Msit No'kmaq:MAQ:
An Exploration of Positionality and Identity in Indigenous Research.

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Abstract:

In this paper I explore the Mi'kmaq words Mist No'kmaq, which can be translated as 'all my relations'. Msit No'kmaq is not only at the center of who I am as a person, but also who I am becoming as a researcher. Reflecting on how to honor all my relations within research, has allowed me to explore my beliefs about research, thereby developing a clear understanding of the purpose and intentions of engaging in Indigenous research. Rather than seeing researchers as insiders or outsiders within the context of Indigenous communities, I argue that it is important to engage in reflexive processes that make visible a researcher's positionality and who they are and are becoming.

Key words: Identity, positionality, Indigenous research, relations, relational accountability

Msit No'kmaq, is a Mi'kmaq phrase that most closely translates as 'all my relations'. As a Mi'kmaw person, I[1] recognize that this is not a simple phrase, but rather a prayer, a teaching that holds great meaning. Msit No'kmaq holds me accountable to address who I am and how my Indigeneity impacts how I experience the world. I am called to attend to all my relations. My relations include the universe, living and non-living things, and my community. Msit No'kmaq holds an understanding that Indigenous peoples and their understanding of relations are important within research. For Indigenous peoples, the word *research* and the relationships associated with it has often been connected to colonial trauma and acknowledged as something 'dirty' (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). As a Mi'kmaw woman, I grew up in Newfoundland, a province in Canada. I hold close connections in my community, which shape who I am and

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[1] 'I' throughout this paper refers to Erica Samms Hurley, the first author. While Dr. Margot Jackson co-authored the paper, the focus was not on her experiences.

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am becoming. In this paper, I explore researchers' positionality, which is reflected in the ideas of being an insider/outsider. Rather than seeing this as being dichotomous, I emphasise the importance of exploring who I am within the space created by research.

Indigenous peoples have endured non-Indigenous people completing research *on* them, rather than in collaboration *with* them (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC] Social Sciences, & Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2018). The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) final report calls on all Canadians and various institutions to work towards true reconciliation (TRC, 2015) and to engage in research *with* Indigenous peoples and communities. The report points to the importance of building the capacity of Indigenous communities and peoples to undertake and lead their own research programs.

The TRC report along with the most recent Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans chapter 9 guidelines reflects historical changes and ethical requirements placed on researchers when engaging in Indigenous research (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2018; Riddell, Salamanca, Pepler, Cardinal, & McIvor, 2017). While ethical guidelines are critical, they are not enough. In response to this gap, the Government of Canada (2019) released a new set of directions aimed at strengthening Indigenous research capacity. The four key strategies include: prioritizing Indigenous peoples research; enhancing funding; championing Indigenous leadership; and building relationships. This means that research with Indigenous peoples requires more than collaboration. There is a need for researchers to recognize communities are central to any research and that they can become co-researchers. Indigenous peoples are requesting that researchers are clear in their intentions, which means valuing and respecting Indigenous knowledge held in the community. Valuing and engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing is

essential to achieve meaningful and rigorous research outcomes (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). Some Indigenous researchers, such as Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 2008), take the position that Indigenous peoples are inherently researchers. Her stance is related to the concept of Indigenous consciousness, in which the nature of Indigenous awareness, thought, knowledge and conceptualization is part of all aspects of seeing, feeling, knowing, and doing. This includes being mindful of the historical and political constructs that have influenced Indigenous identities, Indigenous thinking, Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous ways of being (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Kwame (2017) and other Indigenous researchers counter this belief and state that non-Indigenous researchers can complete authentic and valid Indigenous research, even if they come from an alternate consciousness. While Tuhiwai Smith and Kwame take different positions both raise questions of identity and intentions. These questions are critical as I consider who I am and the research I will undertake.

Questions of identity are important to raise throughout the research. While identity is often defined as the personality or characteristics of an individual (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020), identity also speaks to who people are and are becoming; identities are not static or fixed. Questions of identity call me as a researcher to make visible my position in relation to the research I engage in. This understanding of positionality reflects the social, historical, cultural and political contexts that influence one's identity, and one's understanding and outlook (D'Silva, Smith, Della, & Potter, 2016). Msit No'kmaq is a reminder that my identity is shaped by experiences beyond physical encounters. Within academic settings I have consistently struggled to have my Indigenous perspective heard.

Researchers have a long tradition of differentiating their positions from an insider or outside perspective - whereby non-Indigenous people who engage in Indigenous research are most often positioned as outsiders. How one is

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positioned affects the research and great care must be taken to account for one's position during all phases of the research; yet I argue that the dichotomous position as either/or does not make visible the complexity in working with Indigenous communities and peoples. It is important to recognize that all researchers must engage with complexities inherent in the negotiations of ongoing historical relationships with communities and individuals, while simultaneously learning the cultural context and history of the community. In this way, the complex dichotomous positioning of insider/outsider requires an ongoing wakefulness to who one is.

As I begin to explore my own positionality, I considered my relations within multiple constructs. These constructs are influenced by my understanding of Msit No'kmaq. I am a Mi'kmaw women who is culturally connected to community from conception. The relations with my community are shaped by my role as a woman, daughter, granddaughter, nurse educator, and health care provider. In this paper I will further explore my positionality and identity. Through my exploration I will explore the need for researchers to move away from words that define fixed positions, to actual actions when engaged in research with Indigenous communities. For me, this call to action is embedded in Msit No'kmaq, which emphasizes ethical and relational ways of being, knowing and acting with, for and in Indigenous communities.

Paradigms and Positioning

Research most often begins with the formation of a research idea or question; a sense of wonder about a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon is frequently foregrounded. Yet, it is equally important to explore one's identity and position in relation to the proposed research or phenomenon under study. It is important to examine ones' understanding of the nature of thoughts, the nature of reality, how knowledge is gained and also the worth of knowledge through reflexive and introspective processes (Wilson,

2008). Often it is an individual lived experience that shapes the reasons why one is interested in doing research (Brooks, te Riele & Maguire, 2014), or work with particular populations or communities. This interest also reflects identities. While it is important to engage in this reflexive process at the outset of any study, it is also necessary to return to this throughout all phases of the research (Pitard, 2017). In this way, researchers gain insights and awareness in how the research changed their experiences and ultimately who they are and are becoming. Each study calls us to engage in new experiences and calls forth knowledge. Many researchers and scholars assert that there are interconnections between epistemology, ontology, methodology and axiology (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Who one is, including one's intentions, and how one is positioned shapes decisions and actions, including how to collect, analyze, interpret, and disseminate data (Brooks et al., 2014).

Moffat (2016) stated that researchers must define and redefine themselves, while acknowledging the cultural and societal underpinnings that create their worldview; a researcher can never fully understand another worldview or reality, neither can this understanding be fixed. While it is necessary to position oneself, there is also recurring pressure within professionalized bodies such as nursing and medicine to identify with dominant paradigms that have shaped academic institutions. Some of the dominant paradigms that have been prevalent include positivism and postmodernism (Blackstone, 2014). These dominant paradigms reflect the culture, history, and philosophies of Western thought and often do not give voice to other cultures, including Indigenous peoples (Elabor-Idemudia, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). This dichotomize tension between Western paradigms and Indigenous worldviews and thoughts on knowledge has called Indigenous researchers to develop research approaches that are reflective of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Rather than starting with the identification of a research paradigm, it is important for researchers to contemplate their

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identity, position and consciousness (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002; Wills, 2007). As an Indigenous researcher, I consistently struggle within academic institutions that reflect Western ways of being, as they do not account for the relational respect that is part of Indigenous peoples' original law. Few spaces exist for me as an Indigenous researcher to speak against the imposition of Western paradigms and to honour Msit No'kmaq in ways that reflect my knowledge and experience as a Mi'kmaw woman. This lack of reflective spaces that value diverse ways of knowing can be harmful. I embody Msit No'kmaq, which is visible in my spirituality and my emphasis on relational inquiry. It is important to attend to diverse ways of knowing and to create spaces that openly welcome differences, rather than scribe positions.

Many times over, research is divided into categories of qualitative or quantitative methodologies, whereby qualitative research encourages reflexivity. This division does little to challenge the fundamentally Western assumptions of knowledge and experience. For example, qualitative methodologies are often used to give voice to Indigenous peoples, yet the methodologies chosen are often not culturally appropriate when engaging with Indigenous Peoples (Wright, Wahoush, Ballantyne, Gabel & Jack, 2016). Alasuutari (2000) states that research with Indigenous peoples is often categorized with 'other' procedures and methodologies within the qualitative realm because this has been convenient. The tensions I have experienced make me wonder what happens when the worldview of the researcher does not fit into either qualitative or quantitative paradigms? What if a researchers' worldview raises serious questions about existing paradigms, paradigms that do not reflect who Indigenous peoples are?

Positioning Identity to Examine Indigenous Methodology

Moving away from a Western construct of research, in order to produce and legitimize Indigenous knowledge and ways of being is

important (Akena, 2012). As a Mi'kmaw woman, my identity and positionality offers insight and context to my thinking. I purposefully position myself as an Indigenous person and self-identify as a culturally connected Mi'kmaw woman who is a daughter, granddaughter, mother, nurse, educator and researcher to disrupt common notions of forefronting the phenomenon under study. It is from this understanding that I situate my identity but also my positional stance that inform the intent of conducting Indigenous research. I share the beliefs of Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Wilson (2001) who recognize that as part of Indigenous research methodologies, researchers need to break free from Western influences.

It is critical to note that Indigenous communities and peoples are not universal in their core beliefs and values. While there exist some generalizable or common threads (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008) it is important to understand that communities also have specific and uniquely individualized beliefs and values regarding knowledge, experiences, and ways of being and relating (Kovach, 2010). Therefore, Indigenous research must reflect the unique experiences of the communities and peoples who are part of any inquiry.

Frideres (2008) states that there is no pan-Indian (Indigenous) identity and that each community holds different identities. There is an interactive and iterative process between the community and individuals that creates identity and shapes values and beliefs. Frideres further acknowledges that communities do not have be identified by their geographic location, but can include communities that are connected through shared cultural beliefs. Therefore, a tenet of Indigenous research methodology is that inquiry must allow for fluidity of positions (Burnette, Howard, Butcher, & Rand, 2014). Wilson (2001, 2008) states that this includes fluidity with methodological approach and methods, in order to recognize, honor and celebrate diverse relations, spiritualties and ceremonies. Kurtz (2013) stated that the academic realities associated with language, protocols, and Western methodologies creates a linear approach

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that does not allow for the change and fluidity necessary in Indigenous research. Hierarchal and linear realities of the academy specify ethical protocols, language, and Western methodologies and methods of research, which challenge and impact the research process with Indigenous communities – often they reflect a paternalistic stance. When Indigenous researchers push back against these hierarchical and linear realities, it can raise questions of rigor (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). It is important to recognize that the examination of rigor solely on the tenets of dominant Western "gold standards" can result in the continued oppression of research with Indigenous peoples (Cochran et al., 2008) and dismiss Indigenous knowledge.

Reflexivity is a vital component in Indigenous research as it encourages the researcher to question their own identity, experiences, beliefs, and ways of being, contributing to the decolonization of existing research approaches (Alasuutari, 2000; Russell-Mundine, 2012). Researchers utilizing Indigenous methodologies need to work in close collaboration with Indigenous communities, to ensure methodological approaches that will not only fit their research questions, but also the ways in which the community or peoples work and live together (Alasuutari, 2000). Here, we can see that attending to Msit No'kmaq has real consequences that shape how research unfolds.

Identity Shapes Positionality

Positionality in research is directly related to aspects of identity and includes the premise that people stand in relation to others (Berger, 2015; Greene, 2014; Mullings, 1999; Noh, 2019). Attending to and honoring identity of Indigenous peoples is important and a necessity when thinking about the historical impacts of assimilation (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). For some the close attention to identity has been linked to resilience, which helps me understand that research is not only about knowledge production, but holds a possibility to impact communities, families and peoples in good ways. Specifically, enhanced self-esteem, positive social coping abilities,

validation of knowledge systems and overall wellness has been linked to strong social connections, all of which are reflected in the concept of identity and transcend into the unfolding nature of research that attends closely to reciprocal relationships (Dockery, 2010; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Houkamau & Sibley, 2011; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

One significant aspect of research I want to attend to is the terms insider and outsider, which are primarily used within qualitative research to describe the positionality or position of the researcher. Specifically outsider refers to researchers when they are not a member of a community, population or identified group (Asselin, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Witcher, 2010). When examining research conducted by an insider verses an outsider the concept of rigor often comes under scrutiny. Whereas some researchers argue that being an insider improves rigor (Merton, 1972), others believe there is a negative impact and that it can lead to assumptions of what one knows (Merriam et al., 2001). Recognizing that a researcher is a part of the study is important when considering identity in relation to positionality (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Wilson (2008) expands this idea with his notion of relational accountability. He states that Indigenous reality is not just shaped by relationships, but rather that relationships are the reality. A question that should be considered when coming to any research is how researchers identify themselves in relation to the phenomenon under study. It is important not to make assumptions about who is or is not an outsider, it is not simply a categorical endeavor; a deeper understanding of identity both at an individual and a community level is needed. Holmes (2014) stated that positionality can change intentionally and unintentionally; yet it always reflects a relational aspect between the researcher and those who engage in the research. There is an urgency that researchers allow Indigenous voices to be heard and to place the community at the center of the research and embrace them as partners. As part of research in Indigenous communities, a researcher is

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expected to create relationships that allows them to be welcomed in the community during all aspects of the research process. It is more than this for me, and I feel the need to continuously reflect on how the relations I hold will be impacted by the research I propose and engage in.

Who a researcher is, impacts how they construct the world; who a researcher is, is shaped by their worldview and social and cultural backgrounds (Berger, 2015). It is the combination of these aspects that impact and shape all aspects of the research process and ultimately the research findings (Berger, 2015). An outsider who comes to the research with a different worldview may be unable to fully grasp the deeper meanings associated with an Indigenous perspective, thereby offering limited and in some cases incorrect findings (Doyle, Cleary, Blanchard & Hungerford, 2017; McCleland, 2011). While I have tried to provide a translation for Msit No'kmaq ('All my relations'), I recognize that this translation does not reflect the depth of meaning that this prayer holds. My knowing of Msit No'kmaq has developed over many years, through both formal and informal teachings and by being in relation with family members, knowledge keepers, and Elders. I would even further acknowledge my knowing gained from relations with the environment and spiritually.Witcher (2010) noted that being an outsider may decrease the chance of subjectivity and bias. In most case it is argued that being less familiar with the community or with the lives of research participants, results in greater objectivity. The lack of familiarity at times allows outsiders to raise questions or wonders that have not been previously considered. Yet, an insider who identifies with the community has the potential to have a profound understanding, thereby increasing the depth and breadth of the research (Greene, 2014; Muhammad et al., 2016).

I believe it is important to consider the historical relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people when thinking about researcher positionality. Issues of a lack of trust and actual or perceived power imbalances have been common when outsiders engage in research of Indigenous communities or peoples (Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). Outsider researchers can potentially overcome these power imbalances through exposing their biases, lack of knowledge and vulnerabilities to aid in building relations that allow and encourage communities to gain trust and build meaningful relationships (Greenhill & Dix, 2008). This requires that researchers be situated in a place where questions about their identity and intentions can be raised and where there is a recognition that colonization continues to affect many aspects of Indigenous research (Held, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Saini (2012) stated that outsiders who are not familiar with cultural aspects, including aspects of spirituality, may not understand their research findings within a specific context, or report research findings in ways that disregard cultural knowledge or cultural protocols. It is important to recognize that many researchers have been educated in institutions that are guided by Western paradigms of knowledge and have been trained using Western approaches to teaching. While researchers do not intend to cause harm, Western practices and beliefs intrinsically can lead to devaluing Indigenous knowledge, and inherently bias the research, and ultimately decrease rigor and validity (Cochran et al., 2008). Researchers who are considered outsiders have to consistently work against and actively resist what they have been taught in order to stay open to working with Indigenous peoples. There is a need to recognize the relational research impacts on the community and beyond. Both verbal and nonverbal language is important to consider when examining research (Greene, 2014) and requires significant insight by the researcher. Researchers must not only have the knowledge and ability to understand others, but require knowledge of the meanings of words and phrases in specific cultural, historical, and political contexts in order to understand deeper meanings (Pelzang & Hutchinson, 2018; Witcher, 2010). In communities where Indigenous languages are spoken, researchers also must make every attempt to either learn the language, or work

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with translators. This is a significant undertaking and often requires that researchers engage in long term relationships with communities. A researcher who is an insider and who is familiar with Indigenous languages spoken in the community may hold a deeper understanding, which decreases the risk of findings being misinterpreted (Witcher, 2010). Ragusa and Kime (2016) point out that oral histories and understandings have been a source of cultural identities for Indigenous peoples. Insiders may be in a position where they recognize the distinct cultural identities and are able to enhance knowledge translation activities and minimize power imbalances between researchers and participants (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Greene, 2014).

An insider who recognizes the significance of their experience and accepts the context of their positioning, might be able comprehend their responsibility as a researcher and as a person, as an extension of their relational accountability (Chilisa, 2012). Relational accountability is described by Loppie (2007) and Wilson (2001, 2008) as an Indigenous belief that knowledge is relational and not owned by any one person. An insider may be better situated to understand that Indigenous peoples are knowers who have multiple connections that not only inform what they know, but also how it can be known (Chilisa, 2012). Insiders may understand the complexity that relationships hold with all things, including: the land, rocks, trees in our physical environments, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spiritual and with ideas (Campbell, 2014; Wilson, 2008). These researchers have an understanding that expends from an individual level to a relational and holistic perspective, encompassing Indigenous beliefs and worldview. The extension to community and beyond might be more easily understood by an insider, who holds a personal sense of responsibility towards the future of the community (Doyle et al., 2017), and to the development of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Yet, without raising questions of who one is in relation regardless of insider/outside position, research will be difficult to undertake.

Conclusion

In order to represent experience, it is important to understand the ways in which the identity, position and intentions of researchers intersects with the processes of research. Thus, reflecting upon and inquiring into ones lived experience can help researchers understand their positionality and gain deeper insight while remaining focused on the relationships that are key to engaging in research alongside Indigenous peoples. Chavez (2008) and Greenhill and Dix (2008) argue that there is a possibility, that when spending considerable time with participants, that boundaries could become unclear and challenges in the research process could occur. While this is important to recognize, I would argue that the depth and significance of the research increases when boundaries are blurred. The importance is to attend to these challenges, rather than avoid them. I have argued that positionalities and identities are not fixed or frozen and hence insider and outsider positions must be viewed as fluid; a view that is supported within Indigenous research methodologies (Berger, 2015; Lavallée, 2009; Mullings, 1999; Wilson, 2001; 2008).

Situating the identity of researchers within the context of Indigenous research moves beyond positioning the researcher. It requires careful attention to the historical, social, political and relational aspects of the researcher's life, as this speaks to the Indigenous knowledge they hold. Weaving Indigenous ways of knowing into all aspects of the research not only places value on Indigenous knowledge, but also significantly changes the contributions research can make to the knowledge development within Indigenous communities. Most importantly for me is that I recognize that *Msit No'kmaq* is not only at the center of who I am as person, but also who I am becoming as a researcher. Reflecting on how to honor all my relations with my own research, has allowed me to explore my beliefs about research, thereby developing a clear understanding of the purpose and intentions of engaging in Indigenous research. It is important to me that as a researcher I honor Msit No'kmaq in my ways of being. For me this is possible

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because of the deep knowledge I hold of Msit No'kmaq and my openness, humility and thankfulness to receive the ongoing teachings from family members, knowledge keepers, Elders, the universe and spiritually.

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