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Storytelling is an Indigenous method of sharing knowledge (Cajete, 2005). Through story, we (Teresa and Heather) introduce the creation and continuation of a relationship between Dakota Wicohan, a Native-led non-profit, and Dr. Heather Peters, a Feminist Sport Psychology research practitioner. We encourage you, the reader, to approach this chapter as you would reading a story, exercise patience, anticipation, and curiosity as the story unfolds to reveal a relationship that goes beyond a traditional research project. Given the focus and length of this chapter, we share a few results to demonstrate how our work is an example of an emancipatory research process which allows for those least often heard to share their knowledge and ultimately take a proactive role in promoting social change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hill, Lau, & Sue, 2010). Creating social change is foundational to Feminism, a movement to end oppression, thus, Feminist methodologies assert that research findings should be used to understand the world and then change it (Stanley, 1990). The purpose of our story is to describe how Feminist and Indigenous epistemologies and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) were used to create a reciprocal relationship: empower and build capacity in the Dakota Wicohan research partners and community; enhance the cultural sensitivity and understanding of the university researcher; utilize a strengths-based lens; select research methods; interpret and report results; provide psychoeducation in support group settings; and create social change. Before we begin our story, we briefly discuss Indigenous epistemology, CBPR, and their relationship to Feminist approaches to practice and research.
Theoretical background

Indigenous epistemology is based on Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) which is founded on Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory challenges the status quo and seeks to achieve three goals; present counter narratives from the perspective of minorities, end suppression and recognize race as a social construct, and address gender, class, and areas of difference within racialized others (Creswell, 2012). Critical Race Theory’s underpinning is that racism is prevalent in society, there is a need to challenge dominance and further social justice by broadening perspectives and accessing experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016).

TribalCrit furthers the goals of critical theoretical frameworks by exploring the complicated and unique colonialism impacts on Native Americans (e.g., the unique political and legal status of Indian tribes) (Jones Brayboy, 2005; Winter, 2008). Since colonization of Indigenous peoples, Eurocentric pedagogies and their master stories have placed Indigenous knowledge as subordinate (Winter) and contemporary structures nearly void of Indigenous histories, knowledge, languages, worldview, and pedagogies (Battiste, 2002). Critical Race Theory challenges standard practices by providing a counter narrative. However, in some ways, Critical Race Theory further emphasizes or gives credence to the conventional narrative by continually focusing, discussing, and responding to the currently accepted philosophical frameworks. The application of Indigenous theory removes the need for counter narratives because Indigenous theory purports that Indigenous knowledge has always existed. Indigenous knowledge systems have their own frameworks and disciplines that can be free of Eurocentric validity (Battiste, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous theory steps beyond counter narrative, social change, and the general emphasis of negation, by including tenants of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, including storytelling.

Many Native scholars (e.g., Wilson, 2008) believe that CBPR is an ideal approach to use with Indigenous populations because the defining principles and assumptions focus on improving the reality of the people in the community. CBPR is defined as a collaborative approach to research, [CBPR] equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities.

(Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003, p. 4)

Further, some of the defining principles and assumptions of CBPR include: (a) community is the key unit of identity, (b) co-learning for all community partners and academics occurs through genuine equitable partnership, (c) issues of race, ethnicity, sexism, and social class are addressed, (d) cultural humility is embraced, (e) an ecological and person in context perspective is taken, (f) community strengths are acknowledged and promoted, (g) the research process is cyclical and iterative, (h) building community partners capacity in the research process is a part of the work, (i) findings and knowledge should benefit all partners, (j) work should lead to relevant, sustainable, and positive change for communities, and (k) long-term commitments are needed to effectively reduce disparities (Collins, et al., 2018; Israel et al., 2003).

Whereas, traditional Western constructivist and post-constructivist research perspectives promote a top down approach (i.e., the researcher dictates the research agenda and process), CBPR promotes a bottom up approach (i.e., the community dictates the research agenda and process). Indigenous Theory offers further distinction in that it focuses on the importance of relationality. CBPR, in a very limited way, is similar to Western approaches, in that a bottom up approach still maintains a hierarchical structure in that the researcher is located on top and the community on the bottom. By taking an Indigenous approach to CBPR we propose that a dynamic reciprocal relational process exists so that relationality takes priority over outcomes; a shared leadership role is utilized; and no hierarchical structure exists. Adopting this relational approach provides a vehicle for universities and researchers to conduct research with instead of on Indigenous peoples (Wilson, 2008).

Feminist and Indigenous epistemologies and CBPR share many similarities. For example, all three perspectives are rooted in an awareness of differential power, oppression and privilege. Further, they require academics to embrace mutuality, empower community partners throughout the research process, be culturally sensitive, work to hear all voices, and recognize diversity with cultural humility. Additionally, the three perspectives reject the traditional “university researcher as expert” model in favor of one that believes that every member of the research team is valued, each have important knowledge and contributions to share, and everyone learns from one another through reciprocal relationships.

Building relations

Dakota Wicohan is a Native-led non-profit organization in Minnesota, founded in 2002, whose mission is to revitalize Dakota to a living language, and through it, transmit Dakota life ways to future generations. Dakota Wicohan’s programmatic strategies, remembering and reclaiming Dakota language and traditional life ways and reconnecting kinship relations, are vehicles for healing, wellness, and community development.

In early 2012, Tracy Peterson, Dine’ from the Navajo reservation and Associate Director of University of Minnesota Morris’s (UMM) Multi-Ethnic Student Program, introduced Heather, Assistant Professor at UMM, to Teresa Peterson, Dakota from the Upper Sioux Community and Dakota Wicohan’s Executive Director. By introducing Heather to Teresa, Tracy staked his relationship with Teresa, and his reputation in Indian country, on Heather’s positive intentions. Heather reflects on her thoughts and feelings during this time:

I was anxious about beginning this line of research because I understood the trust Tracy was placing in me, knew about the harm researchers and universities have caused Native people and communities, and was aware of the negative perception of research in Indian country. Further, I felt an added
weight because UMM began in 1887 as the Indian Industrial School (Ahern, 1984) and boarding schools have and continue to have negative impacts on Native families and communities.

Teresa recounts her thoughts during the early stages of this relationship:

Our work at Dakota Wicohan is all about improving the lives of our community through revitalizing our language and cultural life ways. Any research Dakota Wicohan would engage in would need to stem from that purpose. Further, nothing for us without us.

After an initial conversation, about the prospect of collaborating on a research project, Teresa invited both Tracy and Heather to meet Dakota Wicohan staff and youth at an overnight summer camp. Teresa reflects:

The time spent at camp was simply to build relationships and trust between Heather, the youth, and the Dakota Wicohan family and was necessary before any talk of research could occur. In Dakota community, interdependence is emphasized and supported through relationships, responsibilities, and reciprocity.

Research in Indian country is not separate from life or from people; research is ceremony and is based on relationships (Wilson, 2008). Teresa notes:

For Indigenous people, those around you are not participants, clients, or customers but nephew, granddaughter, auntie, and grandfather. I felt a responsibility to the Dakota community to determine if Heather’s commitment was genuine and if she intended to maintain accountability to the newly developing relationships.

Teresa put Heather through a process of initiation, a test of respect, and cultural immersion to see if she would demonstrate an overall willingness to be researcher as participant (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). While at camp, Heather volunteered to gather and carry fire wood, serve meals, and clean. After dinner, Teresa and the older staff members went to their respective homes leaving Heather and Tracy, to camp with Dakota Wicohan youth. Teresa recalls:

I wanted to see how Heather would respond because in alignment with Dakota culture, and its value of humility and respect, it was important to see if Heather was coming in as an equal, willing to join in the labors of work and sleep on the ground with the participants she hoped to study.

On the last day of camp, Teresa mentioned two books Speaking of Indians (Deloria, 1998) and Research is Ceremony (Wilson, 2008) because, as Teresa states:

Frequently, non-Native people expect Natives to educate them on our history and culture. We’re tired of doing this. Native people walk in two worlds, become proficient in two knowledge systems, two worldviews: mainstream and Indigenous. Non-Native people need to do their homework before they come into our communities. They need to read some material written by Indigenous scholars.

Heather reflects on Teresa’s recommendations:

Teresa briefly mentioned two books during our time at camp. I made a mental note and ordered these books as soon as I returned home. I respected Teresa and knew I had a lot to learn about working in Native community. During our next meeting, I discussed the readings with Teresa. I wanted to demonstrate my respect for her opinion and the teachings of Native authors.

Teresa reflects on Heather’s behavior at their next meeting:

After observing Heather’s actions and how she engaged with the Indigenous readings and subsequent discussion, we, decided that the Dakota Wicohan community would partner with Heather on a research project.

Research design and methods

During our fourth visit, after trust had been established, we began discussing the research project. Since Indigenous peoples have their own ways of organizing and transmitting knowledge (Battiste, 2002), the inclusion of community members as research partners provides an invaluable gift that traditional research methods do not. Thus, in line with Feminist and Indigenous epistemologies, we agreed to utilize CBPR, so that Dakota research partners would shape all phases of the research project (e.g., conceptualization, design, data collection, data analysis, and writing). Heather reflects on an early misstep:

After we met a couple of times to talk about the research project we had no goals or objectives. In eagerness to meet a grant deadline, I proposed an idea for the research project: utilize Indigenous research methods as the means to improve Native youth’s mental and physical health (i.e., anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide, and levels of physical activity). By identifying the study focus myself I violated one of the principles of CBPR and research from Indigenous and Feminist paradigms. Further, my action violated an instrumental underpinning of both epistemologies in that I proposed a problem focused approach instead of an asset or strength based approach.

Teresa reflects on Heather’s mistake:
While well-intentioned, Heather’s proposed idea seemed like she had it all figured out. I could see how a partnership could be useful to our work, but it really needed to be developed from within.

Additionally, Heather disregarded the fact that her DW research partners were the experts in their lived experiences (Neysmith, 1995) and that as less empowered members of society, they would provide a more complete view of their reality (Nielsen, 1990). Neglecting to include DW research partners also increased the likelihood that significant questions would be missed thus decreasing the possibility of creating true social change (Whaley, 2001).

Moving forward, Heather confronted her standard Western approach as an assistant professor from mainstream academia by working to empower her Dakota research partners, value their perspectives, and create space for them to move from the margins onto equal footing (Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2005). Teresa reflects:

Through this process, we (Dakota Wicohan research partners) explored our options and decided to take a strengths-based approach and focus on the Wicozani (overall health and well-being) of Dakota Wicohan community members.

We identified our variables of interest by paying attention to the details of Dakota Wicohan community member’s lives and the likely factors that influenced their Wicozani (Whaley, 2001). Specifically, we decided to measure Dakota Wicohan community members’ sense of belonging to both Dakota and White communities; perceptions and impacts of historical losses; connectedness to community; beliefs about Dakota language revitalization; Dakota language use; Dakota Identity Development; use of Indigenous healing strategies; and use of Wo’Dakota values. Teresa recalls:

We wanted to gather information that would help us identify whether or not our programmatic strategies (i.e., Kiksuya—remembering, Kiyuwa—reclaiming, and Kiyuvuwaste—reconnecting), which are designed to promote healing, wellness, and community development were effective. If we were able to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work, we could share this with others, including our funders.

Together we created six scales (i.e., Dakota Language Self-Assessment; Dakota Language Reclamation Scale; Wicozani Instrument; Dakota Identity Instrument; Indigenous Healing Strategies Scale; and Wo’Dakota Values Scale) in order to ensure that the measures were relevant and meaningful to Dakota Wicohan community members (Whaley). We chose to gather both qualitative and quantitative data because any research method can be used as long as it is employed from feminist (Whaley) and Indigenous perspectives.

The Dakota Wicohan research partners lived experiences, suggested that participants should not be asked to sign consent or assent forms. The history of broken treaties between tribes and the US government taught Dakotas that signed documents are often meaningless. Further, asking Dakotas for a signature prompts skepticism about what is occurring. Teresa reflects, “I remember the anxiety I felt when Heather began discussing getting consent forms from participants. These weren’t participants, they were the Dakota Wicohan family.” We submitted a waiver of consent to UMM’s IRB thereby respecting and validating the Dakota Wicohan research partners’ experiences and viewpoints (Tzou, Kim, & Waldheim, 2012). In addition to receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we presented the study design to Dakota Wicohan’s Board of Directors and discussed shared ownership of the data. Teresa notes, “Without the board’s approval, the project would not have moved forward”.

During data analysis, we continued to utilize Indigenous and Feminist epistemologies by believing that multiple realities are accepted, multiple explanations for results exist, and those explanations are dependent on contextual factors (Whaley, 2001). After all data was analyzed, we disseminated the results back to the Dakota Wicohan community. This step was imperative because those being researched should have direct access to the study and results (Bergstrom, Cleary & Peacock, 2003; Freire, 1970; Mihesuah, 1998). Similar to feminist therapists, whose clients decide how assessment results will be used (Evans, et al., 2005), Dakota Wicohan decides how the results of the research partnership will be used. For example, they review and approve all interviews, presentations, and manuscripts related to the research project, including this writing.

**Maintaining a reciprocal relationship**

To maintain good relationships with Native community partners, researchers should remember that research in Indian country is part of people’s lives and is based on relationships, thus research is ceremony (Wilson, 2008). Heather recalls:

As we proceeded with the study it was critical that I kept in mind the importance of relationality within Dakota culture and that maintaining good quality reciprocal relationships, and not research outcomes, was the priority. Thus, I spent a lot of time listening carefully. Listening to Teresa and my other Dakota Wicohan research partners taught me how to be in relation with the land of Mni sota Makope, to seek out information about my own cultural background and ancestral roots, to confront my families’ colonizing past, and about the healing power of Native culture and language revitalization. Further, listening provided me with insights into aspects of my Dakota Wicohan research partners’ lives and provided guidance as to ways I could continue to maintain a reciprocal relationship.

Teresa recalls:

During some research meetings we discussed the historical trauma we as Dakota people experience due to atrocities committed against our ancestors.
and the present-day racism and sexism we experience due to living in an oppressive society. Heather listened to us and offered to provide some information. We accepted her offer.

Heather, in line with Feminist therapy for trauma survivors (Brown, 2004), provided psychoeducation in a support group setting, about trauma's neurobiological and social impacts and described the person-in-context perspective and how the broader socio-cultural context influences issues afflicting the Dakota community. For example, we discussed how health problems (e.g., diabetes, obesity, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, suicide) are symptoms of distress and are often attempts to cope with the oppression they experienced in the past and continue to experience today. Heather used reframing, a technique used in feminist therapy, to shift the blame from individuals to external sources, such as historical trauma, societal and political oppression, and policies of genocide (Worell & Remer, 2003). Reframing is also an Indigenous method whereby social problems (e.g., alcoholism, mental illness) are defined as a result of history and colonization and solutions are determined by the people (Smith, 1999). Heather reflects:

I wanted to support Dakota Wicohan community members in placing responsibility where it is deserved (e.g., historical trauma, societal and political oppression), rather than internalizing health, education, and economic disparities and attributing them to their own personal failings or to their Dakota culture. Dakota culture is the solution not the cause of these disparities.

Heather also provided psychoeducation about Stereotype Threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and its potential influence on Dakota Wicohan community members during interactions with wasicun's (White people). Teresa recalls:

We had just come back from a meeting where I was the only Native in the room and I felt I was being called on to be the “expert”. I was panic-stricken and explained to Heather, sometimes my mind just goes blank while talking to White people, even when I am the most knowledgeable about whatever we're talking about. It's a horrifying experience. I was relieved to hear others experience this same thing and that there was an explanation beyond a personal deficit.

Specifically, Heather shared how unconsciously being afraid of confirming a negative stereotype (e.g., American Indians are not intelligent) can cause anxiety, which increases cognitive overload, and prevents people from thinking clearly. Heather then shared relaxation and breathing skills that Dakota Wicohan community members could use before and during interactions with wasicun's to engage their parasympathetic nervous systems and down regulate their stress response. "I think we all felt a great sense of relief. And, of course, we laughed, finding humor in the whole thing," Teresa remembered. These psychoeducational discussions occurred in supportive group settings so that Dakota Wicohan community members could recognize their shared experiences and help one another become aware of their situations. Similar to Empowerment Feminist Therapy (Tzou, et al., 2012), Heather aimed to increase Dakota Wicohan community members' awareness of the social and political sources of their problems, while empowering them to use their personal and cultural strengths and resources to improve their Wicazani.

Results and social change

We first shared the results of our partnership with Dakota Wicohan's Board of Directors, the Dakota Wicohan Community, and surrounding Tribal Officials. Our findings suggested: the more Dakota youth identified with Dakota culture the higher they rated their Wicazani; Dakota youth experienced a disconnect between their sense of belonging in Dakota community versus White community; and Dakota youth experienced significantly higher levels of sense of belonging in their Dakota community as compared to the White mainstream community. Teresa recalls:

When interpreting the results, we reflected on our lived experiences and the current social context surrounding our Dakota youth. Unfortunately, during that time our community lost a number of Dakota youth to suicide. We speculated that problems in school (e.g., racism, invisibility of American Indians in curriculum) may be contributing to lower levels of sense of belonging for our youth in White mainstream community.

To address this problem Teresa recalls:

We decided to develop materials and resources that would increase the positive visibility of Dakota people. We wanted to do this by telling our story. We asked Heather and her Dakota student research assistants to transcribe elder interviews we had collected a few years earlier. Then, together, we qualitatively analyzed the interviews and used this material to create the Mni Sota Makoke: Dakota Homelands Curriculum, a culturally-based social studies curriculum that utilizes Dakota story, language, and culture and Indigenous learning strategies to fulfill 6th grade MN social studies standards.

In fall of 2014, Dakota Wicohan's lead trainers provided teachers at three Minnesota schools with the curriculum, companion materials and instructional support. The objective of this project was to introduce the Mni Sota Makoke: Dakota Homelands curriculum as a cultural intervention (Allen, et al., 2011), in order to increase visibility for Dakota youth in the educational system, increase their sense of belonging and connectedness, and thereby improve Dakota youth's Wicazani and decrease their suicidal ideation. Teresa remembers:
Although we wanted to take a strengths-based approach and focus solely on increasing Dakota youth's wicozani, we unfortunately had to address a health disparity (i.e., suicidal ideation) in order to receive funding from the Collaborative Research Center for American Indian Health NIH (U54MD008164).

Our project was met with such success that additional funding was secured, a revised curriculum is currently being implemented in school districts around the state, and to date over 1,650 students have received the curriculum. The results of this collaboration have been used to create social change to better the lives of American Indians around the state of MN and educate non-Native youth about Dakota communities. Thus, our relationship supports social justice agency in that the Dakota co-researchers are becoming change agents within the education system (Denzin & Lincoln; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Gall et al., 2007). Teresa reflects on the partnership, "I am so grateful because I gained significant research experience through this relationship that has provided me with confidence to further my academic and professional service in Indian country." Heather reflects on the relationship, "I am thankful because I gained invaluable knowledge about the power of being in relation to others, to the land, and to my culture. Additionally, I supported a community in creating social change and lastly, this partnership supported my tenure." By taking a feminist approach, the research process became transformative for all: Teresa, Heather, the Dakota Wicohan community, UMM, and society.

Key terms

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
Indigenous research
Storytelling
Tribal Critical Race Theory
American Indian health and well-being

Discussion question

1. Imagine working within Native Community, how would you honor that community throughout the partnership? Which of your actions, values, and beliefs would you want to be aware of as you navigate this relationship?

Reflection questions

1. In what ways can you expand your worldview?
2. How can you value and show appreciation for Indigenous people, their knowledge systems, history, and culture in your individual and collective lives?
3. What strategies can you use to further reciprocal relationships either in your research or practice of sport and exercise psychology?

References


This chapter explores the marginalized and paradoxical experiences of transwomen of color in the sports world. On the one hand, society persecutes the wins of transwomen competing against other women by claiming they have an unfair advantage due to their biological sex of male and minority race/ethnicity. Alternatively, the public views their losses as affirming to their gender identity as female. All identities of transwomen athletes of color are not accepted in either scenario. Society’s contradictory perspectives evidence a lack of understanding of transwomen athletes of color. The chapter further guides the reader on how to affirm their identities, empower them, and advocate on their behalf. We begin to understand their experiences by first defining terms related to their gender identity.

Understanding terms related to transwomen of color in sport

The word transgender refers to people who identify and/or express their gender identity as the opposite of their sex assigned to them at birth (Brown & Kelly, 2018; Jones, Arcelus, Bouman, & Haycraft, 2017). For example, a transwoman is a person who is born biologically male and identifies their gender as female. Transgender is an umbrella term with several subcategories. One term is genderqueer, which are individuals that may identify with one, both, or neither genders. Another one is transsexual, who are transwomen that transition from the sex assigned to them at birth to the opposite one by completing the process of gender confirmation surgery (Brown & Kelly, 2018). Transwoman athletes of color are post-operative transsexual exercisers, including elite athletes and recreational ones, who identify as non-white (Teetzel, 2006). Last, cisgender refers to persons who express their gender identity as concordant with the sex assigned to them at birth (Jones, Arcelus, Bouman, & Haycraft, 2017).