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Welcoming and Navigating Allyship in Indigenous Communities

Mikayla Hagel, Miranda Keewatin, & Dr. Carrie Bourassa.

ABSTRACT

The Morning Star Lodge (MSL) is an Indigenous Health Research Lab located in Regina, Saskatchewan and conducts community-based research within the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council. While discussing the importance of utilizing Indigenous Research Methodologies when engaging with Indigenous communities, this story discusses the theme and importance of allyship in any relationship. While facilitating meaningful and reciprocal relationships, Morning Star Lodge acknowledges and promotes the importance of Traditional Knowledge and culture incorporated within research methods. The authors of this story discuss their lived experience of working alongside Indigenous Peoples within Treaty Four Territory.

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WELCOMING AND NAVIGATING ALLYSHIP IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Morning Star Lodge (MSL) is an Indigenous community-based health research lab that builds capacity in Indigenous communities and with allies by training, teaching and hiring locally. The story that follows begins with background information from the perspective of an Indigenous-identifying researcher at MSL and follows with a personal account of allyship from the perspective of a non-Indigenous allied researcher.

Miranda's Experiences as an Indigenous Researcher

As an Indigenous researcher at MSL, I have had the opportunity to learn Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRM) by practicing community-based research with the vision to develop supportive environments by creating healthy and reciprocal relationships between Indigenous communities, researchers, and allies. Working at MSL as a researcher has awakened my understanding of the importance of IRM and has given me the opportunity to learn from

Indigenous community members. Indigenous health research must be conducted, grounded, or engaged with Indigenous communities while including their wisdom, culture, experience, and Knowledge systems as an important and integral component of data collection (Kovach, 2010).

The greatest reward as an Indigenous researcher at MSL is the opportunity to learn and flourish in Indigenous teachings and to build relationships with culture, community and Knowledge Keepers through research studies. As an Indigenous researcher, I understand that Traditional Knowledge delivers information and perspectives on the First Nations, Inuit and Métis existence, medicines, songs and stories. The significance of allyship in the context of MSL allows individuals of all backgrounds to join together to learn from Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, Elders, community members and researchers in a culturally safe manner. Allied researchers must build on those relationships to help preserve and understand Indigenous traditions respectfully. Although it may evoke negative feelings, Indigenous allyship must recognize the current and historical oppression of Indigenous Peoples in Canada by listening to and supporting the community when doing long-term work regarding Indigenous health. Indigenous allyship is a significant relationship created within a community as it requires action to support the communities who have historically been underrepresented. For instance, issues that some communities face stem from hundreds of years of ongoing trauma and discrimination. Indigenous allyship must take responsibility for and commitment to learning the history and context of Indigenous Peoples in order to gain context of the numerous protective factors contributing to Indigenous strength and resilience.

Commitment to cultural safety involves building respectful understanding between people of different cultural perspectives from your own, strengthening cultural security while working towards equality in opportunity (The Relationship Building with First Nations and Public Health Team, 2017). It is essential to build cultural safety on the foundation of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes while building on the strength of each other's knowledge, using a wide range of community members and resources to build on their understandings for a comprehensive approach (Anderson et al., 2019; Diffey & Lavalley, 2014). Cultural safety should be considered a precursor to any engagement activities with community members in the context of research. MSL equips each staff member they employ with professional and personal development while integrating practices of ceremony to promote building relationships, and ultimately, cultural safety.

The building of relationships at MSL begins with understanding each staff member's connectedness to the guiding Elder, who leads the lab in a good way by teaching us protocols that have been integrated into the methodology of the lab. Traditional Teachings—like offering tobacco ties to those who share their stories and Knowledges during the research process—are prioritized. The relationship built through participation in ceremony between Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community, and allies allows Indigenous allies to understand the cultural practices and protocols which will enable them to be aware of ways they influence relationships with all beings. The guiding Elder shares traditional teachings with the lab that are recognized in many Indigenous nations, characterized by the concept of the circle, interconnectedness, connection to place, and the four R's (respect, reciprocity, responsibility and relationships) (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). The support of Elders and the teachings received are an asset to Indigenous allyship.

Mikayla's Experiences as an Indigenous Ally Fieldwork Student

Indigenous allyship is an integral component to decolonizing current Eurocentric institutions, research and policies in Canada. For my final semester of school as an undergraduate, I joined the Research Team at MSL as a fieldwork student because I felt drawn to the lab's mandate to influence Indigenous Peoples' lives in a positive way. I also wanted to join the team as I was looking for opportunities that would foster an environment for continuous learning after I graduated from my undergraduate degree. MSL supports a reciprocal mentorship model which excited me when I was applying as it encourages learning at all levels. A reciprocal mentorship model asserts that each staff member holds unique Knowledges and life experiences that we can all learn from, this unique relationship among staff members allows for everyone's voice to be heard and valued. No matter what educational or personal background a person may hold, everyone is important.

While in school, I was provided with a foundation of knowledge in the field of physical science. While I did take courses on qualitative data analysis, coming from a science background means that I hold a bias in how I approach and analyze data and so initially, I viewed research through an empirical lens using quantitative data analysis methods. Although quantitative research is important and utilized at MSL, I acknowledged my bias towards quantitative research methods and was open and willing to learn from other members of the research team in an effort to understand IRM and protocols followed by the lab. MSL has staff members with diverse backgrounds in the fields of physical science, social work, health studies, anthropology, psychology, and women and gender studies, providing the lab with a wholistic view of how to address research topics brought forth by the Indigenous communities we serve.

As a descendant of a Euro-Canadian settler, I initially held limited knowledge on Indigenous protocol and the customs that guide IRM, making me feel uncertain or unworthy of participating in the research at MSL. Initially, when I reflected on my unintentional bias from my own cultural background, I was met with feelings of guilt and confusion. I viewed this bias as a downfall and feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy arose. Unacknowledged biases can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between people of different backgrounds, so with meaningful mentorship from MSL staff, I was able to find strength in the unique perspective I brought to the research. MSL fostered an environment for me to experience and understand the strength that can be found in diversity. Instead of letting uncertainty fester in silence, I remained reflexive and voiced my insecurities to the research team and was graciously met with welcoming arms to support me on the journey of becoming a culturally safe ally to Indigenous communities. Although initially uncertain, I asked questions to understand how to conduct research with Indigenous communities in order to avoid further perpetuating colonial practices. I believe that asking questions and attempting to understand cultural practices can be seen as an apt example of acknowledging bias or uncertainty while using it as an opportunity to create space for understanding. An intentional mindset with a sincere willingness to learn demonstrates humility and ensures research is conducted in a good way.

Not only is there strength in diversity at MSL when it comes to staff members' backgrounds in education, we also have staff members of diverse ethnic backgrounds. As the responsibility of

reconciliation for the ongoing colonization in Canada does not fall in the hands of Indigenous Peoples, hiring people of all backgrounds at the lab creates space for reconciliation. Although everyone comes from unique cultural backgrounds, MSL provides and equips team members with pertinent knowledge and experience of Indigenous customs and protocols as we conduct Indigenous research together. As one may introduce bias due to lack of knowledge or cultural safety, it is important to ask reflexive questions in order to understand how a personal bias may affect a working relationship. Although it may be difficult at first, the most fruitful growth comes from humbling oneself.

In my personal experience of navigating allyship while working alongside Indigenous co-researchers, self-location of bias in a relationship cannot be a one-time effort. One simply cannot complete cultural safety training and expect to be a culturally safe ally indefinitely. Cultural safety as an ally requires continuous self-location of privilege and bias while listening intently to the lived experiences of others. This kind of introspection is needed in order to empower the voices that have been or are still being oppressed today. As an ally, it is impossible to completely understand all of the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and so it is the ally's duty to privilege the voice of Indigenous Peoples facing oppression while taking action to prevent further injustices from happening. As I learned and listened to the members of the research team on the importance of including Indigenous Knowledges in research and data collection, I became aware of how my own experiences in academia may introduce prejudice when working with Indigenous communities. Although understanding the magnitude and profound importance of maintaining cultural continuity among Indigenous Peoples may be a challenge for allies, it is necessary and required to truly attain allyship.

A specific example of utilizing individual strengths at MSL was shown when I worked alongside Miranda, an Indigenous researcher, to decolonize the body map research method for a workshop with Indigenous women living with HIV. Miranda taught me the importance of decolonizing research methods to ensure all research is culturally safe and relevant for participating co-researchers. I learned the decolonization process for research methods from Miranda and shared what I knew about quantitative data analysis to build capacity for the research team to perform data analysis with the newly decolonized research method. This reciprocal relationship of offering our individual strengths aptly demonstrates the value of the mentorship model at MSL.

The Community Research Advisory Committee (CRAC) is also an integral component to research conducted at MSL. In order to interact with the community as an ally, it is important to understand the traditional customs and practices that are prioritized in the community involved. I held the responsibility of acknowledging my position and motivations while reflecting on biases and power differentials that may arise when working alongside Indigenous communities. This process helped to build reciprocity and trust. When working with the CRAC, I was initially apprehensive about how the community would react to an ally as a lead of a research project at MSL, but instead of being met with uncertainty, the CRAC welcomed me with positive, supportive and open arms. This demonstration of collaboration among Indigenous community members and allies is an important testimony of the reciprocal relationship that is so important in Indigenous Research Methods. I was also invited to partake in Traditional Teachings and Ceremony. Ensuring research is conducted with the right intention and mindset is important. This can help to avoid further perpetuating the colonial research practice of going into a

community while imposing personal research priorities, collecting data, then proceeding to leave the community to analyze and report findings with little to no community involvement. The ownership of data and identifying research priorities is important for communities to lead, as it drives building community capacity and autonomy if done correctly.

As an ally to Indigenous communities, it is important that I use my own privilege and platform to value, centre, and amplify the voices and experiences of people who are oppressed. In relation to my work at MSL, allyship requires strengthening the voices of those who are often left underrepresented in research. The meaning of allyship goes beyond denouncing racist or biased opinions, it also requires actively fighting towards equity while speaking out against the daily injustices people face as a result of their cultural background. Evoking empathy as an ally involves making an effort to understand one's journey while attempting to view a situation from the perspective of others. Aspects of cultural safety must be included and prioritized in any working relationship between people of different cultural backgrounds (Anderson et al., 2019; Kovach, 2010; Diffey & Lavallee, 2014).

AUTHOR BIOS

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Dr. Carrie Bourassa (BA, MA, PhD) Professor, Community Health & Epidemiology, College of Medicine, University of Saskatchewan. She also is Scientific Director, Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health – Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR-IIPH). She is an adjunct professor in the Faculties of Education and Kinesiology & Health Studies at the University of Regina and the Nominated Principal Investigator for the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) funded Morning Star Lodge established in 2010, and also for recently CFI-funded Cultural Safety, Evaluation, Training and Research lab built in 2020, hosted at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Bourassa is a member of the College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists of the Royal Society of Canada and a public member of the Royal College Council of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. She is a member of the International Research Advisory Board (IRAB) for the Health Research Council (New Zealand) and a member of the Health Quality Council Board of Saskatchewan. She was appointed to the National Research Council of Canada Advisory Board (NRC) – Human Health Therapeutics Research Centre Advisory Board in May 2018. Dr. Bourassa is Métis and belongs to the Riel Métis Council of Regina Inc. (RMCR, Local #34).

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