American Indian Historical Experience with Research

Nate St. Pierre, Ed. D.
Chippewa Cree
Sources of Knowledge

Ancient, traditional, contextual

Empirical, scientific, theoretical
Knowledge Acquisition in
Native Communities

- Based on oral tradition and history
- Indigenous Ways of Knowing
  - Practical use of information
- The interconnectedness of all things
  - Keen observation of environment
  - Observation of individual and communal experience
  - Multiple perspectives and participation over time
Native “research” Included

- Tribal elders
- Bundle holders
- Pipe carriers
- Spiritual leaders
- Lodge makers
- Ceremonial chiefs
- Storytellers
- Oral historians
- Rites of passage
- Artisans and craft-workers
- Extended family systems
- Practitioners of tradition and custom
Historical Experience of Native People and Research

- Scientific interests during the 19th Century
- The ongoing experiment
- Solving problems for Indians
- The accepted model for conducting research
A typical scenario: A researcher trained in the western approach

- Enters/penetrates into a community
- Observes and gathers data by “taking” notes, taking quotes, taking pictures, taking recordings, and taking samples
- Exits or essentially vanishes as quickly as he arrived
- Completes analysis outside of the community, usually without community feedback or cross-validation amongst “subjects”
- Shares findings of the study with the rest of the world, and
- Receives recognition as “the authority” from the academic and non-Indian community or obtains grant funding.
The Net Effect of Historical Research on Native People

- Misappropriation and/or misrepresentation of culture and specific conditions in a community

- Inconclusive, and sometimes erroneous, assumptions about a people and their way of life

- Individuals and their communities are disenfranchised, even powerless, or exploited, whether intentional or not

- Communities can become marginalized and stereotyped

- Reality is distorted
JFK's American Indian Proclamation of 1963

“For a subject worked and re-worked so often in novels, motion pictures, and the media, American Indians are the least understood and most misunderstood of all citizens of the U.S.”
Some Caveats for Conducting Research in Native Communities

- Most researchers are considered “outsiders”
- The Indian “world” is much different than the mainstream
- There are stigmas associated with researchers and research
- Building and maintaining trust
- Integrity and Honesty
Caveats, continued

- Paternalism will not be tolerated
- Inclusion and involvement of “the people”
- Ownership of process and product
- Follow through (do what you say you’re going to do)
- Culturally appropriate, culturally-competent, culturally-sensitive, and tribally-specific
- Accountability and transparency
Research in Indian communities

There are advantages as well as disadvantages in working with one's own culture. The knowledge that you already have can form a basis for defining a more in-depth problem or topic to document; whereas, an outsider may need to take years to become familiar enough with the culture to define a meaningful topic. (Guyette, 1983, p. 126)
The Role of TCUs

- Train student researchers to address community issues and challenges
- Include a protocol to create a balance of community interest in the research process
- Make a deliberate attempt to incorporate key people from the community
Learning from One Another

- Form an Institutional/Tribal Review Board
- Seek a tribal resolution for each research project, if necessary (be familiar with the process)
- Ensure that any research is inclusive instead of exclusive
New View for Tribes

Tool for Self-Determination

Issues for research in Indian Country

- How will results be used?
- Will you see the results?
- What is the purpose of the research?
Some final thoughts

Protecting cultural property through policy declarations is a worthy exercise of Native sovereignty (Harjo, 2002)

Ideally, research about Indian people should be completed by Indian people for Indian people.

Otherwise, follow protocols, use ethical and rigorous practices, and partner with responsible, trusted individuals and entities.