



Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal Women



FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC INC.
QUEBEC NATIVE WOMEN INC.

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Website: <http://www.faq-qnw.org>

Prepared by: Suzy Basile¹

In collaboration with: France Robertson, QNW

English translation: Alpha traduction et interprétation Inc.

Graphic Design: Maria Inostroza

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¹ This document was developed in Fall 2011 and Winter 2012, in French by Suzy Basile, a doctoral student in environmental science at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT). Ms. Basile is originally from the Atikamekw community of Wemotaci. She has been involved in several different studies and publications on the subject of research ethics with Aboriginal peoples and especially Aboriginal women.

Introduction

Quebec Native Women (QNW), founded in 1974, is a non-profit association that works on behalf of all women from all First Nations in Québec, whether they live in communities or in the urban environment. The organization was created to counter the discrimination against Aboriginal women and their families that was instituted by the Indian Act and to demand equality between women and men. Its principal mission is to support the efforts of Aboriginal women to improve their own living conditions and those of their families. The main issues that fall within its purview are health, promotion of non-violence, justice and youth.

QNW also supports Aboriginal women in their quest for independence and helps them take charge of their own interests. The development of the “Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal Women” is part of this process. With the creation of this tool, QNW hopes to promote research that is respectful of its subjects, help establish a rigorous process and ensure that research findings are useful to Aboriginal women. Over the last few years, QNW has participated in a number of research projects with academic and government partners to produce knowledge that can be used to document the many issues under its responsibility. QNW recognizes the importance of taking an active part in studies that have the potential to help it defend the interests of Aboriginal women and their families, and to this end, it sits on a number of research, research monitoring and research management committees (e.g., Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) – Domestic violence and Aboriginal women in Quebec: Environmental scan and interventions).

These research guidelines have been prepared for Aboriginal women, QNW members and employees, decision-makers and managers in the Aboriginal communities, and researchers interested in examining issues related to Aboriginal women. Their purpose is to help manage the many research proposals received and make informed decisions on whether or not to become involved in those projects. The guidelines also outline an approach that will help establish a transparent, equal and mutually respectful relationship between the researchers and the Aboriginal women concerned.

This document describes the context of research involving Aboriginal peoples in general and Aboriginal women in particular. It also presents a brief overview of existing tools and sets out a number of principles (e.g., OCAP: ownership, control, access and possession of information) and methods (research steps and methodologies) to be applied. Lastly, it presents a checklist for use in the analysis of proposed projects and a bibliography that is intended to be both inclusive and open-ended.

Aboriginal Women and Research

Research involving Aboriginal peoples is changing significantly in Canada. No longer simply the “subjects” of research, Aboriginal peoples are becoming increasingly involved as “partners,” thanks in no small part to their activism. Aboriginal women, long ignored in decision-making processes, need a specific approach (Basile, 2011, 2012; Desbiens, 2010). From the very first contact with Europeans, Aboriginal peoples were the subject of numerous studies and documents that were subsequently used to establish colonial policies and projects. Advances in scientific thought, the expansion of commerce, and systematic attempts to colonize Aboriginal peoples since the 16th century affected European relations with the First Nations peoples and established the basis of so-called scientific research (AFNQL, 2005; Smith, 1999). Unlike Aboriginal peoples, who have a strong oral tradition for transmitting knowledge and instilling learning (a role that fell largely to women), the first European explorers and Euro-Canadians had a very strong written tradition, long dominated by men. Furthermore, approaches to understanding the world around them differ considerably between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals (Atran and Medin, 2008).

The recent history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and especially of Aboriginal women, has been marked by assimilation policies carried out through the application of the Indian Act. The struggle of Aboriginal women against colonial domination finally succeeded in changing a few discriminatory articles of the Indian Act (in 1985 and in 2010) without, however, fully resolving the situation². Since then, Aboriginal women have reappropriated spaces that had become “traditionally” male (under colonialism) such as politics (mainly at the community and national levels). They have also started to make their voices heard in the many international fora (Labrecque, 2011). In this respect, the activism of Aboriginal women on the international front, in particular with regard to the protection of the environment and Aboriginal knowledge, has spurred progress and led to the signature of a number of agreements. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Aboriginal Peoples is one good example³.

A number of challenges face Aboriginal peoples and especially women in terms of the protection of Aboriginal knowledge (Posey and Duffield, 1996). Aboriginal women are the keepers of specific knowledge (e.g., the use of medicinal plants, properties of berries, water management, crafts, etc.) and they need equal representation in all discussions and decisions that deal with the protection of that knowledge (McGregor, 2008). In a study on traditional knowledge and water protection conducted by researcher Anishinaabe Deborah McGregor, an Aboriginal

woman participant stated: "Without the equal input of women, the Elders were able to only give half of the knowledge available" (McGregor, 2008, p. 30). This quote clearly reflects the need to ensure the fair contribution of Aboriginal women to the study and highlights the fact that their knowledge is essential to a holistic vision of the world and of research. Taking this knowledge into account will contribute to the reappropriation of knowledge and the decolonization of research (Gentelet, 2009; Smith, 1999).

All research projects that involve or concern issues related to Aboriginal peoples, including questions linked to gender and the experience of Aboriginal women, must take into account certain specific aspects of the cultural context (Asselin and Basile, 2012; SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR, 2010) which differs from one Aboriginal group to another. It is above all important to remember that Aboriginal women have long been ignored by research, which generally concentrates on men and then generalizes to women. Furthermore, several studies conducted by Aboriginal women have been rejected by other researchers because they were considered to be "subjective" (Green, 1993; LaRocque, 1996). At times, Western feminist models were also imposed on research in the Aboriginal context, leading to the misinterpretation of the situation of Aboriginal women and gender relations (Markstrom, 2008).

Finally, active involvement of Aboriginal women from the beginning of any research project is necessary to ensure their meaningful and respectful participation and the rigorous application of ethics rules. The responsibility for participating must be shared by the researchers and the Aboriginal women themselves.

2 See the history section on the Québec Native Women website at <http://www.faq-qnw.org> for more details on the stages of the political, legal and social struggle waged by the Aboriginal women of Quebec

3 The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Aboriginal Peoples was officially adopted by the United Nations on September 13, 2007, and signed by the Canadian government three years later, in November 2010.

Some Existing Tools

A number of documents (guidelines and protocols) have been developed in Canada by Aboriginal organizations and communities and by non-Aboriginal governments and academic associations. The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), published in 1996, was the first of these documents to include research guidelines, which were subsequently applied extensively by universities and by Aboriginal peoples themselves to develop research management tools. Some of the tools that were instrumental in the creation of these guidelines deserve particular attention.

1) The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) suggests the use of a ***culturally relevant gender-based comparative analysis***, which it regards as a natural and inherent way of perceiving and interpreting information (NWAC, 2011: 3). Unlike other types of gender-based analysis, this particular approach recommends that the impacts of colonization be included in the research parameters. The document notes that Aboriginal women have unique experiences and perspectives and should play a major role in both policy-making and decision-making. The four principles proposed to guide the implementation of this approach are as follows: 1) revitalization of the value of Aboriginal women in society, 2) respect for Aboriginal cultures and the balance between the elements of the circle of life (including women and men), 3) compliance with the Creator's laws and other laws (Aboriginal law, inherent rights, the Constitution and international law), and 4) respect for cultural diversity and the history of Aboriginal women (NWAC, 2011: 5).

2) **Chapter 9** of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) (first published in 1998 and updated in 2010 following extensive consultations in Aboriginal communities) addresses the subject of research involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada. Although it does reveal significant progress since the first version of the TCPS, the new chapter does not resolve all the problems that are likely to arise between researchers and the Aboriginal community. It does, however, offer some interesting guidelines, such as the requirement to comply with Aboriginal protocols where they exist, as

well as the inclusion of OCAP principles⁴ in research agreements, and clarification of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal partners' expectations. Chapter 9 of the TCPS also proposes conditions for research in Aboriginal and urban settings. Section 4.2 of the new document also stipulates that research should not systematically exclude women.

3) In 2005, the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador (AFNQL) prepared and adopted a **Research Protocol** at the request of and for use by First Nations communities and researchers. One of the goals of this document is to help communities to create a better framework for research activities, gain a better understanding of the research issues that involve them, fully participate in all stages of the research, and above all take full control over the research process. The protocol is currently being reviewed by a committee of experts, and the new edition, to be published in the fall of 2012, will suggest the use, when required, of a research approach designed to address the specific needs and distinctive realities of Aboriginal women. The protocol may also refer research partners to other tools that offer guidelines for research involving Aboriginal women.

4 OCAP: Ownership, control, access and possession of the information.

Principles of Research Involving Aboriginal Women

Among the many research principles that should be applied in research involving Aboriginal peoples, which are inspired by the words of our ancestors and have been amply described in the literature and by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations alike, there are several that should be applied specifically in the context of Aboriginal women in all its varied forms.

The **OCAP principles** (ownership, control, access and possession of research information) were first proposed by a Canadian First Nations organization (National Aboriginal Health Organization) in 1998 (NAHO, 2007) and should now be regarded as the basic principle underlying all research involving Aboriginal peoples and, by extension, Aboriginal women. In addition, the following principles, which apply to Aboriginal research in general, are considered here as part of a specific approach for Aboriginal women.

- 1) Include women in **initial contacts** made before starting the research, to ask permission from the Aboriginal authorities or organizations concerned, taking into account the community, Nation, age and special status of elders.
- 2) Hold **extensive consultations** with the community or organization concerned, focusing in particular on the women by arranging meetings specifically for them, at times and in locations conducive to discussion (e.g., locally where possible). The consultations should lead to informed, individual and collective consent and a research protocol that is respectful of the local women's culture.
- 3) Involve Aboriginal women in the task of **defining the research subject**, choosing the methodology and preparing the materials (e.g., questionnaire), and in all other steps of the research. If the women so request, Aboriginal languages should be used in priority. Confidentiality must be guaranteed for both data collection and analysis.
- 4) Base the study on **local needs and priorities** identified by the women themselves. The study should include strategies to transfer knowledge and provide training so that the women in question are able to take part in the research process and even initiate other research activities for the good of their community.
- 5) Consider **Aboriginal knowledge** (e.g., traditional ecological knowledge) on the same footing as Western scientific knowledge. Aboriginal knowledge should be regarded as both unique and valid, with its own purposes and validation pro-

cesses. Special attention should be paid to knowledge that is specific to Aboriginal women (e.g., on health, diet and social structure), which was long considered to be less prestigious than and inferior to men's knowledge.

6) Choose a research methodology that respects the conditions prescribed by the Aboriginal community, taking into account the values and knowledge of Aboriginal women.

7) Restore the **voice of Aboriginal women**, to bring balance back to the discourse of society in general as well as the discourse of the community, in order to update the principles identified here.

8) Respect the **holistic vision** that is common to most of the world's Aboriginal peoples and that encompasses all the elements of the Earth and the Cosmos, including the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional components of humans, which are considered to be related and interdependent. This approach is generally taught by Aboriginal women to each new generation.

9) Establish **reciprocity** in all relationships with Aboriginal peoples. The researchers should give something in return (beyond a financial contribution) for the knowledge they obtain from the Aboriginal women who take part in their study. The details should be identified in collaboration with the women or the organization involved in the research.

10) **Communicate the findings** to the women concerned and the benefits for the Aboriginal group or community. Prior to publication, the interpretation of the findings should be validated with the participants and the organization responsible for monitoring the research⁵.

11) Uphold the **basic values** of respect, trust, knowledge, balance, fairness and decision-making power throughout the entire research process. These values must be applied at all times, both during and after the study.

12) Adopt an inclusive attitude and approach, and maintain an **ongoing dialogue** and an effective and sincere partnership between the researchers and the Aboriginal women.

Finally, the importance of the "post-research" period must not be forgotten, as the connections forged between the researcher and the community are at least as vital as the research itself (Lévesque, 2009).

⁵ This was one of the criticisms previously levelled at researchers and was a factor in the identification of new ethical research rules. See Bull, J. R. (2010). Research with Aboriginal Peoples: Authentic Relationships as a Precursor to Ethical Research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 5 (4), 13-22; Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Dudedin and London: Zed Books Ltd. and University of Otago Press.

Research Conditions

There is no single “right” way to conduct research. A research methodology suited to the needs and interests of Aboriginal women must be developed. Aboriginal authors have proposed a variety of research methods (Absolon, 2011; Dumont, 2005; Green, 2007; Jiménez Estrada, 2005; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) inspired by Aboriginal traditions and philosophies, such as “talking circles,” “tree of life,” the “four directions” and the prophecy of the “seven generations.” “Two Row Wampum” is also proposed to illustrate the principles of research partnerships between people of different cultures (Stevenson, 2010), as is the use of “life stories” (narrative inquiry) which is recommended to allow the required space for the individual situations and shared history of the research participants (McGregor, Bayha and Simmons, 2010). It is also possible to use a combination of Aboriginal and Western principles and methodologies to meet the requirements of ethical and rigorous research (Loppie, 2007) and respond to the needs expressed by the Aboriginal women (Dion Stout and Kipling, 1998; McDonald, 2004).

Among the various research methods, participatory action research is preferred in Aboriginal research largely because it establishes close cooperation between the researchers and the people related to the research topic (AFNQL, 2005). It allows the study participants to examine their own realities, formulate research questions and apply the results to their own lives or to their community – in short, to both leverage and develop their own expertise. Participatory action research encourages:

- Reciprocal education of the study partners
- Implementation of actions, solutions and corrective measures
- Emergence of social change
- Sharing of knowledge and expertise in a respectful relationship, from equal to equal
- Sharing of responsibilities, costs and benefits leading to satisfactory results

Participatory action research requires the real, meaningful participation of Aboriginal women in the development and execution of a research project. It is also suggested that a feminist approach be adopted in order to: 1) guarantee full participation of women, 2) focus on their experiences, and 3) encourage awareness of the use of “masculinist” conceptions of knowledge, if applicable (Rose, 2001).

Research that is ethical and respectful of the standards established by Aboriginal women (through a research ethics committee, for example) should include the following steps before, during and after the study:

- A. Examine materials from the oral tradition of the Aboriginal women in question (authorized recordings of interviews, videos of gatherings, documentaries, meeting minutes, etc.)
- B. Review existing literature about Aboriginal women (articles, books, research reports, publications by QNW and other Aboriginal organizations)
- C. Study local research protocols (if any) and other existing Aboriginal research protocols
- D. Hold an initial meeting between the parties involved in the research (researchers, governing councils, band councils, elders and women’s committees)
- E. Work together to jointly develop the subject, purpose and objectives of the research
- F. Acquire an ethics certificate (issued by the ethics committee of the research institute)
- G. Work together to jointly develop a methodology (blend of Aboriginal and Western data collection methods) appropriate to the research topic and context
- H. Identify intellectual property rights (who owns the life stories, quotes, personal information, and other traditional knowledge gathered through data collection)
- I. Sign an agreement protocol with the research partners (Quebec Native Women, women’s committee and researcher(s)) that guarantees the articles listed above
- J. Collect the data (interviews, talking circles, etc.)
- K. Translate and interpret the content into the researchers’ language of use (if the data was collected in one or more Aboriginal languages)
- L. Process and analyze the data (involve Aboriginal women in this crucial part of the research)

- M. Interpret and validate the results with Aboriginal organizations and/or Aboriginal women
- N. Sign an agreement for the publication and communication of the research results
- O. Write and prepare the publication communications materials for the research (with feedback from Aboriginal organizations and/or Aboriginal women)
- P. Develop education and communications tools (such as PowerPoint presentations, summaries and brochures, radio clips, videos, etc.)
- Q. Translate and interpret the results or highlights in the relevant Aboriginal language(s)
- R. Recognize the contributions of the organizations and individuals involved in the research report and secondary publications (articles)
- S. Evaluate the negative and positive impacts of the research
- T. Have the results used by Aboriginal organizations and/or Aboriginal women

Finally, all partners of a research project must be flexible, open and patient with regard to time management and unexpected events that may occur during the study. The creation of research management tools (monitoring committee, calendar of operations, data collection activities) must be considered to be teamwork. An ongoing evaluation of the research process will identify potential difficulties and allow for the adjustments required for the successful completion of the study.

Appendix I – Checklist

A number of basic questions should be asked to properly assess the quality of a research project involving Aboriginal women. The answers will help determine whether to support a project submitted to Quebec Native Women (inspired by NAHO, 2007).

1. Is the research subject relevant and useful for Aboriginal women, their families and their communities?

Yes No

Subject: _____

How is it relevant? _____

2. Who are the researchers who submitted this research proposal and what are their affiliations? _____

3. Do the researchers have significant research experience in the Aboriginal setting?

Yes No

What are their references? _____

4. Is their approach appropriate?

Official letter Yes No

Request for initial meeting Yes No

Lay terminology Yes No

Time given to respond Yes No

5. Does the proposed research project offer terms that uphold the OCAP principles (ownership, control, access and possession of data)?

Yes No

If not, what is missing? _____

6. What benefits or impacts could the research have on women's quality of life in the short, medium or long term? _____

7. To your knowledge, has a similar project already been undertaken with regard to Aboriginal women?

Yes No

If so, was your organization or community satisfied with the process?

8. Are Aboriginal women expected to take part in the important stages of the research project?

- Project planning and design (subject and research question)
- Search of bibliographic and oral sources
- Selection of research methodology
- Development of questionnaire and consent form
- Data collection (interviews, group meetings)
- Analysis and interpretation of data
- Validation of content of final report
- Terms of result publication (to Aboriginal women first)

Other: _____

9. What is the practical involvement of Aboriginal women in the research project?

- Researchers, co-researchers or research assistants
- Interviewers
- Interpreters
- Resource people (key informers)
- Participants
- Member of research monitoring committee

Other: _____

10. What are the potential benefits of the proposed research project for Aboriginal women, their families and their communities?

- Direct economic benefits for the members of your community (e.g., salary for participants and other people, see question 10)
- Indirect individual and collective economic benefit (e.g., research team that stays in your community, room rental, restaurants, etc.)
- The principal investigator is offering training to research employees and involving community members in the development of the approach and the selection of the research method.
- The research results will help the community members to make informed decisions and to document applications for funding and causes to defend.
- The research results may help lead to political, social, environmental, economic and cultural change.

Other: _____

11. What are the potential risks or harm of the proposed research project for Aboriginal women, their families and their communities?

- The research project may pose a risk to the privacy and personal information of the community members.
- The proposed research topic may upset some members of the community.
- The proposed research project conflicts with the cultural values of the community or does not respect local morals and beliefs.
- The project involves a lot of (unpaid) time and energy from community members.
- The principal investigator does not intend to take into account the conditions set by community members.
- The principal investigator has not proposed any means of consulting with the members of the community on the way the study will be run or of validating the research results with them.

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