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## What the Grandfathers Taught Me: Lessons for an Indian Country Researcher

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### Abstract

Native scholars face several challenges when they enter research spaces. These challenges include difficulty in engaging with the broader research community because of the social and educational urgency of tribal-focused research, discouragement from using Indigenous methodologies because they are not “widely recognized,” and resisting positivist and postpositivist methodologies that marginalize Native populations. Using an autoethnographic approach, I make meaning of how the Seven Grandfathers lessons from my childhood inform my research practice. I also discuss how these lessons give me the tools to address the challenges I experience as a Native scholar and provide a holistic approach to the process of decolonizing research.

### Keywords

Indigenous Research, Autoethnography, Native American Education

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## What the Grandfathers Taught Me: Lessons for an Indian Country Researcher

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*Native scholars face several challenges when they enter research spaces. These challenges include difficulty in engaging with the broader research community because of the social and educational urgency of tribal-focused research, discouragement from using Indigenous methodologies because they are not “widely recognized,” and resisting positivist and postpositivist methodologies that marginalize Native populations. Using an autoethnographic approach, I make meaning of how the Seven Grandfathers lessons from my childhood inform my research practice. I also discuss how these lessons give me the tools to address the challenges I experience as a Native scholar and provide a holistic approach to the process of decolonizing research. Keywords: Indigenous Research, Autoethnography, Native American Education*

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### Introduction

For as long as I could remember, a tension existed between what I learned at school and what I learned at home. In school we learned about such things as Christopher Columbus, the Mayflower, the First Thanksgiving, and manifest destiny. These were not the stories of my ancestors, although my teachers treated them as such. These stories did not align with the stories from home—of great warriors and strong medicine women, of great-grandparents who survived the government’s attempt to erase the Indian from their life, of a people connected to the earth and to each other and not to a country determined to continually destroy my people.

This tension only increased as I entered college and tried to make sense of being a Native person in a mostly White space. Introducing others to my identity meant hearing people say, “You don’t *look* like Native American,” or “How much are you?” or my favorite, when they would mention a long-lost relative who was possibly one-sixteenth Native American. I struggled to situate my identity with the educational spaces I found myself in. In college and graduate school, I was treated as a token (“We need a Native American to come do college recruitment at the Navajo nation and you’re the only one in the department.”). At home, I was treated like a sellout, my aunts and uncles and cousins wondering how I could continue to participate in a system whose treatment of Natives was profoundly negative. It was evident to me that my presence in higher education represented a statistical anomaly as every level—and it pushed me to think about how my experiences mirrored or departed from other Native American students.

Navigating the tensions of my own academic and personal experiences, coupled with a strong desire to understand how other Native students experienced school, led me to pursue my doctorate and begin my (formal) development as a Native scholar and methodologist. Within my work, I often explore the relationship between myself, the Indigenous communities I study, and the research methodologies I use—a relationship I refer to doing “Indian Country” research. Historically, “Indian Country” was a legal term used to refer to Indian reservations, Indian communities, and Indian allotments, and represented the conquest ideology generated by White people. However, the term has now evolved to represent the legal, racist, and power relationships in the history of US and Native American interactions. For me, doing “Indian Country” research means studying Indigenous peoples in the US using methods focused on

making the Indigenous experience centered, and not in comparison to the White experience in the US. Doing “Indian Country” research also means naming the effects colonialism has on the research process.

The purpose of this autoethnography is to connect my practice of conducting Indian Country research with the Indigenous teachings I learned from my aunts and uncles. I chose autoethnography because it brings together the study of self (auto) with culture (ethnography), and I am particularly interested in the culture surrounding my experiences conducting research as an Indigenous scholar, as well as the discourse between my racial identity, other Indigenous scholars, and the Western/European dominant research community. Using autoethnography to understand the connection between my research practices and Indigenous teachings is useful because it “hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural, and political concerns” (Adams & Jones, 2008, p. 374). Autoethnography is also analytically reflexive and presents a narrative presence in order to improve the theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). Lastly, using autoethnography is particularly important for Indigenous people who use their writing to explain and describe the experiences of living under colonialism (Smith, 2012).

The most important Indigenous teachings I learned from my childhood focused on the lessons of the Seven Grandfathers. I am a member of the Ojibwe, or Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians (Chippewa is the Anglican version of Ojibwe). Ojibwe tradition tells us that the Creator gave Seven Grandfathers responsibility for watching over the Earth’s people and to do this, the Seven Grandfathers presented a young boy with seven gifts, or lessons. Lesson stories are not just for elders to connect with the younger members of the tribe, lesson stories also serve as warnings to prevent generations from repeating errors made by their ancestors. For some Ojibwe, following these teachings is a means of being ethical and productive members of the community. For me, these teachings served as a framework for my research practice.

### **Literature Review**

To understand what it means to do Indian Country research means understanding how settler colonialism has profoundly affected the structure and practices of Indigenous communities, particularly within educational research. Although there are many forms of colonialism, one particular form Indigenous communities contend with is settler colonialism. Settler colonialism requires the elimination of Indigenous peoples, politics, and relationships from and with the land (Wolfe, 2006) as a structural change, not an event. Given settler colonialism “destroys to replace” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), the influence of the settler will extend far beyond just the physical appropriation of land. Settlers replace—and erase—everything about Indigenous communities. This type of replacement involves “the creation and consumption of a whole array of spaces by settler collectives that claim and transform places through the exercise of their sovereign capacity” (Barker, 2012, p. 1). Academic research and knowledge similarly undergoes this process--knowledge production itself maps the physical spaces claimed by settler colonialism.

Historically, scientific research provided the foundation for representations of the “Other,” and in the settler colonial context, this research became the “objective” way in which non-White people were presented to White people. Colonial ideology relied on this research and knowledge production to further its goals of imperialism, making research and colonialism inextricably linked (Burnette & Sanders, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2012). As Patel (2016) argues, “educational research, in many ways, relies on vulnerable populations to justify various foci in funding streams and publications bolstered by the potential impact in improving said vulnerable populations’ conditions” (p. 40). Although there is a growing body

of research that challenges Western assertions of knowledge and knowing, the larger research community continues to reinforce Western power (Austin, Parkes, & Antonio, 2015; Patel, 2016).

The research history of Indigenous peoples in the United States is marked in two distinct ways: who conducted the research and for what purpose. For most of history, a majority of research conducted on Indigenous communities in the United States involved non-Indigenous researchers (Struthers, 2001). Unfortunately, this type of research did not occur in ways that were respectful of Indigenous participants. Called “research poachers” (Ambler, 1997), scholars used the experiences of Indigenous people for professional and financial gains and did not use their findings to better support Indigenous communities. White people held the power to define research in education including the goals, the research questions, and the methods (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lomawaima, 2000). Unfortunately, “acritical and ahistorical educational research is complicit in the maintenance of these realities by consistently justifying its work through the lens of a presumed lack or underdevelopment leading to an achievement gap, rather than being grounded in the political, economic, and historical infrastructure of inequality” (Patel, 2016, p. 42).

The legacy of colonialism and the ongoing, structural influence of settler colonialism have left a void in research practices within educational research. Indigenous research methodologies push against the dominant practices that sometimes unwittingly and sometimes purposefully, will replicate, reinforce, and perpetuate settler colonialism. Indigenous methodologies center the experience of those marginalized rather than framing it as an “alternative” experience to the dominant or majority experience. As conversations continue to take place around the role of research in relationship to colonized people, a call to change research practices has been put forth by those seeking to disrupt and dismantle Western knowledge systems and their epistemologies (Mutua & Swadener, 2004).

One particular way to disrupt and dismantle Western knowledge systems is the use of theoretical frames focused on Indigenous peoples and their unique positionality. Two such frames are Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2004) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005). Both theories argue that to address the challenges in Indigenous communities, one must acknowledge the role of colonialism in creating and sustaining those challenges. Brayboy (2005) argues that colonization is endemic in society and that “the goal, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, of interactions between the dominant U.S. society and American Indians has been to change (“colonize” or “civilize”) us to be more like those who hold power in dominant society” (p. 430). Grande (2008) shares this sentiment and writes, “By virtue of living in the Whitestream world, indigenous scholars have no choice but to negotiate the forces of colonialism, to learn, understand, and converse in the grammar of empire as well as develop the skills to contest it” (p. 234). Understanding the relationship between Indigenous people and settler colonialism is critically important for those conducting research on Native American communities. Both theoretical frameworks also challenge the use of assimilation or acculturation as an appropriate tool for Indigenous people to use in order to be successful in White spaces. Both also encourage an entirely different paradigm that centers the Indigenous experience at the center of the research rather than in relationship to the dominant group experience. It is from this paradigm that I connect my experiences doing Indian Country research with the lesson stories from my childhood.

### **Situating the Study**

The purpose of this autoethnography is to connect my practice of conducting Indian Country research with the Indigenous teachings I learned from my aunts and uncles. To do this, I draw from the extensive field notes, analytic memos, personal interviews, and journals

generated during the completion of my dissertation. My dissertation was based on a year-long qualitative case study on the experiences of five Native American eighth graders who attended a predominately White public school. What made this study unique was my participants were active members of the Leaf Lake Indian Tribe (all names are pseudonyms) and had the option to attend their tribal school; however, their families made the decision to place them in the local public school. From the beginning, my participants acknowledged the similarity of our experiences (Native kids attending White schools) but also the differences (I often “pass” for White, this is not something my participants encountered. These similarities and differences heavily influenced my reflections on my relationship with the participants, how I made sense of the data, and how I connected my scholar and Native identities.

Within this autoethnography, I interrogate my experiences as a Native researcher in an academic environment entrenched in colonial ideology. This type of interrogation is not new—my work builds on existing Indigenous methodologies, which are “research by and for indigenous peoples, using techniques and methods drawn from the tradition of those peoples” (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, & Sookraj, 2009, p. 894). While historically, qualitative research on Native communities has reinforced colonial versions of knowledge, power, and truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), several scholars have argued for the inclusion of Native knowledge, worldviews, and perspectives when engaging in research, especially in educational spaces (Kovach, 2009; Patel, 2016; Smith, 2012). My primary reason for choosing autoethnography is to provide an example for what this inclusion can look like.

### **Tell Me Stories: Applying Lessons from the Seven Grandfathers**

One of my fondest memories as a child was listening to my aunt and uncles tell stories about the Creator, to absorb the wisdom they gained during sweat ceremonies, to ask dozens of questions about the ancestors who came before me. My aunt and uncles are medicine people, healers in our community—and they took seriously their role as elder, making sure the younger generation understood exactly who we came from. Because of this I was not surprised at their resistance and frustration with my career path as an academic. My great-grandparents survived the boarding school era, my aunt and uncles remember being washed in lye to lighten their skin. The process of schooling was incredibly hostile to my family and it made no sense to them why I would willingly enter a space not meant for me. No amount of discussion would persuade them otherwise—I was selling out and betraying my culture. Being an academic meant being White. It was only when I started my dissertation did my family start to understand there was room to be both Native and an academic, that I could use the teachings and lessons they provided me within the context of my research.

What follows are my reflections on the Seven Grandfathers lessons and how those lessons are implicated in my dissertation work. My hope is to use autoethnography as a tool remove conceptual lenses, immerse myself in systems different from the Western-centric systems I was trained in, and challenge the hegemonic nature of Western research practices (Battiste, 2013).

### **To Cherish Knowledge Is to Know Wisdom**

Growing up, my aunt would often tell me “to cherish knowledge is to know wisdom.” What she meant was that wise people valued the knowledge of their communities and their ancestors. To know wisdom as a Native scholar means relying on Native knowledge and culture when designing and implementing research studies. Every conversation I had with community members informed my study, something I noted in my research journal:

*My first meeting was at the museum with Deidre. I was doing preliminary research on the relationship between the town and the Leaf Lake. Meeting with her felt important to me because she does presentations to area colleges about the education persistence issues of Native American students. Her insight and wisdom were invaluable to me as she helped me understand the tension between the local school and tribal school, and how families felt divided on the issue. She warned I might encounter some resistance to my study, especially from parents worried my goal was to convince them to send their children back to the tribal school. This information provided useful during my first parent meeting. (Reflection journal entry—April 3, 2011)*

Having conversations with community members and trusting their insights is important because each tribal community has their own culture regarding research within their community. Some tribes, such as the Navajo, have an established office, similar to a university Institutional Review Board. Conducting research in this space is somewhat easier because research guidelines are already established. However, in my case, I was not conducting research within the Leaf Lake tribe, although my research did tribal youth who attending the public school in town. This made my community meetings with tribe members all the more vital for understanding different cultural practices of Leaf Lake.

What does it mean to rely on Native culture and knowledge when designing and conducting research? I regularly struggle with this question. During my dissertation, I called upon several strategies to rely on this knowledge. In addition to meeting with key community members, such as Deidre, I regularly met with a group of parents and teachers. These conversations extended beyond my specific project and focused on their experiences with educational research, their concerns about my project, and how I could best work with and support their students. Although we shared no tribal affiliation, I respected their perspective and wisdom as Native community members. The second strategy I used was a specific-form of member checking. Rather than ask my participants to review their transcripts for just accuracy, we went through and discussed any specific cultural information they provided. This was to verify what could or could not be shared with a non-Native audience. The third strategy focused on using data collection methods that support Native ways of knowing, such as storytelling (Kovach, 2009). This involved asking students to share their stories orally, through narrative interviews, and in writing, through a journaling process. The final strategy involved my use of analysis methods that account for the positionality of Native peoples and communities within Western society. My use and application of Tribal Critical Race Theory Using addressed my participants' experiences as colonized and racialized people within predominately White spaces.

### **To Know Love Is to Know Peace**

Throughout my childhood, “to know love is to know peace” was said constantly to us as a reminder to be generous with each other and ourselves. In this lesson, the love refers not to romantic or familial love, but to the practice of kindness or generosity. While it is unlikely that researchers will treat their participants poorly, it is uncommon for researchers to express generosity toward their participants. Including this concept in my research practice allowed me to acknowledge the formal and informal ways Native people practice generosity with each other, such as participating in giveaways at local powwows or offering expressions of admiration. The Ojibwe believe that a key practice of generosity is to never ask for something you would not give yourself. Therefore, I was incredibly mindful of the expectations I placed on participants regarding their involvement in the research process.

Within my own study, kindness/generosity took many forms. When conducting interviews and participants shared important stories from their past, I often shared stories of my own. In Western-centered research practices it is commonly suggested that researchers limit how much they share with participants as to not create bias. This was most evident in an interaction I had with Freddy, one of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders who participated in my study:

*Today was my final interview with Freddy. As he stood up to leave he said to me, "Can I ask you a question?" Sure, I replied. "What is like this when you were in school?" he wanted to know. I paused for a long time, struck by the weight of his question, wondering why he was asking this, wondering how much I should reveal, or share. And I decided I owed his honesty, in acknowledgment of the truth he shared with me. I asked him what he meant by "like this" He paused for a second, then said, "Like did you get treated differently for being Native, because I can't tell if people are treating me different because I'm Native or if I'm going crazy." No, I said to him, you are not crazy. What you think is happening to you is happening to you and I wish it were different. He nodded and walked out the door, turning around only to say "thanks." (Journal reflection, 5/12/12)*

When I share this story with the students in my research methods course, they often have the same response—how could I share with him my true feelings? Didn't that make me biased as a researcher? And I always explain how this reciprocation of generosity, to do for them what they do for me, is to demonstrate how much I value their participation. Opening myself up to my participants was one way for them to trust the importance I placed on their stories.

### **To Honor All of the Creation Is to Have Respect**

One of the greatest gifts we can give back to the Creator is to act respectful toward all of creation—our communities, the people of the world, and the very environment we live in. As a small child, these acts of respect took the form of honoring the earth through things like ceremonies and practices (such as recycling). Honoring people in our community meant treating them with value and purpose. When I entered the world of educational research I realized acting respectful has a different connotation than what the Seven Grandfathers meant. Within Western-centric research, respect is typically conveyed in the informed consent and risk assessment portion of the institutional review board process—it means to do no harm. However, respect in this lesson story extends beyond the typical Western-centric function of addressing informed consent and assessing risk, which often ritualizes "the appearance of 'giving voice' to others" (Patel, 2016). For me, there are two primary areas where maintaining respect during the research process is tantamount: research implementation and data analysis. When implementing a study focused on Native communities, respect is given, not only to the participants but to the community from which they come. Researchers have worked with tribal and institutional review boards to indigenize the practice of research and to rethink the positionality of Native "informants" from being vulnerable populations to collaborating scholars (Kovach, 2009). Related, it is important to support the sovereign legal status of tribal entities who work to establish protocols for their community. This might mean discussing your research with community elders, asking community elders for perspective, or providing an opportunity for you participants to remove certain pieces of data that are culturally inappropriate to share. When analyzing data, practicing respect means using theoretical lenses that are centered on the experience of Indigenous peoples. Oftentimes the theoretical lenses used in research are Western-centric and other perspectives are compared against those



Western perspectives, often from a deficit perspective. Honoring the Native communities from which we (Native scholars) come from requires that our research includes using theoretical and analytical perspectives that do not diminish Indigenous cultures or knowledge.

In my own research practice, this practice of respect is most often present in my use of Tribal Critical Race Theory. Tribal Critical Race Theory is a theoretical viewpoint that is not only centered on the experiences of Native peoples but recognizes the way colonization has diminished the importance of Native knowledge. Discovering this was critical in my dissertation study and really helped me in linking this lesson story with my research:

*Today I met with my committee to talk about the direction of my research. I offered a brief overview and then started to discuss my theoretical framework. Initially, I wanted to use Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital—it makes sense that Native students in a predominately White school lack capital—but it didn't feel right. And then during our meeting, T. suggested I look at Tribal Critical Race Theory. I wasn't familiar with this so I grabbed the article and read it over lunch. Ahh. This is exactly what I've been waiting for. Using this theory makes so much sense. It's focused on Native positionality, addresses the sovereignty/colonization issue, and recognizes that marginalized is a structural issue, not just an individual issue. This theory feels respectful, like it really does take into consideration Native perspectives. It's not just a White theory applied to Natives. It feels nice to have this settled. (Journal reflection, 9/15/11)*

Using TribalCrit acknowledged the challenges faced by my participants as challenges created by a colonial structure; not challenges that were the result of my participants' identity as Native. Acknowledging the structural causes of marginalization was one way to respect my participants and their experiences. They were not deficient—the system was not designed to honor them.

### **Bravery Is to Face the Foe with Integrity**

The fourth lesson I learned as a child centered on the belief that being brave meant acting with integrity, especially in the face of conflict. Although I did not give much thought to this lesson during my dissertation process, it became increasingly important when I began to present my scholarship to a general academic community. Given the Western-centric landscape of educational research, choosing to use research as a tool of decolonization is an act of bravery for Native scholars in academia, and is often in direct conflict with the academic preparation experienced by Native scholars. The relationship between indigenous knowledge and research in the current contemporary colonial project has political implications both for scholars and the communities they research and is often very tenuous (Kovach, 2009). Smith (2012) articulates the tensions well when she writes

Many indigenous researchers have struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own and other indigenous communities, with whom they share lifelong relationships on the other side. There are a number of ethical, cultural, political and personal issues that can present special difficulties for indigenous researchers who, in their own communities work partially as insiders, and are often employed for this purpose, and partially as outsiders, because of their Western education or because they make work across clan, tribe, linguistic, age, and gender boundaries. Simultaneously, they work within their research projects or institutions as

insiders within a particular paradigm or research model, and as outsiders because they are often marginalized and perceived to be representative of either a minority or rival interest group. (p. 5)

The feelings Smith describes of being both insider and outsider were particularly salient for me as I attempted to reconcile the tension between my Native identity and my research identity. Compounding the tension is my physical appearance, in which I am often mistaken for White. I not only have to stake claim to my Native identity any time I engage in my research, but then must often defend my identity to those who think it's "not enough." My engagement in decolonizing research practices gets labelled as "trendy." Although it can be argued that decolonizing research is an act of bravery shared by both the researcher and participant, when I engage in research practices and employ methodologies that Western-based research has often shunned, I assume a level of professional risk related to publications, the promotion process, and funding, among others. However, I view this risk as necessary to not only advance a research agenda centered on decolonization, but to honor my Native identity and heritage with my work.

### **Honesty in Facing a Situation Is to Have Courage**

Another significant lesson from my childhood centered on the belief that being courageous meant approaching all situations with honesty. Although I often interpreted this to mean "do not lie," as I grew older I came to understand the complexity of what it means to be honest in all situations. It means sharing hard truths, confronting injustice, and generally speaking from one's position. Although one might not think research requires us to share hard truths, confront injustice, or speak from our own position, the lived experiences of Natives are often diminished when compared to the truths of the White people. So, while research should be faithful to reality and researchers should engage in research practices that support and honor the truth of participants and their communities, how we speak about the truth of Native participants is of utmost importance.

Although I remained faithful to the truth of the Native students in my study, I became acutely aware my interpretations of their experiences would be directly challenged by non-Native researchers. After I had written a draft of my first chapter (which focused on the relationships my participants had with their teachers and White peers), I workshopped it with a writing group. Rather than engage with the work and point out areas that needed more development, the group members focused on the "harshness of my language."

*You're not going to believe this! It was my turn to go in writing group, so I shared a draft of chapter 1. I wanted them to tell me where I needed more support for the argument and if the discussion aligned with the findings. But instead we spent the first 20 or 30 minutes arguing over my inclusion of a quote in the introduction that used the term genocide to refer to the experiences of Natives in the US. Now, I am pretty sure that what happened to Native Americans in this country \*was\* genocide, but you know, I'm not a historian. What I found most infuriating was not that the argument centered on whether it was appropriate to call what happened to Natives "genocide" but that using genocide might alienate my audience, that the term was "serious" and "harsh." Alienate my audience. I am not here to write for White people! Gah. So frustrating. (Personal email communication, 9/24/12)*

This particular experience stood out as especially salient in helping me understand what this lesson is really about. The lesson is not “do not lie” but instead requires us to be honest in all situations, no matter its cost to us. And unfortunately, speaking the truth about the experiences of Natives in the educational system, especially in a way that challenges White hegemony, could affect me professionally. Yet, as the grandfathers taught us, to do so is highly courageous.

### **Humility Is to Know Yourself as a Sacred Part of the Creation**

One of the hardest of the Grandfather lessons for me as a child was the practice of humility. Time and time again I was chastised for “acting bigger” than I was, or thinking I was “more important” than everyone else. In my family, all of your gifts were from the Creator which should be acknowledged appropriately. Making claims about your abilities or accomplishments was strongly discouraged. The practice and focus on humility created certain difficulties, most notably when I started my dissertation research and was suddenly viewed as the “expert.” Acting with humility is not my natural instinct and I found myself using several strategies to reflect this important value.

First, I saw myself as equal to my participants—not “better than” or more knowledgeable. Oftentimes, the acceptance of participants as equal to researcher is routinely dismissed in Western-based research, which often is predicated on expert-novice relationship structures. Failing to see participants as full persons equally involved and invested in the research process creates a hierarchal system where participants are objectified (Patel, 2016). Viewing the research relationship as a hierarchy diminishes the participant and their truths. Second, relieving myself of the role of sole expert and viewing the participants as co-creators of knowledge allowed me to destabilize the traditional definition of data as something participants did in a place recorded by me (Patel, 2016). Doing this recognized the importance of participants’ perspectives and values and their conceptions of what is or is not data.

*Doing research with 8<sup>th</sup> graders presents its own sorts of challenges. I’m not sure why they agreed to participate so I’m always a bit worried they’ll just stop talking to me. I mean, 8<sup>th</sup> graders can be both incredibly harsh and incredibly fragile so I try to balance those attitudes with my study. But yesterday was a bad day for data collection. Conducting the interviews was like pulling teeth. Lots of one word answers, not much engagement. I didn’t prolong the process, but it was still frustrating. But then today Melita handed me a note that read, “Yesterday you asked us about our friends. Here you go” complete with little notations about her social circle at school. And I find that this happens kind of regularly...the participants kind of shuffle through the interview but will grab me before or after class and whisper to me the answers to the questions the day before. They are definitely driving much of this process. (Reflection journal, 3/15/12)*

Practicing humility also reflects the way Native scholars view the relationship between participants and the knowledge creation process. While Western-based research sometimes treats knowledge as something that only researchers have the skills to “discover,” it can also be argued that “knowledge does not exist decontextualized from those who are trying to know, but that is also different from considering how skills or practices had meaning to others before one happens upon them” (Patel, 2016, p. 78). Simply put, research humility is recognizing that your participants have the knowledge you seek already—they do not need you, the researcher, to help them understand it. Rather, the researcher is there to create the space and opportunity

for participants to bring forth what they already know and experience, to act as stewards of the spaces where knowledge is found (Patel, 2016).

### **Truth Is to Know All These Things**

The seventh lesson of the Grandfathers is to recognize that integrating the six lessons into one's life leads to a sense of truth. For me this integration takes the form of making sure my research includes practices reflective of all the lessons. Using the lessons as a guide reflect not only my identity as a Native scholar, but also can create a sense of trust between me and the communities that I study. Researchers do not set out to act in distrustful ways, however, there are many ways in which Western-centric research practices are distrustful. Examples of this include benign research descriptions on consent forms, "seduction and betrayal," a process where researchers develop relationships with participants in order to collect data but do not disclose or share their thoughts or perspectives about the interactions, and failure to intervene during a study for fear of contaminating the research study (Newkirk, 1996). Related, when working with Native communities, researchers should engage in truth-gathering, which requires accurately portraying Native people and their communities by using appropriate terminology, correct language, and demonstrating the nuances between tribal communities.

One way to practice this lesson in the research design process is to acknowledge the responsibility of intervention (Newkirk, 1996). When I first started collecting data for my dissertation, I tried hard to remain objective and detached from my participants, even though I felt a strong connection to their experiences. This desire to remain objective was a vestige from my own research methods courses, which emphasized that any type of personal sharing could compromise the research. However, the students asked me questions all the time about what I observed, if I saw what they saw, if I noticed that they were treated differently from others. And not answering their questions felt wrong. I had an obligation of truth to them as participants. So I answered their questions based on my research—yes they were treated different, yes I could validate their perspectives. This did not compromise my research, it made it stronger. Doing so honored my participants, my study, and my identity as a scholar doing research in Indian Country.

### **My Future of Doing Indian Country Research**

When my participants asked me to talk about my research and my reflections of their experiences at the end of their participation in my study, my understanding of the research process shifted considerably. My obligation was to my participants—not to a research process rooted in Western notions of objectivity. I began to understand what it meant to do Indian Country research and to frame my research within a Native worldview. The lesson stories planted in me as a child served as a foundation for my development as a researcher, even if, at the time, I had no idea how valuable those lessons would be.

This autoethnography on my application of the Seven Grandfathers lessons to my research practices adds to the growing body of scholarship on Native scholars using Native-centered approaches in research. What I uncovered is that the Seven Grandfathers lessons served as an intervention in an academic structure that almost always privileges Western-centric perspectives. Applying the Seven Grandfathers lessons was my attempt to challenge the colonial nature of research. Using Native knowledge and perspectives during the research process is important for Native scholars engaging in the decolonization of research. Decolonization requires "a consideration of how ideologies impact material practices, how practices are epistemically shaped...to, then, a set of material practices for another flirts with cosmetic changes that may do precious little to interrupt material coloniality" (Patel, 2016, p.

65). My use of the Seven Grandfathers lessons in my research is a direct response to the practices of Western-centric research and offers an opportunity for other scholars to witness a particular type of holistic approach to research design and implementation. Using the Seven Grandfathers as a guide allowed me to consider how much of my research is influenced by Western-centric ideas and offers suggestions on how I can disrupt Western-centric research practices in the future.

Six years has passed since I conducted my dissertation study. All five of my participants went on to graduate from high school, with big plans for college. My own family softened their judgement on my work in higher education, with my aunt finally admitting “I guess it’s important to have Native voices on the inside.” And my development as an Indian Country researcher continues as I explore the intersections of Native identity, colonialism, and educational spaces, the lessons of the Seven Grandfathers serving as an undercurrent throughout.

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