USAI
UTILITY
SELF-VOICING
ACCESS
INTER-RELATIONALITY
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK
Developed by: Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres ©2012
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BACKGROUND

The USAI Research Framework has been conceived and developed by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) to guide all Aboriginal research projects conducted by the OFIFC and the urban Aboriginal communities, in which the OFIFC is involved.

As the OFIFC welcomes all informed and principled allies to partner, cooperate, and collaborate with the Federation and the communities, when appropriate and required, this document has been developed as a guide to our research principles and ethical considerations, to our rules of research conduct and the goals of our research endeavors.

A companion training manual for the community researchers supplements this document.

Our work has been guided by the fundamental recognition that Indigenous knowledge is not a singular entity that can be discovered by social scientists, translated and interpreted, critically analyzed, and summed up in scientific journals or academic dissertations. We recognize that Indigenous knowledge comes from all relations, it manifests itself in the voices and actions of people, it is generated when people get together, it arises simultaneously from the past, present and future, it lives in words, stories, movement, dance, feelings, concepts and ideas. It is participatory, historical, and political and “this political form of participation affirms people’s right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a:9).

Sylvia Maracle
Executive Director

Magdalena Smolewski
Research Director
USAI Research Framework takes its acronym from the four principles of ethics that guide it: Utility, Self-Voicing, Access, and Inter-relationality.

Our work is faithful to Indigenous identity, harmoniously inscribed within the four directions of the medicine wheel.

Our approach to research is practical, fully recognizing communities as authors of the knowledge that any community-driven inquiry generates.

USAI stresses the inherent validity of Indigenous knowledge and positions it within all relationships, fully acknowledging its historical and political context.

USAI Research Framework prescribes several research procedures, called “research spaces” that describe research conduct to guide the work with principled allies.

The Framework delineates the preferred research methodology, called “orientation to research”, to encompass various research practices that are appropriate in Indigenous research.

USAI also responds to evaluation issues, offering a culturally-relevant approach to measures and indicators.
Before the 20th century, the term “culture” was associated in Europe with the cultivation of the mind, “enlightenment”, “progress” and “civilization”. Since the 20th century, when American anthropology adopted the term “culture” as a guiding principle to understand communal behavior and meanings that people attach to what they do, the word “culture” has been used to define how societies use shared and understood by all symbols to represent what’s important to them. Since then, anthropologists (academics and practitioners alike) have been debating whether the term they use refers to a bounded and stable entity (a culture) or a collection of various symbolical expressions of people’s everyday lives (culture-s).

For Indigenous societies, these definitions of “culture” and the term itself are foreign and imposed concepts, often conveniently used by others to authoritatively represent, label, compare and study Indigenous systems of knowledge and practice.

Since the word “culture” is now widely recognized as a term of convenience, we note its everyday use while referring to Indigenous ways of seeing, knowing, believing, and acting. We do, however, stress that in our work we are guided by the multigenerational knowledge and experiential insights to counteract the externality of the term “culture”. What we want to bring forward is the inherent and real sense of what it means to people to balance all aspects of life: the physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual to guide their communal knowledge and practices, all their relations, roles and life cycle responsibilities.

The work of the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, that represents and supports 29 Friendship Centres across Ontario, is faithful to Indigenous identity, harmoniously inscribed within the four directions of the medicine wheel. This balanced, complete and fulfilled reality of people’s everyday’s good living is what we strive for and what is also closest to what the term “culture” may mean for Indigenous people: not an object, not an entity, but a felt sense of great peace within us. This very wisdom that we inherited from many generations who came before us and which tells us to practice who we are everyday of our life, which is simply described by us as “everyday good living”, is the foundation of all the OFIFC’s endeavors, including our USAI Research Framework.
For a few decades now, research approaches within social sciences have been undergoing radical transformations under a paradigm called Participatory and Action Research (PAR). This new way of knowing, reflecting, and acting came out from the historically imposed and contemporarily maintained cultural and socio-political margins to challenge the positioning of a researcher vis-à-vis the “researched”, to test the boundaries between research and praxis, and to infuse seemingly “objective” and “pure” research procedures and academically-habituated routines with diverse narratives, localized meanings, geo-politically grounded symbols, and historically shaped cultural discourses.

In PAR, which pulls thoughts, reflections, and actions out of The Predicted and The Validated and into The Possible and The Real, “human actors are both willful and capable of thwarting research prediction, and willful and capable of selecting and implementing theories or probabilities they want to see manifested! Conventional science sees this as undesirable ‘contamination’ and ‘bias’. Participatory Action Research sees this as a goal, and the stuff of which ‘real life’ is made or enacted” (Wadsworth, 1998).

Various definitions of PAR position it as a collaborative process of research, education, and action that recognizes plurality of knowledge, which is generated by and inherent in many places, spaces, and people. All forms of knowledge are valid. All voices, even those deeply marginalized, colonized, and silenced, have the power to articulate, to express, to declare, and to tell “the story”. All knowledge leads to action and transformations. All knowledge and all the resulting action give people power and competence to define their own world.

We welcome the fact that with the introduction and blossoming of PAR, Indigenous knowledge and practice, as well as culturally-appropriate research methodologies, have gained momentum in recent years. We also acknowledge that, in the last decade, much has been written about decolonizing research approaches and the ethics of research with Indigenous communities and among Indigenous people(s).

However, we also recognize that most PAR research projects do not go far enough to recognize local systems of knowledge and practice as fully authoritative and competent to design, conduct, and evaluate their own research. We also note that the PAR paradigm often fails to recognize a subtle but crucial difference between “participation” and “authorship”, where in the case of the former - Indigenous communities and people remain more
“trusted informants, confidants, and advisors”, while in the latter - they assume the rightful position of creators and holders of knowledge and praxis.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) has been practicing community-driven research for most of its history. With the Report of the Task Force on Native People in an Urban Setting (1981), with the Final Report of the Urban Aboriginal Task Force (2007) and - more recently - several noted research projects, including Our Health Counts (a collaboration with the Centre for Research on Inner City Health), an innovative study on Indigenous masculinity supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, and a research project on the Indigenous Knowledge Networks, we have solidified our position within the urban Aboriginal community in Ontario to welcome principled partnerships, ethical cooperation, and meaningful collaboration with research allies who share our goal to improve the quality of life of urban Aboriginal people.

Our Research Framework, named USAI after the four ethical principles that govern it, Utility, Self-Voicing, Access, and Inter-relationality, is designed to ensure the integrity of our research from the perspective of the knowledge holders and knowledge authors. We believe that the unique features of our research paradigm, in which both the historical perspectives and contemporary socio-political context, in which Indigenous knowledge and praxis are generated, are fully recognized, make this framework an effective decolonizing tool to situate our knowledge properly as pragmatic, authentic, and inherently valid.

USAI reflects lived reality that does not need to be mediated, translated, and interpreted to gain mainstream academic legitimacy. USAI research takes place in communities, is driven by communities, and loudly speaks the language of identity, in people’s own voices and on their own terms “to construct knowledge in accordance to self-determined definitions of what is real and what is valuable” (Brandt-Castellano, 2004:99).
USAI RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH STATEMENT

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) conducts, supports, and recognizes community driven, community relevant, faithful to Indigenous identity, self-voiced, useful, accessible and relations-based research, which generates locally-authored Indigenous knowledge and locally-determined, confident, well-informed and effective action to bring desired changes and benefits to urban Aboriginal communities.

PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

Recognition and acknowledgement that, both historically and contemporarily, Indigenous people have been disfranchised, disadvantaged, and dispossessed, are essential in understanding that only by assuming full control over generation and dissemination of knowledge, can urban Aboriginal communities confidently make decisions about their lives, assert their rights to execute plans, goals, and priorities, and proudly own their cultural, socio-economic, and political reality.

The OFIFC conducts, supports, and recognizes only those research projects and activities that are informed by the following four principles of ethics:

PRINCIPLE I: UTILITY
Research inquiry is practical, relevant, and directly benefiting communities.

- Research findings are immediate resources to benefit communities and build local capacity
- Generated knowledge must be useful and relevant to communities and people involved in research activities
- Communities decide on nature of actions that follow research activities

PRINCIPLE II: SELF-VOICING
Research, knowledge, and practice are authored by communities, which are fully recognized as knowledge holders and knowledge creators.

- Knowledge production, authorship, and dissemination constitute a political process to decolonize Indigenous knowledge and praxis
- All community voices frame research reality; all research activities are self-determined; all research findings are authored by communities
- Research goes beyond “inclusion” and “engagement,” with communities constructing and authoring their knowledge and defining their own actions
PRINCIPLE III: ACCESS
Research fully recognizes all local knowledge, practice, and experience in all their cultural manifestations as accessible by all research authors and knowledge holders.

- Local knowledge, lived experience, community narratives, personal stories, and spiritual expressions are reliable and valid forms of authored research, both as researched reality and methods to understand and relate to it.
- Research is part of everyday life; it is never static or finished; it speaks everybody’s language; it is situated in the present, supported by the past, and it contemplates the future.
- No mediators or cultural translators are needed to interpret or validate local knowledge, actions, and reflections.

PRINCIPLE IV: INTER-RELATIONALITY
Research is historically-situated, geo-politically positioned, relational, and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is generated.

- Research takes place within the complex web of interconnected relationships and encompasses all stages of life.
- All knowledge and all practice are situated within all relations; there is no objective knowledge or neutral praxis.
- There is always an historical context to Indigenous knowledge and praxis, which are inseparably linked to Indigenous identity and all its interrelated socio-political expressions.
COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RESEARCH

INTER-RELATIONALITY
Positioned action; Praxis always in context and relations

ACCESS
All life manifestations valid in research; findings understood by all

UTILITY
Relevant vision; reflection on useful actions

SELF-VOICING
Decolonized, authored knowledge and practice

USAI MODEL
KNOWLEDGE GENERATION AND RESEARCH SPACES

USAI research recognizes the value of forging alliances with informed and respectful parties who are willing to work for the advancement of urban Aboriginal communities.

Being situated within interconnected relationships, USAI creates contextualized research spaces (procedures), where different types of research alliances are fostered to generate specific types of knowledge, depending on the on-going interactions and a type of the research project. We acknowledge that many research endeavors may benefit from creative fusions, inventive “assemblages of thought”, and inspired blends of ideas. These, however, must be rooted in genuine respect and careful balance of authority where invited allies never assume positions of “benefactors” or “patrons” of a shared research project. Our rules of research conduct prescribe how the community-driven projects are to be developed and frame how we work with our allies within the following research spaces:

COMMUNITY RESEARCH SPACE
- Within this research space, a community/OFIFC conducts a self-designed and self-executed methodical inquiry that is entirely community-based and driven, as opposed to “community-placed”.
- Partnerships may be forged to secure funding or in-kind contributions, or to create advisory capacities to inform political processes, with the partners’ full recognition and acceptance of research principles, procedures, and ethics of USAI research. There is no expectation that partners share identical objectives.
- Any knowledge generated through community self-voiced research belongs to the community and its inherent integrity is fully recognized and protected. It does not have to be validated by comparative research or deconstructed with analytical tools. It represents the community reality “as-it-is”.

SCENARIO

TYPE OF PROJECT: The OFIFC/Friendship Centre community initiates a methodical review to categorize and assess the range of current services provided by shelters to homeless Aboriginal women in urban centres.

NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP: Funded by the federal government; other governments signal their interest in generated knowledge. There are no mutually defined objectives.

AUTHORSHIP OF KNOWLEDGE: The OFIFC/Friendship Centre community authors the generated knowledge. The funding partner may use the knowledge that has been generated to inform the development of its policies and programs, but must properly recognizing the authorship.
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH SPACE

- Within this research space, there is an opportunity for a direct educational interaction/relation between a knowledge holder and a knowledge seeker, who may or may not be a member of the community, and may or may not be conducting a methodical inquiry.
- Both the knowledge holder and the knowledge seeker agree to cooperate, working or acting together as researchers but there is no expectation that they share identical objectives.
- There is recognition that this interaction generates a very specific type of knowledge situated in the interaction itself. This type of knowledge represents the shared reality that now includes the knowledge seeker.
- Both the purpose of the interaction and the type of knowledge being sought must be explicitly stated, and the potential biases of the knowledge seeker addressed in a principled way.
- The knowledge holder is the sole author of the narrative/story/facts being shared; every effort must be made to recognize that the knowledge holder and the knowledge seeker share the situated, co-produced knowledge that comes from the relation, the act of sharing, and exchanging ideas.

SCENARIO

TYPE OF PROJECT: A PhD candidate approaches the OFIFC/Friendship Centres to learn about the meaning of medicines.

NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP: The student is directed to local Elders who agree to share the knowledge, following appropriate knowledge-seeking procedures. The student learns about the medicines; the Elders learn about how their knowledge enriches, contributes, and/or changes the student’s understanding of Aboriginal cultures.

AUTHORSHIP OF KNOWLEDGE: Elders author the knowledge about the medicines and all their relations. They decide if/how they want to share it and how the knowledge can be used to inform the student’s project. Elders and the student share and co-author the knowledge generated through the interaction. If the student wants to publish the record of the interaction, s/he needs to vet her/his account through the Elders.
Within this research space, researchers not identified with any given community may be invited to share their expertise and work together with local researchers and/or the OFIFC on a project that is community-driven.

Invited ally researchers will have to fully adhere to the research principles, procedures, and ethics, and commit to a long-term alliance with a mutually-shared goal to reach an identical objective that directly benefit urban Aboriginal communities.

The potential biases of ally researchers and their own research interests must be clearly stated and addressed in a principled, self-reflexive way.

A written agreement is to be developed that clearly specifies the authorship of generated knowledge and particular situations/context in which it may or may not be disseminated.

It is the sole responsibility of ally researchers to ensure that research institutions with which they are affiliated understand and accept the principles, procedures, and ethics of USAI research.

Ally researchers may also approach the OFIFC/Friendship Centres to invite them to participate in a project. All the above mentioned rules apply to that scenario.

NOTE:
Local communities may design other research spaces, appropriate in any given research context and governed by the USAI principles
ORIENTATION TO RESEARCH

USAI research stresses that it is entirely up to communities to choose methods of inquiry most appropriate in any given research context. We call it an “orientation to research” instead of a “methodology”.

We note that, at times, this approach may challenge mainstream research methodologies where the research agenda, methods and instruments, types of analysis and ways of evaluation are imposed by academic conventions. It does not mean, however, that USAI categorically excludes the use of “academically conventional” methods, if a community deems them as appropriate for the research context.

USAI recognizes all manifestations of community life as both appropriate spheres of research and valid methods to address research questions.

We understand that the realities of urban Aboriginal communities are rooted in various interactions, constantly moving through various circles of life, where everything is interrelated, interconnected and open-ended so that transformation and change are expected and welcome.

Our orientation to research calls for the use of practices that are effective in generating concrete knowledge in such interrelated and vibrant social environments; not just those that are efficient in data gathering.

Research into spiritual meanings held by a community calls for practices respectful of those meanings (shared analysis of symbols, cultural imagery, indirect mode of communication, story-telling, visualization, etc.). Research into effects of assimilation on youth needs to speak to youth’s emotions and feelings (learning by doing, community art and media, photo-voice, concept mapping).

Whatever practices are chosen as appropriate for community-driven projects, the most important feature is “their ‘hands-on’ nature . . . to enable people to generate information and share knowledge on their own terms using their own symbols, language or art form” (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, 2007:17).

Practices that USAI research supports as appropriate in community-driven Indigenous research are contextual, not necessarily standardized, never static, always making sense to community members involved in a research project, intuitively “right”, and reflecting the richness of relationships.

All practices recognize that in Aboriginal communities people are “sophisticated in the stories”, or as Gardner (1995:11-14) says, “to put it simply, one is communicating with experts . . .(who) come equipped with many stories that have already been told and retold”.

USAI research does not “collect” stories or facts. Instead, its practitioners respectfully listen and learn using research practices that are most effective in grasping how the stories, experiences, voices, symbols, facts and actions embody community’s priorities, identities, strengths, and aspirations.
In the course of USAI research process, just as in all types of action research, communities and individuals inevitably become self-reflexive and self-critical, as they deliberately observe their own reality to formulate research questions, choose appropriate practices to generate knowledge, and reflect again to understand what this knowledge tells them about their future actions. They learn to see critically through subjectivity that is inherent in any inquiry. They become skilled in articulating their perspectives. They master their self-awareness of possible biases.

Specific to Indigenous research and to the USAI Research Framework is the recognition that just as the research orientation incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, any evaluation of research or an attempt to develop measures and indicators must be self-reflexive, highly participatory, respectful of and rooted in relationships, wholistic, and closely tied to appropriate teachings.

As USAI research is conducted within the intricate web of relationships, connections, interactions and stories, we recognize that the most challenging aspect of evaluation is that what is to be “evaluated” and reported on are those very relationships, those very connections, those interactions, and those stories. USAI does not expect or envision consensus on how these be evaluated. The ultimate assessment of their “validity and reliability” is in the hands of the community and we emphasize that no translation, interpretation, or validation is needed for those “data” to declare them accurate and authentic from any research perspective.

Still, we recognize that there are check-points that communities can identify and reflect upon while moving through the research process. The training package for USAI practitioners includes an Evaluation Circle tool to support the communities in establishing where they are in the process and whether the goals of research are being realized, as well as suggestions on how to frame and phrase the generated knowledge so it preserves its independence, without the need to constantly re-affirm itself and re-claim legitimacy vis-à-vis mainstream and often competing types of knowledge.
USAI research is envisioned as a culturally-appropriate, methodical and practical inquiry in the service of urban Aboriginal communities, conducted by those very communities so that they can nurture their capacity to self-actualize and realize only those futures that they themselves conceive.

We do hope, however, that it will also become a mechanism which will help shift the balance of authority, contributing to a systemic change in how Indigenous knowledge and praxis are positioned vis-à-vis other knowledge systems – culturally, intellectually, historically, and politically.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


