Reflexivity in Evaluating an Aboriginal Women Heart Health Promotion Program

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Abstract: The role of reflexivity—the process of examining oneself as a researcher, the research process, and the research relationships—is examined in the context of evaluation. A reflexive account of the evaluation of an Aboriginal heart health promotion program as an inside-outside evaluator is provided to demonstrate evaluator reflexivity in a cross-cultural setting. It is argued that the reflexive process may enrich evaluation by providing context to the processes and the interpretative dialogue, by offering a space to rethink and rework processes, assumptions, and power dynamics, and by uncovering important learnings and discourses that will assist the evaluator and her/his audiences.

Keywords: cross-cultural evaluation, cultural competency, evaluator role, reflexivity, research relationships

Résumé : Le rôle de la réflexivité — processus selon lequel on s’ examine en tant que chercheur et selon lequel on examine le processus de recherche ainsi que les rapports de recherche — est examiné dans le cadre de l’évaluation. Un compte-rendu réfléchi de l’évaluation d’un programme de promotion de la santé cardiaque des Autochtones, en tant qu’évaluateur interne-externe, est fourni pour démontrer la réflexivité de l’évaluateur dans un contexte interculturel. On fait valoir que le processus réfléchi peut potentiellement enrichir l’évaluation en fournissant un contexte aux processus et au dialogue d’interprétation; en créant un espace où l’on peut repenser et retra-vailler les processus, les hypothèses et les dynamiques de pouvoir; et en dévoilant d’importantes découvertes et discours qui aideront l’évaluateur et son public.

Mots clés : évaluation interculturelle, compétence culturelle, rôle de l’évaluateur, réflexivité, relations de recherche

Reflexivity—the process of examining oneself as a researcher, the researcher-researched relationship, and the research process (Hsiung, 2010)—is not new in ethnographic and qualitative research, but is not often talked about or practiced in evaluation (Abma, 2002; Harklau & Norwood, 2005; SenGupta, Hopson, & Thompson-Robinson, 2004; Small, Tiwari, & Huser, 2006). In this article I discuss...
the merits of reflexivity in research and question the use of reflexivity in evaluation. I also provide a reflexive account of my journey evaluating an Aboriginal heart health promotion program as an inside-outside evaluator to convey how reflexivity can be incorporated into evaluation. I hope that my experience will shed light on the merits of conducting evaluation with a reflexive lens.

**SEVEN SISTERS HEARTY HEART DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

The Seven Sisters Healthy Heart demonstration project was a holistic Aboriginal women’s heart health promotion group that ran for eight weeks in collaboration with the BC Women’s Hospital & Health Centre Nurse Practitioner (NP) Community Clinics and the Pacific Association of First Nations Women. The NP-led group used a talking-circle format, where women freely discussed issues around health and well-being while incorporating personal stories of struggles and triumphs. The group sessions became a bonding experience for the women participants and the NPs, with a health promotion focus as a common thread running through the discussions.

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the merits of the program and to develop a gender-aware and culturally responsive heart health promotion framework based on the components of the program that contributed to its success. A participatory evaluation approach was taken, with several stakeholders involved in the design, data collection, and data interpretation. The evaluation used multiple lines of evidence and relied heavily on qualitative data, aiming to capture the participants’ voices, as well as the voices of the NPs, community partners, and program planners. Our participatory and collaborative approach was consistent with other evaluation studies conducted in Aboriginal communities (Chouinard & Cousins, 2007).

As the evaluation lead for the project, I reflected on how my inside-outside status impacted the way I approached and designed the project, collected data, and interpreted the findings. I examined my assumptions and the relationships I had forged with the stakeholders. I also reflected on the impact of the group on myself, given that I began eating healthier and attending to my emotional health as the project went on. My reflexive journey proved to be rewarding and eye-opening, with several key learnings, which will ultimately pave the path for any future projects I embark on. Before delving into my reflexive journey, I start my discussion by examining the concept and use of reflexivity in research and evaluation.

**CONCEPT OF REFLEXIVITY**

The definition of reflexivity and its use varies in the literature (Pellatt, 2003), although in its most basic form it means “self-awareness” (Giddens, 1976, in Robertson, 2000). According to Hertz (1997), “to be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment” (p. viii). Reflexivity is thus not merely a reflection on the research experience, but
constitutes self-awareness at every stage of the research process as it is happening. Mulhall, Le May, and Alexander (1999) suggest that three main questions need to be answered in the “reflexivity conversation”: How have I affected the process and outcome of the research? How has the research affected me? Where am I now?

Reflexivity in research began with the works of anthropologists and ethnographers who reflected on how their personal experiences impacted their interpretation of field experiences (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Through the years, reflexivity has become one of the defining features of qualitative research (Finlay, 2002a) and has many guises (Foley, 2002). Researchers from a variety of disciplines have commonly used reflexivity as a form of validity check (Ball, 1990; Dowling, 2006; Lather, 1986). The premise is that, by uncovering researchers’ internal processes, the research process can yield more accurate and valid results, thereby positively impacting the research process. For example, taking a validity-focused approach, Peshkin (1988) described how his subjectivity played a role in his interaction and interpretation of findings. His own sense of ethnic identity allowed him to identify more with his ethnic subjects, and his pedagogical self steered him more toward judgement-making and away from the observer/researcher role. In the end, he aimed to manage his subjectivity by being aware of it when collecting and interpreting data.

Postmodern researchers, such as feminist and empowerment researchers, who generally practice relativism and subjectivism, have enthusiastically embraced reflexive practices because they are fundamentally concerned with how knowledge is generated (Dowling, 2006; Lather, 1986). For example, Cotterill and Letherby (1993), have argued from a feminist epistemology that personal autobiographies of researchers add to the depth of the research and place the findings in the context of where they were generated:

We draw on our own experiences to help us understand those of our respondents. Thus, their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present (whether we admit it or not) in our written accounts. (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993, p. 74)

Postmodern researchers strive to use reflexivity to do research differently (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Nicholls, 2009; Oakley, 1981). Reflexive practice allows them to alleviate power differentials in research by reciprocal sharing and genuine engagement and partnership with the researched (Dowling, 2006; England, 1994; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Pellatt, 2003). Hence, power dynamics are continuously examined in a cycle of reflection and action by researchers and, at times, by participants, making the reflexive process democratic and empowering (Lather, 1986). For example, through reflexivity Pellatt (2003) became aware of her own position of power, as a nurse researcher, in relation to the disabled patients she was studying. This awareness in turn allowed her to question and reposition her practice, values, and preconceptions.

Reflexivity becomes particularly vital for community-based participatory researchers who study communities as outsiders. It is argued that the participatory nature of such studies can be examined by critically reflecting on the nature of the researcher-stakeholder relationship (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Minkler, 2004). For
instance, Koster, Baccar, and Lemelin (2012), who also used reflexivity in research, stated, “[A]lthough we had come to the research with our own plan and process (research on), we abandoned this direction and followed the needs identified by [community members] (research with)” (p. 201).

Similarly, Indigenous researchers view researcher reflexivity as pivotal (Dana-Sacco, 2010). Wilson (2001) argues that the Aboriginal system of knowledge is built on relationships, and it is through reflexivity that these relationships can be investigated and analyzed. Reflexivity can uncover domains important in the Aboriginal culture—namely, reciprocity, the researcher’s obligation to the research, and respect for the nature of research relationships. Dana-Sacco (2010), an indigenous researcher studying her own community, realized through reflexivity that to serve the interests of her community she needed to safeguard and not disclose or publish some of the most important findings of her research. Although this created tension, she realized that her main obligation was toward the relationships she had forged in the research process.

Despite many uses and benefits of reflexivity, there are critics. Some argue that researchers’ own experiences can essentially overshadow participants’ experiences and appear to be narcissistic and self-indulging (DeVault, 1997). Others argue that reflexivity takes attention away from the biases in a study and/or disguises the realities of a study (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). In other words, merely confessing internal processes does not make them unproblematic. As Peshkin (1988) argues, “[I]n the spirit of confession, researchers acknowledge their subjectivity, they may benefit their souls, but they do not hereby attend to their subjectivity in a meaningful way” (p. 17). Validity claims via reflexivity have also been disputed by researchers who argue that our confessions are no guarantee that what we say and observe is the truth (Patai, 1991). The question of whether or not reflexivity can produce better research has also been raised (Patai, 1994).

Pillow (2003) acknowledges that reflexivity may not be the answer to all of our methodological limitations, and may not produce better research, yet she advocates conducting “messy” and “uncomfortable” reflexivity that highlights the realities of research, including tensions, uncertainties, and confines. Pillow coined the term “uncomfortable reflexivity”: “a reflexivity that seeks to know, while at the same time situates his knowing as tenuous” (p. 188). Pillow argues that we often desire only certain kinds of reflexivity—reflexivity used as “truth claims,” lending methodological power to studies. On the other hand, uncomfortable reflexivity critiques research attempts, challenges our representations of data, and depicts the messy realities of doing engaged qualitative research. Such depictions are often ambiguous and may speak to our failures and uncertainties, and yet they are illuminating in their revelation of complex realities.

Examples of uncomfortable reflexivity can be found in the work of Ellingson (1998). In Ellingson’s reflexive journey, she states that

while many confessional tales have as their goal the reassurance to the reader that their findings are “uncontaminated” and hence “scientific” and “valid,” I have as my goal the opposite: to reassure the reader that my findings are thoroughly contaminated.
This contamination with my own lived experiences results in a rich, complex understanding. (p. 494)

Similarly, Villenas (1996), who describes herself as a “native-American” and a university professor, finds herself as an inside-outside researcher and writes from a researcher-colonizer-colonized lens. The tension between these roles becomes evident in the way she conducts research and situates herself within it. She practices uncomfortable reflexivity, as she does not provide any easy fixes regarding these tensions, but questions and brings to the forefront the need to forge new research identities and discourses.

I argue that there are both benefits and limits to reflexivity. Reflexivity does not necessarily produce better research. In fact, it is through reflexivity that the limits of research are recognized. Sometimes researchers are able to address issues that arise through reflexivity, but other times challenges may remain unresolved (Pillow, 2003). Some may also require intellectual and emotional distance from their research before becoming truly reflexive (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Although retrospective reflexivity cannot change any results or processes, it can still yield important lessons for future work. Reflexivity can potentially contextualize research and illuminate and uncover learnings and limitations for the researcher and his or her audience during and after the research process. Reflexivity also allows researchers to do research in a “different way”—in a more reciprocal way, as highlighted by feminist researchers (England, 1994; Podems, 2010). This becomes central when working with vulnerable populations and in cross-cultural settings.

REFLEXIVITY IN EVALUATION

Does reflexivity have a place in evaluation? Certainly evaluation is different from research because its end purpose is to place judgement on and assign merit to a given program. The concepts of value and judgement are at the core of evaluation and separate evaluation from the research process (House & Howe, 2000; SenGupta et al., 2004). Does judgement placement require that the evaluator approach it from an objective stance? Such a stance would be contrary to the reflexive process, where the subjective, political, social, and personal positioning of the evaluator become clear. Furthermore, can evaluators afford to do messy, “uncomfortable” reflexivity (Pillow, 2003), pointing out uncertainties, gaps, and tensions in the evaluation process? These questions are not easily answered.

No doubt evaluation may have more limitations imposed on it than research. For one, evaluators may self-censor and avoid discussions of reflexivity to meet their clients’ expectations (Abma, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Even if the evaluator had exercised reflexivity, he or she may not be able to showcase it. Restrictions such as the need to keep the spotlight on the program, the use of reporting templates, page limits, and a general desire for more concise reporting may not leave much room to document evaluator reflexivity. Reflexivity may also be seen as out of place or self-indulgent in certain contexts, particularly in contexts where clients are not familiar with more qualitative methodologies.
Despite the unique challenges evaluators may face, Jewiss and Clark-Keefe (2007) argue that reflexivity, as a validity check, should become one of the core components of analysis in evaluation, the lack of which would create ethical and practical limitations. Beyond the validity-focused approach, reflexivity can also add richness to the interpretative dialogue because in the absence of it, the evaluator may remain silent about the platform from which meanings emerged or were constructed (Widdershoven, 2001). Abma (2005) described how reflexivity with regard to the social positioning of the evaluation team members helped the team to better understand the different issues and perspectives of stakeholder groups. In another study, Abma (2001) talked about how the project team reflected on their own filters and standpoints in light of their interpretations. Harklau and Norwood (2005) discussed their many roles within the evaluation (e.g., nonparticipant observer, academics, lurkers/spies, etc). With each role their positioning within the program shifted and they redefined their understanding of the program, in a process of “constant mutual negotiation of subject positions among the evaluators and the evaluated” (p. 284).

Reflexivity in evaluation can also lead to a more democratic process (Greene, 1997, 2001) by attending to power dynamics in the evaluation milieu, especially in cross-cultural settings. In fact, Chouinard and Cousins (2009), as part of their proposed agenda for future cross-cultural evaluation research, call for more reflexivity on questions such as “[W]hat role do relationships play in mitigating power and privilege issues within the evaluative settings?” (p. 487). SenGupta et al. (2004) also viewed evaluator reflexivity as one of the hallmarks of a culturally competent evaluator. Cultural competence in evaluation requires “increased and critical self-reflection” (p. 14), an “active awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the context at hand” (p. 12), and “addressing issues of power in evaluation” (p. 13).

Reflexivity in cross-cultural settings have been demonstrated by Wallerstein (1999), who provided a reflexive account of power dynamics between evaluators and members of a culturally diverse community in New Mexico. Wallerstein stresses that evaluators need to reflect on their personal biographies to understand power imbalances and to create more equitable and engaging relationships with the communities they study.

However, there is very little written in the published literature about evaluator reflexivity, let alone detailed accounts of the reflexive process in evaluation (Abma, 2002; Harklau & Norwood, 2005; SenGupta et al., 2004; Small et al., 2006). In their review of the literature on cross-cultural evaluation projects, projects that mainly took participatory approaches, Chouinard and Cousins (2009) noted that in only half of these studies did the evaluators situate and assess themselves in terms of their own culture (outsider status) and biases. However, upon closer look, some of these studies do not fully delve into evaluator reflexivity. For example, Voyle and Simmons (1999) explore the Maori community’s sense of mistrust of research,
and yet the evaluator’s own stance, beliefs, biases, and insecurities in establishing relationships with the Maori community and its impact on the evaluation are not examined.

Evaluators may also face methodological challenges. Despite the many uses of reflexivity, there are no standard ways to practice it (Finlay, 2002a; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Pillow, 2003). Pillow (2003) questions whether or not reflexivity is a “skill or a set of methods that can be taught” (p. 177). No doubt, there is fluidity and ambiguity in how reflexivity is practiced. Finlay (2002a) uses the “swamp” analogy to depict the messy nature of reflexivity, where one can potentially drown or make it to the other side intact. Yet, Finlay (2002b) suggests that reflexivity can be perfected with practice, implying that it is a skill to navigate the swamp. The practice of reflexivity is often done by taking detailed field notes, keeping a research diary, or having reflexive conversions with team members, sometimes at a designated reflexive time/space (Abma, 2005; Finlay, 2002b; Jewiss & Clark-Keefe, 2007; Mulhall et al., 1999). Mauthner and Doucet (2003) used voice-centred practice in data analysis, namely reading and interpreting data from different perspectives, including their own.

I uncovered my own reflexive journey during this project as result of some planned and unplanned activities. The project team members took part in structured debriefing sessions, where we reflected on the day’s work. These sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. The sessions provided a safe space to reflect on assumptions, power dynamics, and processes. I also took extensive field notes following each group and debriefing session, where I further reflected on issues privately. In addition, I participated in the project’s talking circle, where I uncovered the quite unanticipated impact of the project on myself. My interview by the community partner as part of the video she prepared about the women’s experiences provided yet another opportunity to reflect on my internal processes.

To fully demonstrate reflexivity in action, I turn to the three main questions that guided my reflexive thinking. These are the questions that Mulhall et al. (1999) suggest researchers need to ponder over in their reflexive conversion. Inspired by Pillow (2003), I also strived to present my reflexivity in a more messy and uncomfortable way. I did not attempt to neatly package my experiences and processes to solely showcase what worked, but also tried to reflect on the realities of doing evaluation in a cross-cultural setting, as an inside-outside evaluator. My hope is that this exercise will be illumining for others who end up walking similar paths.

**How Have I Affected the Process and Outcome of the Evaluation?**

My insider-outsider status impacted the way I navigated the project. My positioning proved to be both a strength and a challenge. The “insider-outsider debate” in research and evaluation has been well documented (Asselin, 2003; Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Conley-Tyler, 2005; Minkler, 2004; Serrant-Green, 2002). The insider researcher is said to have more ease establishing rapport and acceptance.
Familiarity with the subject matter under study, advocacy, flexibility in designs/methods, and a higher chance of utilization of the findings are also among the advantages of being an insider. However, there appears to be as many arguments for using an outsider, including “perceived objectivity,” willingness on the part of the researchees to share with an outsider, and ability to capture and highlight information that may be seen as routine due to overfamiliarization by an insider. Yet, the insider-outsider debate has been questioned by researchers who challenge this dichotomy and bring to light the subjective and the ever-shifting and evolving identities of the researchers and the researched (Chavez, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; McDonald, 2013). My aim is not to resolve these tensions, but to demonstrate how I, as an insider-outsider, and at times in the “space-between” the two—or in the “hyphen” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009)—impacted the evaluation process.

**Being an Insider**

I was an insider in my relationship with the NPs, management, and funders. Being a woman internal evaluator in a women-centred organization that serves vulnerable and marginalized women through its outreach clinics, I approached the project from a sympathetic stance. I had already worked with the NPs in other evaluation projects and had a good working relationship with them coming into the evaluation. My sympathetic stance to their cause and my prior working relationship certainly made it easier for me to be accepted as evaluator and team member. I was not seen as a “judge,” but a partner who is there to aid with improvements.

I also came to the evaluation with a level of “knowledge.” I already had good understanding of women-centred care (Gelb, Pederson, & Greaves, 2012); without that knowledge it would have been difficult to respond to one of the key evaluation questions, the gender-sensitive components of the program. For example, certain messaging, such as “Change is a journey” and “It’s okay to not be perfect,” resonated with the participants. I highlighted these components as being gender-responsive because they are helpful for women who often are caregivers, are involved in multiple roles, and put themselves last due to conflicting demands on their time, energy, and resources. In short, health care messaging needed to be flexible for women. My analysis came from my prior understanding of women-centred care, the stories the women shared with me, and my own lived experience juggling multiple roles as a working woman, mother, daughter, sister, and wife. From a hermeneutic perspective, understanding is based on pre-understanding (Widdershoven, 2001). Hence, my insider status, in both subject matter and lived experience, and my awareness of it shaped my analysis.

At the same time, my interpretation of the findings was impacted by my own ethnicity, and what I had known and learned about the Aboriginal culture. I understood culture from an insider-outsider lens, or perhaps from the space in between. I am not an Aboriginal woman, and yet not fully part of the mainstream due to being a “visible minority.” Because of colonization, the Aboriginal women in the group had a sense of cultural identity loss and/or experienced devaluing of
their culture, and they desperately wanted to attain, revive, or reclaim it (Mussell, 2008). Being a second-generation immigrant woman, I identified with the women in their cultural-identity quest, as I too was standing somewhere along the continuum of culture and loss, and I too understood that regardless of my place on the continuum I was forever tied to my culture, mainly due to the colour of my skin. Therefore the ever presence of culture made it at times difficult to separate the gender-responsive components of the program from culturally responsive ones. For example, the element of food was not only considered to be gendered, but quite cultural. Women bonded over eating nutritious breakfasts, as it created a relational space for them to support one another as women and also created a cultural space for feasting, honouring their journey to better health, and nourishing the body and soul. Consequently my analysis acknowledged the interplay between gender and culture, and that gender is ultimately culturally constructed.

Yet, my interpretation of Aboriginal culture was limited, due to being an outsider. Issues related to my outsider status will be discussed next.

**Being an Outsider**

According to Wilson (2001), “indigenous people need to do indigenous research because [they] have the lifelong learning and relationships that goes into it … research is not something that is out there: it’s something that you’re doing for yourself and your community” (p. 179). This sentiment is echoed by other researchers (Koster, et al., 2012). Although the scope of this article is not to argue for or against the use of insiders or outsiders as evaluators, I reflect on how my outsider status impacted the project.

Not being a white Canadian-born woman had its advantages in this project. I did not feel the burden that white women working with Aboriginal communities may experience. In other words, I did not come to the evaluation with a lot of historical baggage. I think my baggage-free perception helped me to approach the community partner with open arms, with the assumption that I would be accepted. And in turn I did feel accepted. The women were very welcoming and shared freely in my presence (at least I was not able to detect any hesitations on their part). They chatted with me outside of the group, and one woman approached me and gave me specific advice on self-care. Not only had I felt accepted, but I also felt cared for.

However, I was considered an external evaluator, an outsider to their community and organization. Hence, I still had to work hard to establish a level of trust. I recall that the Aboriginal partner once said that she hoped for the NPs and I “not to go native, but to learn how to effectively work with the Aboriginal community.” This involved being respectful, flexible, and open enough to critically examine my own assumptions and practices.

In the planning stages we did consult with the Aboriginal partner about our evaluation framework and received feedback on our data collection tools and strategies, yet it is safe to say that the evaluation agenda was mainly driven by the program planners (outsiders). We assumed that the Aboriginal partner would be
“in her power” to voice her opinion and concerns about our approach. However, advice from the Aboriginal partner came gradually and only when relationships were established. The Aboriginal partner later reflected in our debriefing meetings that the mainstream agenda can completely take over in cross-cultural collaborations if the Aboriginal partner is “not in her own power.” My implicit assumption approaching the evaluation was that there was a level playing field. In fact, being a visible minority woman, I often find myself not in a position of power, but in a position of having to prove myself. My assumption of a level playing field proved to be wrong and limiting. It is common for researchers to not be fully cognizant of their power status (Small, Tiwari, & Huser, 2006). Even when friendships are built in cross-cultural settings, these alliances will always take place in situations of “asymmetry of power” (Ahmed, 2000). Minkler (2004) poses the question of whether true community-based participatory research can take place if the research agenda comes from the outside? If the evaluation agenda had been first developed by the community, or if the Aboriginal partner had felt more comfortable in providing feedback in the planning stages, the evaluation agenda may have been different.

My evaluation approach began to shift once I started reflecting on the appropriateness of my approach. Initially I incorporated a pre-post test design and wanted to mainly capture changes in diet and exercise. As the group progressed, I quickly realized that the changes the participants were making were not so much physical, but spiritual and emotional in nature. As such, I relied more on qualitative data, and the talking circle itself became my main data collection tool. At first I tried to control the talking circle by posing questions, but soon had to forego that when I recognized that the importance of the talking circle occurred through allowing women to freely discuss issues of significance. My methodology, data collection tools, and analysis kept changing as the group evolved and I got more feedback from the Aboriginal partner. I had to exercise flexibility, respect the wishes of the community and the women, and be open and comfortable in presenting other “softer” indicators for a heart health promotion program (as opposed to harder indicators, such as change in blood pressure, weight, etc.). In fact, the push toward harder measures, some internally imposed due to my own background in experimental psychology and some externally and implicitly imposed by the funding agency, initially made me resistant to change.

My assumption about my role as evaluator was also challenged. I originally wanted to take on an observer role during fieldwork, participating only minimally. However, it soon became apparent that I needed to fully participate in the group to show respect, to be accepted, and to tend to power dynamics. I could not have been above the group looking in as a privileged researcher; I had to be situated firmly within. Thus, I began to participate in the ceremonies, the talking circle, and the prayers. I felt quite challenged because I was ready to participate but not to deeply disclose and become vulnerable. However, my participation was paramount not just in establishing rapport, but also in fully grasping the group experience.
As a result of my participation, my analysis moved to another level, coming from the inside as opposed to looking in from the outside. This was important in grasping experiences that cannot be well understood through observation—for example, spirituality. I understood that the talking circle created a sacred space, where people became authentic, vulnerable, and more receptive to change messages. Prior to the group commencing I thought of the talking circle as a formality, a way of introduction, and a prelude to the teaching segment by the NPs. As the group progressed, we all realized that the talking circle became the heart and soul of the group. In experiencing the group I also lived in the space between an insider and an outsider.

However, as an outsider I also found myself limited by language and a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal culture and experience. In the evaluation report, I used language and analysis that I was comfortable with. I did not draw connections to the land, ancestors, sacred values (such as reciprocity), and other concepts important in Aboriginal culture (Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010; Wilson, 2008, 2001). In other words, there were limits to my knowledge (Letiecq & Bailey, 2004). Ahmed (2000) argues that as outsider researchers we need to accept limits to the knowledge that one has already claimed, and that the outsider “both knows and fails to know” (p. 62). Hence, though my analysis proved to be rich and enlightening and was accepted by the community partner, it has limits.

I was also limited by the presentation of my findings. I did not present my written findings in a narrative or other indigenous form, although I did incorporate many quotes in my report to reflect the voices of the women, which resulted in a lengthy report. While, for example, Wilson’s (2008) Research Is Ceremony in part takes the form of a letter to his three sons, I had the task of communicating with funders about the merit of the program and had to use their language and standard reporting. However, we also provided funds to the Aboriginal partner to develop a video about the program based on the evaluation findings, which the partner viewed as a better demonstration of the results.

How Has the Evaluation Affected Me?

The evaluation impacted me at a very deep level. I feel transformed by the program mainly because of it being ritually and spiritually based. As evaluators we evaluate many different programs, some of which we cannot personally relate to or may not be able to fully participate in. I realize that my experience may be unique and, being an outsider, my exact journey may also be different from that of the other women in the group. Nonetheless, my story adds to the larger story that most of the women who were part of the group were transformed and impacted by it. I also feel that because of my own experience I was able to understand the women’s stories at a deeper level. For example, when women talked about the “magical” effects of the talking circle, I knew what they were alluding to, as I too had experienced the magic. In particular, I felt a spiritual connection to the other women, and I felt that I was in a sacred space where the “truth” I spoke to and
the “truth” I witnessed impacted me in profound ways. The Aboriginal partner’s words about the importance of rituals came to life: they were no longer merely words, but a personal experience.

Nevertheless, when it came time to writing the report I was extra vigilant to include and incorporate all voices and perspectives. In fact, like the other participants in the group, I too saw areas for improvement. For example, one woman was clearly not pleased with some of the rituals in the group as they did not represent her community’s rituals. In an attempt to exercise caution, I shared my preliminary analysis and direct quotes with the project team and the community partner and sought their feedback. However, despite my best intentions to represent all voices, I may have inadvertently overrepresented the positive voices due to my own positive experience. This may very well be the case, because the business of interpretation and meaning-making is bound to be impacted by the context and the meanings brought forth by the evaluator (Widdershoven, 2001). The best we, as evaluators, can do is acknowledge these contexts, make them visible, exercise caution in interpretation, and allow our audiences to have access to these types of information to examine our work critically.

One can also argue that evaluators should not apologize for their attachments to the programs they study, but use it as data. Chiu (2006) argues that reflexive practice can create different forms of knowledge. If evaluator experiences can be seen as “data,” particularly in qualitative-participatory evaluation contexts, then reflexive practice can only add to the overall understanding and analysis of findings. In describing her reflexive journey through identification with the group she studied, Ellingson (1998) viewed herself, as part of the group under study, and her experience as “data.” Hence, I see value in the fact that my journey supports and confirms what other women experienced. Yet, I acknowledge that not all evaluators and not all projects lend themselves to evaluators becoming “part of the group.”

Another interesting development in the course of this project was that while practicing reflexivity we inadvertently created a second intervention group. The team debriefing sessions, which were meant to create a reflexive space to go over the day’s work, became a learning group of its own. The Aboriginal partner, who reflected on her personal encounters with the mainstream health care system, conveyed important messages and learnings. The NPs in turn reflected on their own practices and the systems that hinder and facilitate cross-cultural collaborations. The debriefing sessions took on a life of their own and became a great source of data and a great venue for learning, sharing, bonding, and tending to power dynamics. It was in this reflexive space that most of the changes to programming and evaluation took place. It was a safe space for the Aboriginal partner to convey her thoughts about appropriate programming and evaluation, and how outsiders can effectively work with Aboriginal communities by, as previously mentioned, “not going native,” but by “being open to do things differently.” Hence, we found ourselves experiencing a mini-paradigm shift in the way we approached our work. For one, the NPs learned to be less didactic, the Aboriginal partner became more
hopeful in cross-cultural collaborations, and I learned to be more open and flexible in the terrain of evaluation.

And Where Am I Now?

I am left pondering the question Patai (1994) posed: “Does all this reflexivity produce better research?” (p. 69). Through reflexivity I realized the limitations in design and data collection and attempted to revise and adjust my approach. Reflexivity also situated the findings in the context in which they were generated, and highlighted my limitations and challenges as a non-Aboriginal outsider evaluator. By being reflexive, I also learned important lessons about challenging my assumptions in regards to power dynamics. Most importantly, I learned that in cross-cultural contexts participatory approaches can only work if community members are in their own power. Incorporating reflexive spaces (debriefing sessions) proved to be key in establishing bonds and creating a safe equalizing space to voice concerns, allowing community members to be in their own power. I do not wish to suggest that by being reflexive we can suddenly wipe out imbalances and power hierarchies in research, but we can better navigate and situate ourselves within these hierarchies.

By being reflexive I was also able to do evaluation differently. By showcasing my internal processes, and in particular how I was impacted by the project, I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the other women in the group. In the presentation I gave about the project, not only did I speak about the impact of the intervention for the women, but also about its impact on myself. Reflexivity allowed me to put myself, as evaluator, not above the program (researching on) but firmly within it (researching with) (Koster et al., 2012). I am not claiming that by sharing internal processes evaluators can entirely democratize research relationships, but it is a small step toward equalizing relationships and paving the way for outside evaluators to research in cross-cultural settings in a more equitable space. In fact, in the video-journal that the community partner prepared, one of the group participants stated that she felt through the course of the project we started to let go of our “researcher hat” and “put on [our] sisterhood hat.”

Lastly, our reflexive work allowed the team members to form bonds, which to this day continue. Our team debriefing/reflexive circle has since evolved into a writing circle, where we periodically meet on several joint writing projects about the program and our findings (Ziabakhsh, Pederson, Prodan-Bhalla, Middagh, Jinkerson-Brass, 2014). At the end of the project, we were successful in highlighting gender- and culturally-responsive components to heart health promotion. More importantly, we found health promotion programming needed to be contextualized to meet the needs of vulnerable women. However, due to limited resources we have yet to develop a framework around our findings, although elements of our framework are being written in several manuscripts (Pederson, Izadnegahdar, Humphries & Young, 2014; Ziabakhsh et al., 2014). Most importantly, our evaluation work has informed the development of other outreach projects that we are currently seeking funding for.
CONCLUSION

Certainly evaluators face unique challenges with respect to being reflexive and/or showcasing it. However, a reflexive lens can potentially make the evaluation richer by providing context to the processes and the interpretative dialogue, examining and re-thinking processes and assumptions, attending to power-dynamics and making the research relationships more equitable, and by uncovering important learnings and discourses that will assist the evaluator and her/his audiences in moving forward in evaluation.

My reflexive work supports the growing interest in the evaluation community to practice postmodern paradigms of research. Postmodernists’ concerns over how knowledge is generated (Dowling, 2006; Lather, 1986) can be alleviated in part through reflexivity. Evaluator reflexivity has the potential to become more than a mere methods and limitations section in a research paper. If it is done critically, such reflexive discourses can delve into issues that evaluators may be uncomfortable to speak of, as well as issues that can shed light on the complexities of conducting community-based evaluation research. With this approach we do not disguise or soften up our challenges, but make them visible to open up new discourses and paths toward transformation.

My reflexive journey also contributes to the discourse on cultural competency in evaluation. Reflexivity is viewed as one of the hallmarks of culturally competent evaluation practice. Reflexivity becomes particularly salient for outsider evaluators working with Aboriginal communities, where there is a history of power imbalance, inequalities and exploitation. Through reflexivity power structures and cultural and social contexts are examined to bring them to the surface and include them in the evaluation agenda and discourse (SenGupta et al., 2004; Chouinard & Cousins, 2007). Cultural competency calls for evaluators to examine and articulate the lens from which they extract, gather and interpret data, and to articulate the nature of collaborative relationships they forge, with attention to culture, power and politics. These relationships ultimately impact the questions we as evaluators ask, the answers we get, and how we make sense of them all.

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