



Reaching Harmony Across Indigenous and Mainstream Research Contexts: An Emergent Narrative

Catherine E. Burnette
Tulane University

Shanondora Billiot
Washington University in St. Louis

Key Words

Indigenous research • power • decolonizing research • critical theory

Abstract

Research with indigenous communities is one of the few areas of research encompassing profound controversies, complexities, ethical responsibilities, and historical context of exploitation and harm. Often this complexity becomes overwhelmingly apparent to the early career researcher who endeavors to make meaningful contributions to decolonizing research. Decolonizing research has the capacity to be a catalyst for the improved wellbeing and positive social change among indigenous communities and beyond. The purpose of this critical analysis is to reach harmony across mainstream and indigenous research contexts. We martial critical theory to deconstruct barriers to decolonizing research, such as power inequities, and identify strategies to overcome these barriers. First, we critically analyze the historical context of decolonizing research with indigenous communities. Next, we analyze the concept of “insider” and “outsider” research. We identify barriers and strategies toward finding harmony across indigenous and mainstream research paradigms and contexts.

Few areas encompass the profound controversy, complexities, ethical responsibilities, and historical context as research with indigenous communities (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette, Sanders, Butcher, & Salois, 2011; Deloria, 1991; Smith, 2007; Smith, 2012). The depth of this tension is overwhelmingly apparent to the early career researcher who endeavors to make meaningful contributions through research with indigenous communities (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette, Sanders, Butcher, & Rand, 2014). As Mihesuah (2006) aptly notes, “So many indigenous people and our allies are finding their voices, and they are expressing their thoughts. But speaking out can still be precarious, especially for those who haven’t graduated or haven’t received tenure...” (p. 131).



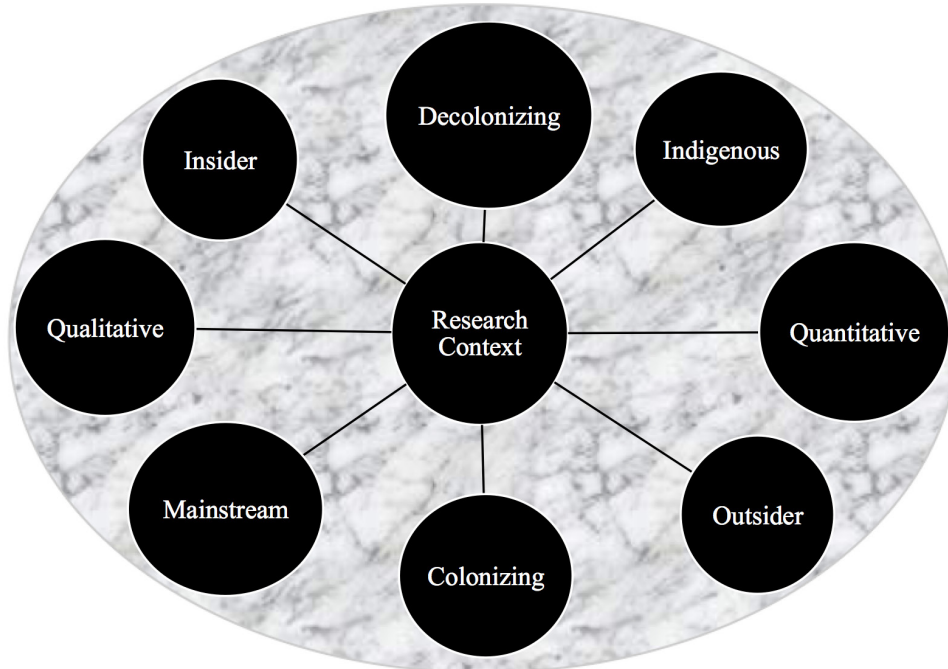
In addition to balancing the requirements of early-career academia, undertaking culturally sensitive research with indigenous communities often means addressing the negative legacy of past researchers, balancing power differentials inherent in research relationships, reconciling differences among indigenous and mainstream research paradigms, not to mention conducting beneficial research with indigenous communities (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette et al., 2014; Burnette et al., 2011; Deloria, 1991; Smith, 2007; Smith, 2012). Despite the need for beneficial research (Deloria, 1991; Mihesuah, 2006), the cumulative weight of the aforementioned challenges may be deterrents for young scholars to begin or continue this type of work. Unless the intricacies and complexities of conducting research with indigenous communities are deconstructed, they may well serve as barriers to the broader project of decolonization, and decolonization is integral for the improved wellbeing of indigenous peoples.

Because research and power are inextricably intertwined, a critical inquiry is useful to deconstruct the context of research with indigenous communities (Bishop, 2005; Smith, 2012). An aim of critical theory is to increase consciousness about the social, political, and historical constraints of a phenomenon (in this case, research with indigenous communities) and facilitate emancipation from these constraints (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Although progress has been made to decolonize the research context, power inequities continue to persist (Smith, 2012; Walters et al., 2009).

The purpose of this critical analysis is to identify strategies to reach harmony across mainstream and indigenous research contexts. Researchers may experience tension when striving to reach harmony and may fall along a continuum of multiple potential polarities in the research context, including (a) colonizing and decolonizing research, (b) insider and outsider identities, (c) mainstream and indigenous research paradigms, and (d) quantitative and qualitative research methods (See Figure 1).

DECOLONIZING RESEARCH IN A COMPLEX HISTORICAL CONTEXT

With the examination of power inequities at its core, critical theory is especially suited to a critical analysis on reaching harmony in the research context with indigenous communities (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Oppression is a central concept within critical theory, with consciousness-raising being an alternative to oppression, which involves critically analyzing oppression and initiating liberation among the oppressed (Freire, 2008). Van Wormer (2010) explains that critical inquiries emphasize the "...power of the people's ability to change the way in which they understand their problems so as to better be able to overcome them" (p. 45).

FIGURE 1. AREAS OF POTENTIAL TENSION IN THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Note. Researchers may experience tension when striving to reach harmony and may fall along a continuum of multiple potential polarities in the research context, including (a) colonizing and decolonizing research, (b) insider and outsider identities, (c) mainstream and indigenous research paradigms, and (d) quantitative, qualitative research methods.

A fundamental factor critically relevant to indigenous peoples has been colonization. Despite vast heterogeneity, a commonality among *indigenous peoples* is the shared history of colonization, albeit experiencing it in distinct manifestations and time periods (Gray, Coates, & Bird, 2013; Smith, 2012). *Decolonization*, in contrast, involves overcoming the dehumanizing and oppressive forces of colonization and a return of power to indigenous peoples (Coates, 2013). Part of the indigenous decolonization movement since the civil rights era has been to offset inequity within the research context by (a) changing the power dynamics of research, (b) fostering indigenous ownership and preservation of indigenous knowledge, and (c) facilitating self-determination of indigenous identities (Smith, 2012). Wilson (2004) proposes that the decolonization movement is “...survivalist in nature, not only because of its potential to restore health and dignity to our people, but also because of how it will assist us in advancing our political aims against our oppressors” (p. 74).

Related to colonization, indigenous peoples have endured *historical oppression* or the perpetual, insidious, and multi-generational experiences of oppression that have been imposed and internalized (Burnette, in press). Historical oppression was initially manifested through *historical traumas* related to colonization, such as genocide, land dispossession, relocation, and forced assimilation through boarding schools, as well as countless other traumas (Brave Heart, 1999; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998). Historical oppression continues to be perpetuated through poverty, marginalization, and discrimination (Burnette, in press). Therefore, historical oppression is a broader concept that encompasses not only historical trauma, but the daily contemporary experiences of oppression that continue to persist.

Research is situated within a broader context of historical oppression, which has given rise to power inequities among indigenous and mainstream research contexts (Burnette & Sanders, 2014). Historically, research has been conducted on indigenous communities by members of the mainstream society (Smith, 2012). Within the historical context of research, colonial settlers were reported to gather information through research to manipulate indigenous populations over whom they wished to gain colonial control (Smith, 2012). According to Smith (2012), colonization has shaped perceptions so that the belief systems of dominant members often become internalized as universal truths. Indeed, according to Freire (2008), oppressive beliefs tend to be created by those in power who perpetuate dehumanizing myths. For example, Freire (2008) described the myth of the “superior” oppressor as opposed to the “inferior” oppressed.

Research is situated within educational institutions that have perpetuated dehumanizing myths and beliefs and have played direct roles in forced assimilation of indigenous peoples through boarding schools (Freire, 2008; Getty, 2010; Smith, 2012;). In the present, researchers have recounted numerous stories from the indigenous community members who describe experiencing exploitation and misinformation through research, a failure to present results, and feeling over-researched without beneficial returns (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette et al., 2014). Thus, research is not only situated within the context of historical oppression, it has played a part in this oppression through exploitative processes (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette et al., 2014; Deloria, 1991; Smith, 2012).

“INSIDER” AND “OUTSIDER” RESEARCH

The ethnic backgrounds of researchers can influence both researchers and indigenous communities who engage in this sensitive work (Deloria, 1991; Mio & Iwamasa, 1993). If a researcher is socialized into a Western worldview, this may clash with the worldview of indigenous peoples and, if imposed, might cause them great harm (Weaver, 1999). Often, researchers are described in dichotomous ways as “insiders” or

“outsiders,” and some indigenous researchers have reported a growing resentment of non-indigenous researchers who work with indigenous communities (Mio & Iwamasa, 1993). This likely relates to exploitation in research and the broader historical oppression and power inequity in research and race relationships. As Swisher (1996) puts it, if non-indigenous peoples believe in the empowerment of indigenous peoples, “...they must now demonstrate this belief by stepping aside” (p.85). The author notes an attitude that “we can and must do it ourselves” (Swisher, 1996, p.85), which may give rise to the idea that “...importantly, talking about American Indian topics has required possessing proper credentials, namely, being Indian oneself” (Gross, 1995, p. 211).

Just as some scholars advocate solely for indigenous researchers to conduct research with indigenous communities, others advocate for more, rather than fewer, non-indigenous researchers working with these communities (Atkinson, 1993; Mihesuah, 2006; Mio & Iwamasa, 1993). These researchers advocate for ethnically diverse research teams with non-indigenous allies advocating for indigenous rights (Atkinson, 1993; Mihesuah, 2006; Mio & Iwamasa, 1993). According to Mio and Iwamasa (1993), researchers interested in cross-cultural issues come from all ethnic backgrounds and experiences; receiving criticism for undertaking this research endeavor should not deter them from this pursuit. Moreover, many indigenous researchers have commented on the importance of alliances among indigenous and non-indigenous researchers working in solidarity for the common purpose of decolonization (Burnette et al., 2011; Mihesuah, 2006; Smith, 2012).

Still, other researchers report on the insufficiency of a single component of researchers’ identity, such as ethnicity, to indicate their ability to conduct credible research (Gray & Coates, 2010). Indeed, Sen (2007) states it is dangerous to dichotomize the world into simply western and non-western definitions or compartmentalize identity into one ethnic or gender identity group. Authors report that the insider versus outsider mentality portrays a false dichotomy, negating the complexity of people who are influenced by multiple aspects, including social background, gender, education, sexual orientation, and prior experience (Chavez, 2008; Gray & Coates, 2010). Some researchers propose that an over-focus on the ethnic background of researchers can pose a barrier to the growth of indigenous knowledge and building on the strengths of indigenous communities (Burnette et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2013).

As an added layer of complexity to the ethnic identity of researchers, identifying who is considered as an “authentic” indigenous person is a multifaceted and often contentious topic in itself. Given that the U.S. federal government has over 30 definitions of indigenous (Miller, 2004), there is no universal standard for what is considered an authentic indigenous identity. A review of literature shows several facets of authentic identity as Indigenous within the U.S. including: (a) having Indian descent (Jaimes, 1992), (b) self-identifying as indigenous (Jaimes, 1992;

Miller, 2004; Weaver, 2001; Wilson, 2004), (c) community acceptance (Jaimes, 1992; Madsen, 2012; Weaver, 2001), (d) the extent to which one knows and practices her or his cultural traditions (Weaver, 2001), and (e) one's relationship with the environment (Jaimes, 1992; Wildcat, 2009). Because the U.S. declared indigenous tribes as domestic dependent nations, granting some tribes U.S. federal recognition as sovereign nations, federal recognition can also affect indigenous identities (Jaimes, 1992; Weaver, 2001). Thus, identity is personal, complex, multifaceted, and socially constructed. Research shows that these facets vary in importance and scale by nation, region, tribe, family, and within the individual (Jaimes, 1992; Madsen, 2012; Weaver, 1999; Wilson, 2004).

While recognizing one's ethnicity is important to consider when conducting research, it should not be the only determinant in considering who may be an authentic researcher. Foremost, assigning a label of authenticity automatically places judgment on one's "tradition, place, and identity" (Searles, 2010, p. 153). As Searles (2010) points out, authenticity is a subjective quality attributed to what is perceived to be genuine or real (Madsen, 2012). There is no consensus among indigenous people on how to measure or appropriate indigenous identity and we must allow tribal communities to make these distinctions (Weaver, 2001; Wilson, 2004, Jaimes, 1992). Those considered an insider in one indigenous community could be considered as an outsider to another indigenous community. Therefore, in research, allowing for self-determination means focusing on indigenous principles rather than solely on insider or outsider identities and can aid researchers in establishing credibility within indigenous community research.

BARRIERS TO FINDING HARMONY ACROSS INDIGENOUS AND MAINSTREAM RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Researchers have remarked upon the clash between indigenous and mainstream research practices, and much of this tension can be traced to conflicting *paradigms*, or the basic beliefs and worldviews guiding the methodological approach, as well as their basic ontology and epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The purpose of research itself can vary; mainstream research may focus on knowledge development, whereas indigenous research may focus on making meaningful contributions to the indigenous community along with knowledge expansion (Burnette et al., 2011).

Mainstream research paradigms. Critical and indigenous theorists have recognized an often unacknowledged power differential between mainstream and alternative research paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2004; Lather, 1998). Lather (1998) posed that all thought is value laden, recognizing that those in power tend to have the resources to perpetuate and reproduce the knowledge that serves their interests. Research has conventionally been conducted on indigenous communities

by mainstream researchers (historically from a positivistic paradigm), and this relationship is often characterized by a notable power differential, with roots in colonization (Burnette & Sanders, 2014). With power comes privilege, and an aspect of privilege is being able to assume one's experiences as "universal" and "natural," whereas alternative experiences are depicted as "the Other" and often devalued (McIntosh, 1988; Smith, 2012). By this logic, mainstream research paradigms would be perceived as natural whereas indigenous paradigms would be devalued (Coates, 2013; Smith, 2007; Smith, 2012). Within research, positivistic and neutral principles have conventionally been benchmarks of "good science" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Implications of this privilege or power differential in the research context include mainstream research being normative and the majority of researchers being trained and socialized into this perspective (Bishop, 2005; Getty, 2010; Mihesuah, 2006). This background can affect researchers' outlook and approach to research, and rather than building upon indigenous worldviews, scholars have commented that researchers are too quick to put a Western perspective on things (Burnette & Sanders, 2014). Relatedly, in a phenomenological study with 13 indigenous and non-indigenous researchers conducting research with indigenous communities, researchers commented on feeling pressure to approach research in a positivistic way, whereas indigenous worldviews and research paradigms tended to go unrecognized (Burnette et al., 2011).

When describing mainstream and indigenous paradigms, although areas of tension are identified, the authors acknowledge that researchers and paradigms are not dichotomous categories, but rather fall along a continuum (See Figure 1) between differential perspectives and backgrounds (Burnette & Sanders, 2014). Both mainstream and indigenous research methods have valuable aspects, which may be complementary; yet the marginalization and devaluation of the latter can cause clash and signify a power differential and concomitant privilege of the former (Smith, 2007; Smith, 2012).

Indigenous paradigms and culturally congruent methodologies. In contrast to positivist or post-positivist paradigms, indigenous paradigms, though vastly heterogeneous, tend to have similar characteristics (Getty, 2010). Although indigenous paradigms and worldviews are constantly evolving, many are characterized by an ecosystemic or ecospiritual framework, where the whole is greater than its sacred parts, and all creation is interrelated, interacting in a reciprocal fashion (Coates, 2013; Getty, 2010). A set of guiding principles for working with indigenous communities involves a cyclical and iterative process similar to the practice of community-based participatory research (CBPR) characterized by relationships, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution (Walters et al., 2009).

CBPR can be an empowering process, promoting indigenous knowledge and co-learning which facilitate collaborative, equitable involvement of all partners in all phases of the research process (Walters et al., 2009). According to Walters et al. (2009) researchers believe they have a reciprocal and never ending responsibility to redistribute knowledge to continue long-lasting relationships. Moreover, research with indigenous communities has been reported to take on added dimensions, rather than being solely intellectual or professional activities. For instance, rather than viewing research from solely an intellectual endeavor, researchers have commented on the spiritual domain of research (Burnette et al., 2011; Coates, 2013; Wilson, 2008).

Funding and publishing institutions stating the need for comparison and generalizability are reported as disincentives for the use of holistic methods (Burnette et al., 2014; Burnette et al., 2011). As one indigenous researcher working with indigenous communities remarked (Burnette et al., 2011), “The problem with Western science is that they . . . don’t know how to deal with . . . multiple realities” (p. 288). Furthermore the need for control in mainstream research can pose problems in providing culturally sensitive research that requires more fluidity and flexibility (Burnette et al., 2014). Likewise, mainstream research tends to be relatively problem-centered, whereas there has been a call for more strengths-based research that builds off of the resilience of indigenous communities (Barney, 2001; Burnette & Figley, in press; McMahan, Kenyon, & Carter, 2012).

Indeed, this tendency to isolate or compartmentalize aspects of oneself may clash with indigenous worldviews, which depicts concepts more holistically. Given the vast heterogeneity and diversity across diverse populations, more research is documenting the insufficiency of attempting to generalize across indigenous populations, calling forth the need for culturally relevant and localized research (Walters & Simoni, 2002).

METHODOLOGY MATTERS: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) state, the majority of social science research tends to be quantitative rather than qualitative. There are socio-political reasons for this, with social sciences having been characterized as a “soft” science, in comparison to the more readily quantifiable and verifiable “hard” sciences, such as mathematics or physical sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Indeed, social sciences have attempted to gain status and political power by emulating the positivism and post-positivism of the hard sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A parallel has been drawn placing quantitative research in juxtaposition with qualitative research, with the latter being characterized as a soft and less credible method of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Yet, there have been critiques of this quantification including stripping variables from their context for isolation, excluding meaning and purpose

from data, and the inapplicability of generalized data to individualized cases (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, rather than attempting to generalize across communities that may have relatively small sample sizes, qualitative and localized approaches may provide more accurate representations of the diversity of indigenous communities.

Qualitative research has been recommended for use with indigenous communities as it facilitates culturally congruent methods like story-telling, a holistic perspective, and understanding topics in-context, yet the structural pressure to approach things from a positivist way can present deterrents (Burnette et al., 2014; McMahon et al., 2012). Despite qualitative research being relevant, in a systematic review of risk and protective factors related to the wellness of indigenous youth in the United States, only four out of 51 articles (8%) used qualitative methods (Burnette & Figley, in press). Quantitative methods have benefits of being economical and less time-consuming, but when social science interventions are normed with other populations and are superficially “adapted” to indigenous populations, this has been viewed as further imposition of Euro-American worldviews and continued assimilation (Echo-Hawk, 2011; Novins et al., 2011).

Indigenous quantitative and qualitative research have the capacity to mutually inform one another in an essential iterative process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Yet, if the majority of mainstream research is approached from a quantitative standpoint, this process becomes out of balance and leads to the devaluation of alternative forms of knowledge. This imbalance has important research implications; if the research context is biased toward quantitative methods, this also translates to funding institutions, hiring faculty, and publishing institutions that serve as gatekeepers to what gets funded and published. It follows that this may pose disproportionate barriers for researchers who take alternative approaches.

EVIDENCE OF THE SHIFTING TERRAIN IN A DECOLONIZING CONTEXT

Despite challenges, evidence of a shifting terrain that provides opportunities for decolonizing research are growing. First, a number of valuable scholarly works are available to provide insight and guidance on decolonizing research (Gray et al., 2013; Smith, 2012). Second, there is growing attention to “Indigenizing the Academy” with growing scholarship that support this movement (Miheisah, 2006; Wilson, 2004). Third, there are increasing publishing opportunities for researchers who are engaged in indigenous and decolonizing research, such as the *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* (Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work, 2014). Fourth, there is greater attention on social determinants of health, family and group-level interventions, and health equity among indigenous populations in the United States (US Department of Health and Human Services & Office of Disease Prevention

and Health Promotion, 2013). Finally, community-based participatory research and community engaged research have developed into keystone methods for conducting research with indigenous communities (Walters et al., 2009). Much of this research places emphasis on tangibly improving the well-being of indigenous communities through close collaboration and direction from indigenous communities.

STRATEGIES TO REACH HARMONY ACROSS INDIGENOUS AND MAINSTREAM RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Given the aforementioned challenges, researchers who engage in indigenous research experience the added burden of advocating, educating, and establishing the worth of their work in a broader context shaped by conflicting paradigms. To overcome this added burden and incrementally “level the playing field,” so to speak, multiple strategies can be employed. First, increased opportunities for publishing and attaining funding in indigenous and decolonizing research without compromising or “adapting” to fit the requirements of mainstream research infrastructure are needed (Burnette et al., 2014; Burnette et al., 2011).

Second, more cross-cultural collaborations can lead to mutually beneficial relationships where mainstream researchers can learn from decolonizing research and vice versa (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Burnette et al., 2014; Burnette et al., 2011). Because the majority of researchers are educated in conventional paradigms, a certain degree of education about indigenous paradigms is needed. From the authors’ experiences in these collaborations, researchers, who may be unfamiliar with decolonizing research, are often open to understanding indigenous paradigms. The more allies who can educate and advocate for indigenous paradigms while engaging in constant reflexivity, the less this burden falls on too few researchers and the greater the power of a decolonizing research agenda.

Third, researchers can continue to advocate and translate the needs and directions of decolonizing research to decision-making bodies (Burnette et al., 2014). Fourth, mentorship and guidance for early career indigenous researchers and allies are needed to provide the necessary support to remain committed to and develop the necessary knowledge base to do work in this area. Fifth, researchers can continue to educate others through scholarly works and training. Finally, it is the responsibility of those indigenous scholars and allies in power to sit on review boards for entry into academia, funding sources, and peer-review journals to be a voice to bring indigenous paradigms into the forefront of the broader Academy (Wildcat, 2009). Furthermore, opportunities for publication on indigenous topics are important in both mainstream and specialized journals. These opportunities are not only important for increased awareness of decolonizing research, but for the recruitment, retention, and tenure promotion of faculty working on these important topics.

DISCUSSION

In summary, mainstream research is often situated within a larger context of historical oppression. The power inequity among mainstream and indigenous forms of knowledge has led to indigenous paradigms and research often being devalued (Smith, 2012). In this way, there is an aspect of privilege if one conducts mainstream research, in that it is the default, “normal” or “credible” form of knowledge development. Contemporary indigenous researchers and their allies are often trained in Western educational systems where indigenous worldviews continue to be marginalized (Bishop, 2005; Getty, 2010; Mihesuah, 2006). They may find themselves within a confusing context, grappling with how to conduct culturally sensitive research for the benefit of indigenous communities (Burnette et al., 2014).

Early career researchers who engage in decolonizing research must address the “insider” and “outsider” complexities, face the atrocities that have occurred throughout historical oppression and within the context of research, and work in a system where they may be disadvantaged based on their paradigms or methodologies selected. Balancing the power across mainstream and indigenous research is imperative to enable researchers to become successful without experiencing disproportionate challenges. Power-balancing requires broad-based changes in the research context.

The challenge in decolonizing the Academy is to find the emergent narrative between mainstream and indigenous paradigms. As an indigenous researcher aptly related (Burnette et al., 2011), “How do we connect the story and the ... the statistics? ... That’s the challenge” (p. 287). Decolonizing research with indigenous communities provides opportunities for profound connections, deep relationships, and transformative experiences (Burnette et al., 2011). With supportive networks and allies, indigenous and nonindigenous researchers alike can use decolonizing research as a catalyst for social change among indigenous communities and beyond.

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Author Note

Catherine E. Burnette, PhD, LMSW (First Author)

Assistant Professor

Tulane University School of Social Work

Contact:

Telephone: (504) 862-3495

E-mail: cburnet3@tulane.edu.

Shanondora Billiot, MSW (2nd Author)

PhD Student

George Warren Brown School of Social Work,

Washington University in St. Louis

Contact:

Telephone: (314) 935-9102

E-mail: smbiliot@wustl.edu