

Listening with the Heart: A Reflection on Relationality and Ceremony¹

Lauren Polansky

Independent Evaluation Consultant, Occupied Duwamish and Coast Salish Territory (Seattle, Washington, United States)

Hana Ferronato

Urban Indian Health Institute, Occupied Duwamish and Coast Salish Territory (Seattle, Washington, United States)

Jennifer Herbert

Independent Evaluation Consultant, Occupied Duwamish and Coast Salish Territory (Seattle, Washington, United States)

Abstract: *This practice note describes how listening is an essential practice and can be part of honoring relationality and ceremony in Indigenous research and evaluation. Through a research project assessing the quality and availability of culturally attuned services for Native survivors of gender-based violence, the authors describe how they put being a good relative into practice by centering Indigenous values and protocol while utilizing western methodologies. Aligning with the Eastern Door, this note offers insight into the incorporation of Indigenous approaches into how evaluators honored and engaged with the research process.*

Keywords: *Indigenous evaluation, Indigenous research, relationality, ceremony*

Résumé : *Cette note de pratique décrit comment l'écoute est une pratique essentielle et peut faire partie du respect de la relationnalité et de la cérémonie dans la recherche et l'évaluation autochtones. Dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche évaluant la qualité et la disponibilité de services adaptés à la culture des survivants autochtones de la violence basée sur le genre ou sexospécifique, les autrices décrivent comment elles mettent en pratique le fait de tisser des liens solides en focalisant sur les valeurs et protocoles autochtones tout en utilisant des méthodologies occidentales. S'alignant sur La Porte de l'Est, cette note offre un aperçu de l'incorporation des approches autochtones dans la façon dont les évaluateurs et évaluatrices ont honoré et participé au processus de recherche.*

Mots clés : *évaluation autochtone, recherche autochtone, relationnalité, cérémonie*

Corresponding Author: Hana Ferronato, Urban Indian Health Institute, 611 12th Ave South, Seattle, WA, USA, 98144; hanaf@uihi.org

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous evaluation and research call for centering Indigenous teachings and cultures—challenging colonial and Eurocentric views of research while also working to improve social conditions through “re-writing and re-righting” our history (Smith, 2012, p. 7). It is important to note that Indigenous theories and methodologies are not as much concerned about technically selecting a method but rather the context of conceptualizing research problems and understanding the implications of research for its participants and their communities (Smith, 2012, p. ix).

As evaluators and researchers committed to being grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, we might use or adapt the best of western science and modern tools for the benefit of our communities. Being grounded in culture and community requires being a good relative. Indeed, Indigenous scholars have described the centrality of relationships in Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, and methodologies and how Indigenous research is the ceremony of maintaining accountability to these relationships (Wilson, 2008). As evaluators and researchers, how we come to work is important. In preparing for this submission, we were reminded of this by the Eastern Door of the Medicine Wheel as aligned with the work of Waapalaneexkweew (Nicole R. Bowman-Farrell, 2018) and described in the Roots and Relations Call for Submissions (Bremner & Bowman, 2021):

Eastern Door—Be a Good Relative. We come to work rested and ready in ways that reflect traditional, cultural, and spiritual ways of knowing as a process where we respectfully listen and seek to understand first, then decide on best pathways together.

In this practice note, we offer a reflection on how listening is an essential practice and can be a part of honoring relationality and ceremony in Indigenous research and evaluation. Through a project assessing the quality and availability of culturally attuned services for Native survivors of gender-based violence, we strived to put being a good relative into practice by centering Indigenous values and protocols for how we listened and engaged in reciprocity and consensus building (Ferrazzi et al., 2019; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012) while utilizing western methodologies for our data collection and analysis.

BACKGROUND

Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), a division of the Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB), is a tribal epidemiology center that serves urban Indian populations in the United States through providing public health support to urban Indian organizations. Since 2000, UIHI has become a national leader in raising awareness about urban Indian health needs and considerations for responsible research. Note that we use the terms *Native*, *Indigenous*, *Indian*, and *American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN)* interchangeably throughout this practice note.

In 2021, UIHI released the report *Supporting the Sacred: Womxn of Resilience* to honor the lives and stories of femme-identifying Native survivors of sexual violence living in urban communities in the United States. It concluded that there

are not enough culturally attuned services available or accessible to urban Natives for their healing (Baker, May, Goforth-Ward, & Echo-Hawk, 2021).

As a companion to the 2021 report, we wanted to honor the stories of those providers who were serving Native survivors. Through our relationships with urban Indian programs and the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC), we were able to conduct in-depth, virtual, conversational interviews with 24 direct-service providers in urban and tribal programs, respecting that survivors might access services within and across urban areas and federally recognized reservations. Interviews provided additional insight into the experiences of survivors through the providers that serve them: what providers currently have capacity to offer, what they bring to their work with survivors, and what they need more of as they hold space for Native survivors to heal.

The project team consisted of three femme-identifying evaluators that included two Native-identifying people (Lenape and Diné) and one who identifies as a Yonsei (fourth-generation Japanese American) and white settler of European ancestry. All three evaluators prioritize coming to community humbly and working from the values of UIHI's Indigenous Evaluation Framework (Urban Indian Health Institute, Seattle Indian Health Board, 2022).

Our team strived to balance funder requirements and a tight implementation timeline with the responsibility of approaching this project in a way that honored providers and their stories. We were mindful of the lack of appropriate analysis methods for working with Indigenous data, including inherent incompatibilities in conducting thematic analysis with qualitative data and the challenge of collaboratively analyzing data with the community under an inflexible, restrictive timeline (Bird, Wiles, Okalik, Kilabuk, & Egeland, 2009; Duran & Firehammer, 2015; Hallett et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009; Murphy et al., 2021; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Smith, 2012). Given our constraints, we opted to use the western approach of coding and thematic analysis but aimed to center Indigenous values throughout our data collection and analysis processes with relationality and ceremony guiding and providing instruction and support to our research team.

HONORING STORIES, LISTENING WITH THE HEART

In the following section, we share how our team practiced listening in three different phases of the project: (a) engaging in interview conversations, (b) creating space to respectfully hear storytellers' recordings, and (c) creating a collaborative codebook through listening, seeking to understand each other, and building group consensus.

Interview conversations

Drawing on conversational and storytelling approaches to interviewing supported by Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2010), we began each interview by simply asking, "Who are you?" without soliciting specific demographic information about age, race, ethnicity, and gender. As a qualitative approach to storytelling

within an Indigenous paradigm, this was intentionally done to empower providers to introduce and describe themselves in their own words.

Because we were interested in the role that Native identity plays in providing services for Native survivors of violence, the exception to this was that we specifically asked each provider whether they identified as AI/AN if it was not shared during their introduction of themselves. At the beginning of the interview, and at appropriate moments throughout, the facilitator also shared about her own mixed AI/AN identity, her tribal ancestry, her identity as a mother, and her intentions, including related professional and personal experiences as an expression of relationality and respect for the provider as has been supported by other Indigenous qualitative researchers (Christopher, McCormick, Smith, & Christopher, 2005; Kovach, 2010). As a means of culturally attuned interviewing, this helps encourage trust building and a familiar, safe space for both the storyteller and the listener (Kovach, 2010).

During the interview, set questions were asked; however, the facilitator opened the space for the storyteller to move in and out of the specific questions as needed and used prompts only as necessary to help guide the conversation back to the general focus areas. This flexibility allowed providers to fluidly tell their stories. Silence and active listening were used to support providers during conversations, and any discomfort that occurred during the interview was actively addressed by the facilitator by pausing, offering to stop the conversational interview, offering to skip questions or stop recording, reflecting back with empathy, and offering access to the StrongHearts Native Helpline (1-844-7NATIVE [762-8483]).

Approaching recordings with presence and reverence

Interview conversation recordings and deidentified transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose Version 8.0.35, a qualitative data management and analysis software. The analysis of stories was guided by grounded theory and thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To begin, we independently listened to every interview conversation recording in its entirety to center Indigenous values of approaching the stories in a good way, fully honor each story shared, and note initial impressions and important cues (such as long pauses, laughter, silence, and tone) that were not captured by written transcripts.

For our team, approaching the stories “in a good way” meant being mindful of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual space we were in when choosing to listen to recordings. It meant approaching the stories with a sense of ceremony, reverence, and respect. Each team member embodied this practice in her own way. For example, for one of us it was important to utilize work-from-home days in order to have the privacy and flexibility to smudge and step outside and breathe fresh air before each listening session, intentionally clearing her mind and opening space for stories to be fully heard. Given the nature of our research topic and the stories shared, we also worked to support each other by regularly checking in, debriefing, and encouraging self-care throughout the project.

Listening to each other, seeking to understand

After listening to a recording, each of us then read the corresponding transcript and noted main topics or patterns. Upon hearing and reading the first 10 interviews, our team met to collaboratively create a codebook based on emergent topics from providers' interviews. We discussed and refined codes until we reached consensus on final codes and their definitions. During this phase of analysis, we reflected on how our different identities and experiences shaped our perspectives and understandings of the stories.

Using the codebook, our team coded all interviews separately in Dedoose while continuing the protocol of first listening to each recording. All the codes were cross-checked and validated by a different team member, and we met regularly to discuss questions and reflections on the stories. Dedoose memos were utilized to track any questions we had ($n = 33$ questions) and to indicate when excerpts that were coded required validation by the other team member due to discrepancies ($n = 115$ excerpts). We also highlighted voluntary expressions of appreciation from providers during the conversation as a measure of trust and safety ($n = 13/24$ providers). In addition, our team used memos to document our own reflections, quotes that exemplified codes, any transcript errors, and needs identified by providers that were not otherwise captured by specific codes. Once coded, interview excerpts were divided by code topics between two team members who then conducted thematic analysis and pulled out recommendations shared by providers themselves.

REFLECTIONS

Throughout the project, we remained aware of Indigenous scholars' critiques and the potential tension of using western methodologies to analyze qualitative data in an Indigenous research project. Our team reflected on other Indigenous methodologies such as collaborative story analysis (Hallett et al., 2017) or arts-based methods we could have considered if external constraints had been lifted. These other approaches, while inspiring, would not have been possible given our project's timeline. Instead, we aimed to adapt western methods while centering Indigenous values and following Indigenous protocols as we collected and analyzed data.

In our interview conversations, we observed that *how* we showed up and listened was key to building trust and showing respect for storytellers. In being an active listener who engaged with providers and shared parts of herself, the interview facilitator took a relational approach to create a safe space for providers to joke, laugh, cry, dream, and share their stories. Listening goes beyond using our ears; we can also listen with our hearts.

In qualitative research, western approaches often emphasize the importance of interviewer objectivity and separation. However, for us, centering and acting with Indigenous values means that interview conversations should involve open-heartedness, meeting and accepting people where they are at, and creating space

for them to tell their story while also actively engaging with it. Listening is more than just listening. It is about building trust, showing respect, taking responsibility to hold stories as sacred, and engaging in reciprocity through sharing part of oneself.

At the end of the project, the stories shared by providers affirmed to us the value of choosing conversational methodology instead of standard survey research, especially in the context of gender-based violence against Native people. While some were naturally wary at first, by the end of the conversation, many providers voiced appreciation for participating in the study and even wanted more opportunities to stay connected. One shared, “It’s nice to be in spaces with other people who are working in the Native community, who understand it, and not always having to educate.”

Creating the protocol of first listening to each interview recording was another important practice for our team. It helped us to not only be aware of ourselves in the moment but also how we approached our relationship to the stories and larger project—remembering *why* we were listening. Through this practice, listening became a kind of ceremony that helped us understand our connection to the data (stories), storytellers, and larger movement for justice and healing. We were reminded of the purpose of our research and our responsibility to carry forward the stories shared with us in a good way by advocating for policy and material change to support the healing of Native survivors and the providers that serve them.

Coming to the data in a good way also meant listening to and learning from each other as a team. The different identities and experiences we each carried contributed to our perspectives and how we received each story. For example, the non-Indigenous member on our team had prior experience as an advocate for survivors of gender-based violence and was able to help differentiate the unique aspects of how providers served Indigenous survivors in their healing versus general practices in the field. Another one of us had worked for over a decade in a Eurocentric research space where her Indigenous values were constrained. Her participation in harmful systems strengthened her commitment to creating safe spaces to honor storytellers and team members.

While not as intensive as more participatory approaches, collaboratively creating a codebook still took time. Our team spent over 225 hours preparing, listening, and talking to each other to come to a common understanding and consensus of identifying and honoring story themes, which we believe added to the validity of our findings. When it came time to code the data, it was important for us to be cognizant of how we coded—we aimed to not pull apart or fragment stories but tried to keep them intact so as to not lose contextual meaning.

MOVING FORWARD

We described how we aimed to center our values and put into practice being a good relative in gathering and analyzing data, highlighting the importance of listening as a way to practice relationality and ceremony in research and evaluation.

Based on what we learned, we offer three closing thoughts for the fields of evaluation and research moving forward:

- Funders, research institutions, and organizations who want to support Indigenous-led research and evaluation must be accountable to investing in and supporting the processes needed. Qualitative methods that incorporate Indigenous values of storytelling, listening, relationality, and consensus are foundational and, as such, should be given appropriate time, resources, and respect (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2012).
- For evaluators and researchers constrained by colonial structures, we hope this practice note offers encouragement in knowing that it is possible and sometimes necessary to infuse western methods with Indigenous values in practicing Indigenous research and evaluation in a good way.
- Finally, as we can learn from each other's creative adaptations, we hope this practice note may be of use and moves others to share how they work to implement decolonized methodologies.

NOTE

- 1 This paper was a collective effort and reflects the responsive and reciprocal support of each of the authors—we hold everyone equal.

REFERENCES

- Baker, L., May, K., Goforth-Ward, M., & Echo-Hawk, A. (2021). *Supporting the sacred: Womxn of resilience*. Retrieved from Urban Indian Health Institute website: <https://www.uihi.org/resources/supporting-the-sacred-womxn-of-resilience/>
- Bird, S., Wiles, J. L., Okalik, L., Kilabuk, J., & Egeland, G. M. (2009). Methodological consideration of story telling in qualitative research involving Indigenous peoples. *Global Health Promotion, 16*(4), 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975909348111>
- Bremner, L., & Bowman, N. (2021). *Roots and Relations: Journal Section Purpose and Scope | Evaluation Canada*. Canadian Evaluation Society. <https://evaluationcanada.ca/roots-and-relations-journal-section-purpose-and-scope>
- Christopher, S., McCormick, A. K. H. G., Smith, A., & Christopher, J. C. (2005). Development of an interviewer training manual for a cervical health project on the Apsáalooke Reservation. *Health Promotion Practice, 6*(4), 414–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839904268521>
- Duran, E., & Firehammer, J. (2015). Story sciencing and analyzing the silent narrative between words: Counseling research from an Indigenous perspective. In R. Goodman and P. Gorski (Eds.), *Decolonizing “multicultural” counseling through social justice* (pp. 85–97). New York, NY: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-1283-4_7
- Ferrazzi, P., Tagalik, S., Christie, P., Karetak, J., Baker, K., & Angalik, L. (2019). Aajiiqatiginiq: An Inuit consensus methodology in qualitative health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919894796>

- Hallett, J., Held, S., McCormick, A. K. H. G., Simonds, V., Bird, S. R., Martin, C., . . . Trottier, C. (2017). What touched your heart? Collaborative story analysis emerging from an Apsáalooke cultural context. *Qualitative Health Research, 27*(9), 1267–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316669340>
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Kovach, M. (2010). Conversation method in Indigenous research. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 5*(1), 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069060ar>
- Lavallée, L. F. (2009). Practical application of an Indigenous research framework and two qualitative Indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8*(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800103>
- Murphy, K., Branje, K., White, T., Cunsolo, A., Latimer, M., McMillan, J., . . . Martin, D. (2021). Are we walking the talk of participatory Indigenous health research? A scoping review of the literature in Atlantic Canada. *PLoS ONE, 16*(7), e0255265. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0255265>
- Simonds, V. W., & Christopher, S. (2013). Adapting western research methods to Indigenous ways of knowing. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(12), 2185–2192. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.301157>
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Zed Books.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Urban Indian Health Institute, Seattle Indian Health Board. (2022). Indigenous evaluation. Retrieved from <https://www.uihi.org/projects/indigenous-evaluation/>
- Waapalaneexkweew (Nicole R. Bowman-Farrell) (2018). Looking backward but moving forward: Honoring the sacred and asserting the sovereign in Indigenous evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation, 39*(4), 543–568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214018790412>
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood.