Critical Social Work
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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork

Link to article: http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/InstitutionalBarriers

Critical Social Work, 2018 Vol. 19, No. 1
Institutional Barriers to Community-Based Research: Learning from the Nunavut, Nanivara Project

Critical Social Work 19(1)
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Acknowledgements

The Nanivara Project would like to thank the Nunavut Arctic College, First Air, Calm Air, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for their support. We are grateful also to the many participants in the communities of Gjoa Haven and Naujaat.

Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a method of conducting research, understood to be consistent with a decolonizing research agenda. Drawing on experiences from the Nanivara (‘I found it!’) Project, undertaken with youth in Gjoa Haven and Naujaat, Nunavut Territory (2013-2016), institutional barriers to these objectives are explored. While universities and granting agencies have increasingly emphasized the importance of participatory methods and applied research to benefit and help develop the capacity of Indigenous communities, institutional barriers to accomplishing these objectives exist. Research funding bodies and universities have yet to address adequately the significant structural barriers that perpetuate unequal and inequitable relations in the conduct of PAR. This has serious implications for researchers and institutions funding research, where policies and procedures do not easily accommodate the material, social, and geographical realities of Inuit youth.

Keywords: decolonization, Nunavut, Participatory Action Research, colonialism, social justice
Scholarly research with Indigenous communities across Canada, as evidenced by the development of Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, takes seriously issues that have long concerned Indigenous peoples, including the need for reciprocity and the building of trust between researchers and Indigenous peoples and communities (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CHIR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC], & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2014). Recent shifts in popular and scholarly knowledge of Canadian-Indigenous relations, and the presence of policy addressing ethical issues, have encouraged new directions in the conduct of field research and project administration (CHIR et al., 2014; Nickels, Shirley, & Laidler, 2006). Consequently, researchers can no longer approach Indigenous communities with a “desire to fit the stories of Native [sic] informants into frameworks that correspond to their own ideas of chronology, epistemology, and what has constituted publishable accounts for an academic audience” (Marker, 2011, p. 201). This has led many social scientists to perceive community-based research as a collaborative undertaking, one of working with Indigenous peoples to meet and address their needs and concerns (Clarke et al., 2010; Grey, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013; Ryerson University, n.d; Sinclair, 2004; Tondu et. al, 2014). Relationships, both personal and professional, are central to this work. However, despite such initiatives, there remain barriers to building trusting, positive, meaningful, and progressive relationships between researchers and research participants. These barriers, which include reporting and accounting practices, are examined with respect to research with Inuit youth (those 15 to 30 years old). They result from inconsistencies between what are typically thought to be best scholarly research practices and issues of funding, timing, and a culture of productivity within the modern academy.

The ‘de-colonizing turn’ in community-based research also serves to highlight ongoing disparities in how academic research is conducted in the field and how it is administered within institutional settings (Alfred & Comtassell, 2005; Maldonado-Torres, 2011). As it relates to the stated objectives of post-secondary and government funding agencies, efforts to re-orient research to meet the needs of communities often leave much to be desired. This re-orientation is complicated by existing institutional and financing guidelines discussed in this paper. These make it difficult to include participants as researchers and not merely as research subjects. Where such inclusion is possible, a range of socio-economic factors can also preclude their full participation. This is problematic for those engaged in Participatory Action Research (PAR) — a research approach that involves research participants as researchers in the process (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006).

Many changes have taken place in academic institutions and environments over the last few decades (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). These changes have contributed to policies that pose a range of challenges to researchers working with participatory methods. In examining these challenges in the context of a project in Nunavut Territory, we questioned the focus and ability of social work research to promote social justice. We also examined institutional realities associated with the adoption of de-colonizing research methods within a social work academic setting.
Towards a Decolonizing Research Framework

Historically, much research undertaken in Canada has been about Indigenous peoples and not conducted with Indigenous peoples (Cochran et al., 2008; Mosby, 2013; Young, 2016). In fact, the case can be made that considerable research has served the interests of the state, often at the expense of Indigenous peoples (Kulchyski, 1993; Mosby, 2013). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) described this:

In the past, Aboriginal people have not been consulted about what information should be collected, who should gather that information, who should maintain it, and who should have access to it. The information gathered may or may not have been relevant to the questions, priorities and concerns of Aboriginal peoples. Because data gathering has frequently been imposed by outside authorities, it has met with resistance in many quarters. (p. 498)

This positioning of Indigenous peoples in the research process has contributed to a maintenance of the colonial and privileged position of Western ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and methods over other philosophies and ways of knowing and learning within both the academy and Canadian society (Koster, Baccar, & Lemelin, 2012; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Pualani Louis, 2007; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). It has also resulted in research and literature that misrepresented Indigenous peoples and communities (Cochran et al., 2008; Smith, 1999). This includes the work of Arctic scholar Diamond Jenness, who conducted research in the salvage tradition of ethnography and anthropology in the 1940s (Kulchyski, 1993). Research, particularly in the period of high modernism following World War II, reflected the values and assumptions of a colonizing culture bent on assimilating Indigenous peoples into the dominant non-Indigenous culture (Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009; Haig Brown & Nock, 2006; Kulchyski, 1993; Smith, 1999). This work was based in ethnocentric values and worldviews (Cochran et al., 2008; Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004; Harding, 2006). It also incorporated research approaches that were so “deeply embedded in colonization that [research itself became] regarded as a tool only of colonization and not as a potential tool for self-determination and development” (Smith, 1999, p. 87). Research results were, therefore, often reductionist, linear, and ultimately exploitative (Smith, 1999).

A postmodern turn in theory, as well as the recognition and validation of difference — a move away from the universal assumptions that informed much of liberal welfare state policy in Canada following World War II — opened the door to a “de-colonial turn” (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 1). This turn serves to “reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies” (Sium, Desai, & Ritskes, 2012, p. 3). It has involved a

Heightened perception of the linkages between colonialism, racism, and other forms of dehumanization in the twentieth-century, [including] the formation of ethnic movements of empowerment and feminisms of color and an increasingly self-conscious and coalitional effort to understanding decolonization, and not simply modernity, as an unfinished project. (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 2)
The creation of the First Nations University of Canada (formerly the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College) and the School of Indian Social Work in 1974, as well as another 23 Indigenous-run colleges since the early 1970s, draws our attention to this change (Crum, 2015; Sinclair, 2004). The de-colonial turn has also had an impact on social work practice and many schools of social work in Canada, including the development of courses and programs related to social work with Indigenous communities (Hart et al., 2014; University of Victoria, 2014; Sinclair, 2004). However, Indigenous peoples and advocates have had to fight continually for educational institutions to produce both social worker practitioners and researchers capable of working cooperatively with, and in support of, Indigenous communities (Sinclair, 2004). This fight, based on seeking “recognition of the history of dispossession and trauma for Indigenous Peoples...[as] they have been consistently, repeatedly and brutally marginalized and denied human, political, economic, social, cultural and territorial rights by occupying settler, nation state governments,” is far from over (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. ix). Decolonizing efforts require institutional changes, such that, “the goal of Aboriginal social work...[should] be the decolonization of Aboriginal people, which is enacted through methodology that contextualizes colonization, and integrates healing methods based on Aboriginal epistemology” (Sinclair, 2004, pp. 55-56).

Smith (1999) maintained, “Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. One of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values which inform research practice” (p. 23). Social work researchers are challenged by an institutional context that produces ‘agents of the state’, delivering, upon graduation, state-mandated policies and programs. A commitment to decolonizing practice may be on the agenda at many Canadian Schools of Social Work (Hart et al., 2014; University of Victoria, 2014; Sinclair, 2004), but this stands in contradiction to how many Indigenous peoples in Canada perceive the agenda of the state (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; “Indigenous leaders give,” 2017). This is further evidenced by governments and institutions that fail to implement the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and a dismissal of Indigenous rights regarding land and the environment (“Indigenous leaders give,” 2017; Jang, 2016). Examples of this include the flooding of Muskrat Falls in Labrador, the creation of the Site C dam in British Columbia, and the approval by the National Energy Board of seismic testing, affecting the well-being of Inuit in Clyde River, Nunavut (Amnesty International, 2016; Moola, 2016; “On Muskrat Falls,” October 25, 2016; Skura, 2016). To appreciate fully what decolonizing practice confronts, social work researchers and students need a critical structural analysis of the state, the culture of post-modern capitalism, as well as insight into institutional contexts for social work practice that includes both the academy and the interests it is increasingly designed to serve.

Change requires moving away from traditional research approaches that position Indigenous peoples and communities as research subjects and toward objectives, methodologies, and project designs that involve Indigenous peoples and communities in their creation. Per Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, and Sookraj (2009) it further requires “describing, defining, and developing research questions, and most urgently, in moving research results into transformative practice” (p. 895). Indigenous peoples and communities must be involved in setting research agendas, ensuring they benefit directly from the work, and perhaps most importantly that research contributes to the goal of Indigenous self-determination (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Brant
A decolonizing methodology that incorporates these components demands the building of sincere and committed relationships based on trust and respect between researchers and participants, while also resolutely moving toward an ultimate objective of all research respecting Indigenous peoples being developed, directed, and controlled by Indigenous peoples.

The Collapse of Collaboration

For many in social work, PAR as a methodology becomes an obvious choice when one is committed to both decolonizing research and building relationships (Barbera, 2008; Rogers Stanton, 2014). Understood as both a philosophy and a research methodology that has the potential to contribute to an agenda of decolonization, PAR focuses on collaboration, social justice, social transformation, and the sharing of power and benefits (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). As a form of community-based research, PAR promotes change through building knowledge with those who are oppressed (Lee, 2008). It has been described as an approach that:

- Seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart, it is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives. (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p.854)

The process of reflection intrinsic to PAR can result in new and emerging insights and findings. Such reflection is also central to ongoing community involvement, and to address changing needs of the community, which the research itself often helps to reveal (Lawson, Caringi, Pyles, Jurkowski, & Bozlak, 2015). Within this context, PAR requires typical inequities of power and decision-making associated with traditional research approaches be openly confronted, challenged, and ultimately replaced with those emphasizing participation, collaboration, and consensus (Lawson et al., 2015). This makes it necessary for researchers to question the values and privileges that underlie both their knowledge and experience. PAR is, therefore, highly relevant to working with Indigenous communities (Evans et al., 2009; Rogers Stanton, 2014). However, PAR is not a panacea for addressing all the ‘wrongs’ associated with more conventional approaches. Nor does PAR necessarily achieve collaboration, social justice, social transformation, and the sharing of power and benefits (Kim, 2016; Lee, 2008; Rogers Stanton, 2014). There are multiple reasons for this, many of them related to the exigencies of the institutional presence and realities associated with academic practice and research.

Funding, for example, typically requires that researchers produce academic texts and present their findings at conferences. This positions the larger academic community, rather than Indigenous communities, as the primary beneficiaries of university-based research. Consequently, even when Indigenous peoples are fully involved in producing research outcomes, they do not necessarily derive equal benefit from them (Greenhill & Dix, 2008). Instead:
As one of the most consulted and researched people in the country, [Indigenous peoples] are the least listened to...[Researchers], on the other hand, have either tidied up their files, made a decision on our behalf, made a scientific breakthrough, attained doctoral status, published their opinions, become experts in the field, provided a consultant’s report, moved on to another theory, gained a new prestigious portfolio, attracted lucrative publicity, gained political kudos, offered legislation, made an impressive speech, attacked our credibility, denied our Aboriginality, advised us as to what we should be doing, or created another problem for us on which we will soon be consulted. (Bailey (1993) as cited in Greenhill & Dix, 2008, p. 51-52)

This occurs because universities and funding bodies are organized to accommodate traditional forms of research and research productivity; a reality that highlights a disconnection between what is considered an appropriate methodology for research with Indigenous communities and institutional expectations to produce academic knowledge (Castleden, Sylvestre, Martin, & McNally, 2015). The way universities and funding bodies are organized, as well as many of their objectives — stated or implied — suggest that while some attention is being paid to the importance of research subjects having a greater say in the conduct of research, modernist assumptions about what constitutes appropriate theory, methodology, and process, prevail. While research is intended to serve ‘the public good’, social elites within both the academy and the state determine what that means. These individuals (academics and others) are capable of influencing the goals and objectives for not only their research but also that of others. In this same vein, peer review by others in the academy ensures the perpetuation of established norms. Further, output by the researcher is a measure of their merit in being considered for ongoing support, funding, and promotion. Where a community plays a significant role in establishing research objectives, once caught up in the machinations of institutions that function with these norms and exigencies, decisions dealing with who owns the research, as well as who can use, communicate, and publish results, can be quickly jeopardized. Colonial logic and assumptions underpin these inequitable relationships (Smith, 1999).

The Nanivara Project in Nunavut

The Nanivara (‘I found it’): Naujaat/Gjoa Haven History Recovery Community Development Project is a three-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)-funded study organized through the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) School of Social Work in partnership with the communities of Gjoa Haven and Naujaat, Nunavut Territory. The project connects Inuit youth (15 to 30 years of age) with the social and colonial history of eastern Arctic Canada and attempts to bridge significant generational differences between an older generation of Inuit Elders, grounded in the logic and norms of a predominantly hunting culture, and Inuit youth. Essential to this work has been the ongoing involvement of Inuit youth as members of the research team.

The social and colonial history of Canada’s Eastern Arctic (present-day Nunavut) forms the background for much of the research design (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). Nunavut was established under the Nunavut Agreement between Inuit represented by the Tunngavik Federation of Nunavut, and the Minister of Northern Affairs and Northern Development, Government of Canada in 1993 (“Agreement between,” 2010; “Nunavut Inuit org wants,” 2016).
The agreement, which came into effect in 1999, was the culmination of negotiation and research conducted throughout the eastern Arctic dating back to the early 1970s. The late 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s were characterized by state efforts to introduce Inuit to ‘modern’ forms of social, political, and economic life, as Inuit were commonly thought to live outmoded lifestyles that required unsustainable levels of government assistance (Tester, 2010; Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). The development of northern resources — oil, gas, and minerals — was understood as providing revenues and opportunities essential to the making of Inuit futures (Keeling & Sandlos, 2015; Tester, Lambert & Lim, 2014). Commencing in the mid to late 1950s, Inuit hunters were encouraged to move and relocate with their families to communities near industrial sites where they could assume roles and wages in the military and extraction economies (McPherson, 2003). However, northern policy-makers grossly underestimated the impact that settlement life would have on Inuit families. Today, this impact includes highest poverty in Canada (a low-income rate of 47.7% of Inuit in Nunavut; Duhaime & Edouard, 2015) and extreme household overcrowding (34% of homes are considered crowded in the territory; Wallace, 2014). It has also contributed to the highest rates of suicide in the country (109 per 100,000 in 2014; Hicks, 2013) and a negative relationship between young Inuit and the territorial education system (a dropout rate of 50%; Gilmore, 2010).

Developed by Frank Tester, at the UBC School of Social Work, with Elders in two Inuit communities, the Nanivara Project worked with more than forty youth in Gjoa Haven and Naujaat, Nunavut, over a two-year period. Six of these youth took on greater responsibility as project facilitators in their own communities. Programming for the project was undertaken at UBC by student researchers from a variety of disciplines, including social work, geography, history, anthropology, and political science. Consisting of three phases between 2014 and 2016, the project’s first phase included consultation with representatives of both communities. Meetings with Elders and community stakeholders occurred to establish research objectives. In these meetings, Elders described the need for their youth to develop a better understanding of Inuit history. Collaboratively, the project was shaped to provide a context and set of resources for Inuit youth to explore their own history, while also inspiring confidence in those that felt disaffected by a lack of knowledge about their history, or an absence of traditional cultural knowledge and skills. A participatory research model that incorporated popular education techniques was selected as the most appropriate way for conducting decolonizing research and achieving both these objectives.

A series of visits in 2015 by UBC facilitators to Nunavut followed this consultation. The UBC facilitators held a range of relationships to Nunavut and the North, from being long-time Northern researchers, to past government employees, and Nunavut beneficiaries. These visits included hosting workshops to learn about the youths’ areas of interests and following these, to explore together the social and political histories of their communities. This work afforded considerable opportunity for important relationships to be formed between the youth and UBC facilitators due to the lengthy time spent together over the course of the summer (i.e., over nine weeks). The final phase of the project involved the youth traveling and presenting what they had learned at conferences, as well as conducting deeper analysis of archival material, and follow up work with the youth in their respective communities. For the vast majority of the youth, this work was unlike any they had experienced previously. Several of them attended and presented at academic conferences in Vancouver and northern Norway where they learned about Inuit
artifacts taken from Nunavut by explorers in the early 1900s. This sparked important conversations about repatriation. In Norway, the youth explored artifacts collected through journeys of Arctic explorers, such as Roald Amundsen in Oslo and participated in the international Arctic Indigenous Education Conference (see: https://aiec2016.com). Their impact was considerable, particularly given their participation as the only Indigenous youth in attendance at a conference dominated by educators and policy makers. They shared what they had learned about their social history through the Nanivara project, the nature of their educational experiences, and their insights and involvements with the education system in Nunavut. Responding to the lack of opportunity to do this previously, Renee Angotialuk, a youth researcher involved in this project, explained, “I want other people to know that we are important too, and that we count as people, and I hope in the future that more people are interested and inspired by us Inuit” (Indigenous Youth Advisory Circle, 2016, p. 42). A larger group of young people in the project visited Vancouver in the summer of 2016, where they took part in a facilitator-training workshop dedicated to learning about the social history of Nunavut with their peers. These youth returned to their communities along with UBC facilitators, who remained with them for another four weeks, to help them share their learning with their peers.

Central to the Nanivara Project has been a focus on providing opportunity where Inuit youth research themselves — their history, their culture, their community, and their territory. To do this, the youth gained research and audio-visual skills from UBC researchers while learning to conduct interviews with Elders in their communities. Between the summer of 2015 and 2016, the youth conducted and filmed nearly 30 interviews with Elders, producing an important body of material for not only them and the project but also for the territory and future generations. This collection of material was displayed at the Natilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven and adds to existing resources produced by Inuit for their use and benefit. Compared to the education youth receive within the territorial school system, where, as youth researcher Benoit Sateana described, “Most of our work is just paperwork,” this process of learning to conduct research helped him “to learn about what people did to follow the Inuit lifestyle, like what to do and what not to do... [and] how you treat people” (B. Sateana, personal communication, October 20, 2016). By conducting research with the youth, significant relationships were formed. These relationships led to substantial discussion between the youth and UBC researchers regarding the youths’ experiences. As detailed below, we came to understand the institutional barriers that impacted this research, as well as the youths’ full participation within it.

**Institutional Barriers to Participation**

A host of material, social, and cultural factors can affect the capacity of many Indigenous peoples to participate in research. As federal funding agency, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) recognizes this reality and encourages researchers to strive to enhance their participation ((SSHRC, 2014). UBC echoes this sentiment in its strategic planning: “in both academics and operations, the University addresses issues of ignorance and misunderstanding resulting from the educational failures of the past,” (University of British Columbia (UBC), 2012, p. 16). UBC also promotes the goal to “expand educational opportunities for Aboriginal people” and “increase engagement and strengthen mutually supportive and productive relationships with Aboriginal communities” (UBC, 2012, p. 17). These publicized commitments, when taken together, acknowledge the historical wrongs
associated with research and Indigenous peoples, as well as a dedication to developing different relationships based on a decolonizing agenda. Unfortunately, a disparity between these goals, the values associated with PAR — consistent with aims for decolonizing social work research and the administration of this same research via funding and academic structures at the academy — continues to exist.

Understanding the specific barriers to improving research relationships and promoting social justice requires recognition of the imbalance of human and material resources possessed by many Indigenous communities in relation to those within academia. Researchers often overlook the ways in which these may be regarded within Indigenous communities, and how differences in the valuation of resources can create confusion or frustration, and discord within research relationships. Money, for instance, is a common a signifier of difference between researchers and community participants (Dutheil, Tester, & Konek, 2015). An example of how valuations of, and attitudes towards money can lead to confusion is evident in distinctions between payment for service and honoraria. When working with Elders, researchers can be apprehensive about offering money for fear it amounts to a commodification of wisdom (International Research Institute for Maori and Indigenous Education, 1997). This can contrast with Inuit values associated with money, in which payment is typically regarded as a sign of respect (Dutheil, Tester, & Konek, 2015). Gifting in many Indigenous cultures is also typically a sign of respect, and an important part of the relationship building that can occur between researchers and communities. As noted in what follows, however, this involves other challenges.

Money also holds important implications for relationships with respect to gender, age, and sexual orientation. This is illustrated by older, non-Indigenous men that typically head academic research in Canada. At UBC, for instance, 60% of professors are men and only 32% are visible minorities (UBC Equity and Inclusion Office, 2013). Whereas in our experience, research participants in Nunavut can often be young Inuit women — as was the case in the Nanivara project. Although there exists a growing number of Inuit researchers in Nunavut, most research in the territory continues to be conducted by Qallunaat (non-Inuit) researchers, and many Inuit research participants continue to struggle with significant socio-economic issues (Prosser, 2011; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). Many young women can also be mothers or primary care givers (Marmer & Sudmant, 2010). Where Inuit women are compelled to ask Qallunaat men for money related to their research involvement (i.e. for an advance on their salary), an intersection of colonial and patriarchal relations of dependency and imbalance and can be reproduced. Administrative realities of project financing and the power associated with this adds a further power imbalance, as authority for a project’s resources and their distribution lie with the principal investigator (PI). This creates an inherent power dimension to the structure of research and the control of research funds. Further, funds made available to Inuit through most research projects do not address the significant structural issues associated with poverty that many Inuit experience. Given these issues, sensitivity and open discussions as to how they impact relationships are crucial. For without them, misunderstandings and resentment can naturally evolve. Dutheil, Tester, & Konek (2015) have offered examples of this. By being aware of these issues, and to mitigate some of the socio-economic barriers to Inuit participation in the Nanivara project, several youths were hired as co-researchers and compensated appropriately. This approach was consistent with SSHRC’s guidelines of “provid[ing] employment and
transfer[ing] skills to Inuit youth involved in data collection” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 129).

Although it is not uncommon for researchers to hire university students as research assistants and pay wages that commensurate with funding agency and university guidelines, it is far more complicated to offer this same opportunity to Inuit youth. Challenges arise when it comes to using research funding provided by SSHRC and administered by a university. One such example was the need to employ Inuit youth as designated contractors, which required invoices be created each month for their employment. Payment of each invoice took between six to eight weeks for processing and often resulted in periods of over two months for cheques to be made available. In Nunavut, plane schedules, weather, and highly irregular delivery service can extend this time even further. As many Inuit do not have bank accounts, direct deposit is a limited option. For those who experience financial stress, this wait can complicate participation in research and make other employment opportunities (where they exist) far more attractive. Consequently, participation in research projects can be limited to those who have the financial means to endure such extended wait times.

A further impediment to hiring Inuit youth is exemplified by SSHRC’s emphasis on the importance for researchers to hire “students, emerging scholars and other highly qualified personnel” (SSHRC, 2016, “Evaluation Criteria and Scoring,” para. 1). Universities encourage this through financial support programs, such as UBC’s Work Learn program — programs that are not available to Indigenous youth who are not university students (UBC, n.d.). Although the federal government offers similar support by way of programs, such as the Canada Summer Jobs, these require participants be registered students who will return to full-time studies in the fall (Government of Canada, n.d.). No equivalent program exists for Inuit youth who are not currently in school. This is problematic because many Inuit youth in pursuit of higher education, apart from limited offerings by a local branch of the Nunavut Arctic College, must leave their community and travel to southern Canada. Their absence from the community, therefore, precludes their participation in community research. This lack of support for hiring Inuit youth thus may contribute to a reproduction of traditional research relationships with communities, and could lead to a privileging of non-Indigenous university students hired as research assistants. UBC offers an example of this, as only 951 of the over 50,000 students are Indigenous (i.e., less than 2% of the entire student body; UBC, 2014).

Although honoraria are not intended as payment for service, but as gestures of gratitude for one’s participation in research, providing other youth with honoraria was complicated and created challenges to research relationships. As many of the youth collected income support also known as ‘welfare,’ any monies provided to them through the project would be clawed back from their welfare cheque the following month. This is because participating in a research project falls outside what the Government of Nunavut considers a ‘productive choice’ (Government of Nunavut, Department of Family Services, n.d.). This means that youth who receive honoraria can find themselves in greater financial hardship the following month. Policies and practices that claw back money, such as this have been identified consistently as systemic issues that have the potential to act as disincentives to employment (Baker, 1995; Sheikh, 2015). Notably, some youth involved in the Nanivara project opted not to receive any honoraria to ensure their welfare payments were not decreased. For youth who were more financially stable
and did not access welfare, this was not a problem; they could accept honoraria during the project with no penalty. This produced a deeply inequitable situation of the sort that can give rise to resentments affecting the employment of Inuit youth as researchers and affect working relations within a project. This also highlights inter-jurisdictional issues that contribute to the current lack of opportunities for Inuit youth in research. Unfortunately, for some of the youth, this was not their first experience with such inequities in relation to what are typically rare opportunities in their communities.

Travel for research also presented significant obstacles. In February 2016, the research team attended a major international conference on Indigenous education in Norway. International travel required the youth to obtain passports. For many of the students it was also necessary to gather birth certificates, photos, and various documents required for the passport application. From within the communities, where there was no capacity to handle passport applications or to take photos that complied with passport guidelines, this was impossible. Despite involving a Nunavut Member of Parliament’s office, applications took many months, and ultimately resulted in six ‘rush’ passport applications made at considerable expense.

What are undeniably travel expenses, these passports and the necessary documentation to obtain them fall outside of what are considered acceptable research-related travel expenses and therefore require direct approval from SSHRC for reimbursement through project funding (SSHRC, 2013). Although SSHRC’s Aboriginal Research Statement of Principles commits to accommodating the "distinct cultural, historical, political and socio-economic spaces [emphasis added]" of Indigenous communities, costs incurred through this application process were refused (SSHRC, 2015, “Guiding Principles,” para. 9). This is problematic given that a host of travel and subsistence expenses related to research planning and exchange of information are otherwise eligible (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), 2016; SSHRC, 2013). UBC policy is almost identical (M. Lum, personal communication, April 8, 2016). This ensures the absence of a passport by someone unable to bear its cost can impede their participation in research that involves international travel and therefore their participation in what contributes to the achievement of research objectives. It also demonstrates how SSHRC and university policies, which advocate for PAR and wish to support Indigenous peoples as research participants and partners, have not anticipated the material circumstances and barriers to participation in research that many Indigenous peoples experience. Further, it restricts the opportunity for many Indigenous peoples to attend conferences, which as a considerable part of academic work can deny an important foundational experience for those interested in pursuing academic careers. Though travel for conferences is a common use of funds, this experience highlighted an inflexibility of policies held by both funding agencies and universities, as well as how such inflexibility can serve to limit the participation of Indigenous peoples in research.

Most importantly, the challenges of fully involving Inuit youth in the project as researchers by including them in travel to Norway must be examined in comparison to the relative ease of involving university students and faculty. Those who can afford to participate in research — both in terms of time and money — can access and provide input to research in ways not possible for those who face economic barriers to their involvement. It also meant the Inuit youth remained unaccommodated via university and funding agency policies. Despite the stated commitments by both UBC and SSHRC, policy and administration are not structured to address
the socio-economic imbalances built into the traditional research relationship. Providing opportunity for Inuit youth to transcend the role of participant, to that of researcher, was in essence denied. Thus, disproportionately ranked among the poorest Canadians, research funding bodies and universities have yet to adequately address the significant structural gaps that perpetuate inequities of opportunity through policies that fail to accommodate the material, social, and geographical realities of Indigenous peoples (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). For many Indigenous peoples, this means remaining at the margins of research important to their futures and well-being.

Barriers to Indigenous participation can also impact the development of relationships that form throughout the research process. As in the case of the Nanivara project, recognition of the ways in which travel can bring people together and forge bonds was important to the overall research goals. Travelling as a group deepened the relationships between and among the researchers and Inuit youth, but also had a ripple effect in terms of improved relationships within communities. As Inuit youth researcher with this project Natasha Uttak, explains:

I feel more open to my family. I wasn’t that close to my family and now I’m closer to my family [after traveling]...leaving them for a bit and [then] coming back home...I got to know people in my home community that are my own age that I never get to see very often. (N. Uttak, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

The exclusion of expenses, such as passports, which were necessary in this case for the Inuit youth to fully participate in the project as co-researchers, goes beyond policies designed to control expenses by defining that which is reasonable. In this, limitations to decolonizing research, particularly concerning ‘engagement’ of Indigenous peoples and communities are exposed.

Although some of the limitations discussed here were understood — to a degree — prior to engaging in this research, some were related to more recent institutional policy changes. Others, the researchers were not aware of and had not yet encountered. One such change that impacted the project and will continue to impact work with Indigenous communities is a recent restriction on reimbursement associated with giving gifts (M. Lum, personal communication, April 8, 2016; NSERC, 2016). Yet this project, alongside many, if not all forms of research that engage Indigenous peoples, often involve gifts. This is because:

When you seek knowledge from an Elder, you offer tobacco or other appropriate gifts to symbolize that you are accepting the ethical obligations that go with received knowledge. In each case, the exchange confirms a relationship that continues beyond the time and place of the exchange. (Brant Castellano, 2004, p. 104)

The ability to form relationships can be largely dependent on gift-giving, as it is typically a key element within the initial contact between researchers and Indigenous communities. Giving gifts, such as tobacco in Canada’s southern provinces, has long been understood as essential to forming research relationships (University of Manitoba, 2016). Consequently, it is regularly incorporated within orientation and teaching by universities and governments to new researchers (Absolon, 2009; Brant Castellano, 2004; University of Manitoba, 2016; Lavallée, 2009). Giving
gifts and the importance of this action as a form of recognition and respect for Indigenous peoples, particularly Elders, is even discussed in Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Article 9.15). Importantly, giving gifts is also consistent with moving towards decolonizing the research process, as it requires researchers begin from a place of respect, equity, and reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge. Policy change that prohibits the use of research funds for gifts thereby requires researchers pay for this out-of-pocket — something graduate researchers, who operate on extremely tight budgets, are not typically able to do. Further, when projects engage large numbers of Indigenous peoples, as did the Nanivara project, this expense, as a personal one, can become prohibitive.

The consequence of this policy and the barriers discussed in this paper can and do limit research and researchers, in adopting decolonizing approaches to research. It follows that researchers should consider gathering additional funding outside of typical government and university sources. In keeping with this, seeking partnerships, where possible, to better support the material needs of Indigenous peoples and communities to participate fully in research can be fundamental to a project’s success. Most importantly, however, is the need to engage in sociopolitical action to address policy-failures, such as this and others described in this text. Policy changes that support flexibility within the research process and allow for adjustments where necessary are critical. This is essential to addressing what, Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explained as “the greater danger,” that is:

The creeping [of] policies [that] intrude into every aspect of our lives, legitimated by research, [and] informed more often by ideology. [This is because] the power of research was not in the visits made by researchers to our communities, nor in their fieldwork and the rude questions they often asked. In fact, many individual non-indigenous researchers remain highly respected and well-liked by the communities with whom they have lived. [However,] at a common-sense level research [can be understood] both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the Indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. (p. 3)

To address this, researchers must engage with communities in a way that moves beyond the traditional research role to one that incorporates not just advocacy, but activism. This is because “decolonizing research strategies are less about the struggle for method and more about the spaces that make decolonizing research possible” (Zavala, 2013, p.55). Only then can researchers work towards truly engaging in PAR with Indigenous communities and moving research relationships towards reconciliation. Literature concerning decolonizing research is consistent with this position (e.g., Bishop, 1998; Steinhauer, 2002; Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012). It is also consistent with the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls for Action, which require federal funding agencies to collaborate with Indigenous peoples and universities to create a national research program (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). To take this seriously requires more than rhetoric regarding relationships, inclusion, and an awareness of the institutional barriers that continue to limit research with Indigenous peoples and communities, but instead effective policy change such that research can unfold in ‘a good way’ (Ball & Janyst, 2008).
Conclusion: Beyond Participation

Research with Inuit youth through the Nanivara Project highlights a post-modern reality in which rhetorical gestures, slogans, statements, and public proclamations substitute for the kinds of material and substantive changes required to make decolonizing research a reality. At the heart of this is a failure to confront the inherent power dimensions of community-based research, and the broader structures of institutional funding and finance that run through academic research. Moreover, the implications of these dimensions on research relationships have yet to be fully examined. Institutional policies that remain incongruent or inconsistent with PAR ultimately foster inequality between researchers and participants. Such policies, many of which may be well intended, challenge the building of equitable relationships between the two. Political economy — an in-depth understanding of the nature of power in relation to the social and material circumstances that confront Indigenous peoples — must become an important component of the curriculum of schools of social work in Canada. To ensure a decolonized education, greater emphasis on communication of shared understandings, a critical examination of how knowledge is created, and a focus on tackling colonial hegemones must be prioritized within the social work profession. This requires collaboration that goes well beyond participation. For at the root of collaboration is communication, not merely interpersonal social relations, but relations of the colonial history and material circumstances that impact what we experience and learn from each other. Principle 11 of the standards for accreditation of schools of social work in Canada states that: “Social work programs acknowledge and challenge the injustices of Canada’s colonial history and continuing colonization efforts as they relate to the role of social work education in Canada and the self-determination of the Indigenous peoples” (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2014, p. 3). This is a vague, open-ended statement, and does little to ensure an understanding of the material and cultural dimensions of Canadian culture and colonial history. It also remains a far cry from addressing the recommendations of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Although power differentials continue to persist despite inclusive approaches, it is essential that social work researchers strive for social justice in both the practice of social work and the conduct of research (Chouinard & Cousins, 2007). A commitment to social justice requires not only attention to the way Indigenous peoples are and have been treated. It requires an understanding of both the material and cultural dimensions of the colonizing culture that give substance to research and social justice practice. These material and cultural concerns continue to inform institutions. As our experience with the Nanivara Project indicates, a failure to do so runs the risk of perpetuating the kinds of injustice social work research needs to confront.

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Critical Social Work, 2018 Vol. 19, No. 1


