersion approach is the core of qualitative research, an approach that uses the person of the researcher as the instrument of data collection and data analysis. The data collection methods, interviews, analysis, and final reporting of the results were shaped by my person, the participants, the experiences of the participants, and the interaction between the participants and me. The qualitative, approach of grounded theory, where the theory emerges from the data, rather than forming hypotheses and then testing those hypotheses, was an excellent fit for the Native population.

### Final Comments

The requirement that the results of a research study be approved by the population studied is one that many researchers believe pollutes the validity of the research. I found quite the opposite with my Native participants. All corrections and additions in the focus groups were meant to better explain their experience in college, not the paint an unrealistic picture. Realism and truth were the primary goals of my participants, and their high level of involvement based on the knowledge that the final product was as much their responsibility as it was mine made for a richer and more accurate research product. Also, upon reflection, knowing that the entire interview could be deleted at any stage by merely sending me an email requesting me to do so greatly increased the amount of information each participant was willing to share. Participants edit what they say during the interview process if they know that it cannot be removed or altered. My method allowed the participants full control of the interview data, knowing this, the participants were extraordinarily descriptive in their responses to my questions.

My project suggests that the fear to allow participants the final say in the products arising from the research is unfounded. As researchers we actually are reducing research opportunities by refusing participants full cooperative research participation. Furthermore, the minor additions and alterations suggested by my participants enhanced the accuracy of the project rather than detracting from it. I believe that Native Americans are merely the first population to demand final approval of research about their culture, their ways, and their personal lives. As a gay man, I have been approached by researchers to participate in projects, and I turn down the opportunity if I do not have the power of final approval of the research. Personally, my main goal is not control of the research, as I found with my Native participants, but rather I want to be certain the publication is an accurate representation of my experience. Going forward, it is my belief that many diverse populations will begin to deny access to researchers without significant protections in place. The entry and exit policies listed in this article are an outline of appropriate entry and exit protocols with one population, Native Americans.

It would behoove us as researchers to develop population specific and appropriate protocols with each diverse population we work with in the future. Not only is this the more ethical path, but based on my experience, the research produced is of a better quality.

### Acknowledgement

None.

### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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