Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL)

WORKING PAPER #10

Decolonizing Methodologies: Reflections of an Interviewer

Erin Oldynski

September 2013

Centre for the Study of Education and Work, OISE, University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. West, Room 7-112, Toronto ON M5S 1V6
Telephone: 416-978-0515 Email:info@apcol.ca

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project represents a partnership effort across several post-secondary institutions and a range of community-based groups in Toronto (Canada). This project was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under its Community University Research Alliance program (2009-2014). Drawing on carefully designed survey and case study methods as well as a participatory action research orientation - the aim of this research project has been to offer the most intensive study of activist learning and development in anti-poverty work in Canada.

The co-editors are pleased to present its official working paper series. The publications contained in this series are linked to APCOL project work and themes. They are authored and co-authored by academic as well as community-based researchers. The material is the copy-right of individual authors or co-authors. Rights for use in the APCOL Working Paper Series is granted to the APCOL project for these purposes only.

APCOL Working Paper Series Co-Editors:
Stephanie Ross (York University, Toronto, Canada)
Peter Sawchuk (University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada)

APCOL Project Co-Leaders:
Sharon Simpson (Labour Community Services, Toronto, Canada)
Peter Sawchuk (University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada)

Decolonizing Methodologies: Reflections of an Interviewer

Erin Oldynski

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

Abstract: This paper explores the theme and relationship across several interviews conducted as part of a participatory research project focused on how people construct themselves within the narrative of poverty. Throughout this paper I reflect on the process of interviewing and the ways in which my own research methodologies both reproduced and challenged particular forms of cultural and colonial knowledges. The findings of this project provide implications for how to conduct research through participatory, communal, local, and subjective methodologies that can be emancipatory for the communities that produce such research.

Keywords: anti-racism; cultural knowledge; anti-colonialism; poverty; participatory research

DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES: REFLECTIONS OF AN INTERVIEWER

LOCATING MYSELF

I am a white female university researcher who was involved for the past year as an interviewer with the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project in a priority neighbourhood of Toronto. I am currently finishing my graduate degree in sociology and employed part-time as a student union organizer. Professor Njoki Wane has said, “it is important to know the world we live in, how we want to represent ourselves, and to accept this representation”. As a person with Polish ancestry who now resides in Canada, this notion has two distinct meanings for me. Physically, I understand myself as a settler on Indigenous land and as a guest to this territory. Spiritually, I understand my own indigeneity as residing primarily in my heart.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The APCOL project is a community-university research initiative active in eight of the thirteen “priority” neighbourhoods of Toronto – called such because they have been identified as the poorest communities in the city in need of “development” and targeted outside investment. The specific focus of APCOL is to study how community members

learn to engage, re-engage, as well as remain unengaged in various forms of anti-poverty activism such as improving access to healthy food, campaigning for affordable housing, and increasing opportunities for youth employment. The primary goals of APCOL are to contribute to local neighbourhood capacity to engage in anti-poverty work as residents define it and to develop connections between community anti-poverty initiatives across Toronto. In Weston-Mt Dennis, APCOL is currently involved in documenting how community residents are organizing around issues of economic development, as they relate to youth employment opportunities and how local businesses can work together to improve local economic conditions.

As a university researcher in Weston-Mt Dennis, I was paired with a community researcher to carry out 12 one-on-one interviews with residents about their development as community activists. The process of carrying out these interviews was done in collaboration with the development of a local economic development campaign, called West End Local Economic Development (WE LED). Each week, I met with members of WE LED to document how the campaign was developing and to interview new members of the group about why they chose to become involved. The primary goals of WE LED are to:

- Engage with marginalized groups, including local business owners, to develop a collective approach to neighbourhood economic development
- Identify local economic development priorities and strategies
- Explore ways to support small and medium size businesses in the neighbourhood to make them more sustainable, successfully with a stronger sense of community

- Pursue economic opportunities for local youth and residents, including supports for self-employment and entrepreneurship, as well as links with potential employers.

Improving the economic conditions of youth, residents and locally owned businesses in the Mount Dennis area is a main priority for the Mt Dennis ANC. The aim of the WE LED campaign is to develop a local economic development strategy based on community research involving local business owners, residents and community organizations. The campaign is a collaborative effort to learn how to improve the economic conditions of the area with a focus on strengthening local assets while also building links to city-wide movements focused on the systemic roots of poverty. Ultimately, the goal of WE LED is to bring about long lasting and positive changes in the Weston – Mt Dennis area.

The development of WE LED and the interviews that accompanied this campaign involved a collaborative relationship among several organizations, including the Mt Dennis ANC, the City of Toronto, Social Planning Toronto, APCOL, the University of Toronto Commercial Gentrification (CGEN) research project, and the York Youth Coalition (YYC). Most of the people I interviewed are involved with at least one of these organizations.

In terms of the research process, there were three stages involved in developing the WE LED campaign. The first stage involved interviewing business owners as well as distributing and later collecting questionnaires about what barriers they encountered in

local economic development. The second stage was the presentation of research findings to a wider community: the first presentation was given to the city's Integrated Labour Market Planning Group; and the second presentation was given to a wide range of community stakeholders at a community forum organized by WE LED. These events allowed WE LED to present information, and to develop trust and build relationships with local business owners. Third is the ongoing process of interviewing local residents – both those who are engaged in WE LED and those who are not – about their development as community activists. For this part, we ask questions such as: Why did you choose to become involved? What barriers exist for becoming involved? What tools or resources would increase community engagement? WE LED then created a magazine and website to solidify its presence among community members, politicians, and local business owners. Each of these stages has contributed to situating WE LED, the Action for Neighbourhood Change community centre and the York Youth Coalition in an important position within the neighbourhood so that city planners and elected representatives cannot easily dismiss WE LED organizing efforts.

DISCUSSION

Many researchers and community organizers have written and talked about the colonization of the mind and the need to decolonize research methodologies by de-centering dominant ways of knowing. Throughout *Colonization of the Mind* the main argument of Ashis Nandy is that the modern project of colonialism works by creating secular structures and hierarchies that are not compatible with the indigenous order of that society. Such an analysis is applicable to the phenomenon of community-university

research projects such as APCOL because of the ways in which this project aims to conduct research in an interviewee-directed, community-based, and collaborative way in which university researchers carry out interviews in partnership with community resident interviewers. It is important to note here that Nandy makes a distinction between the approach of first generation colonizers and that of subsequent colonizers by stating that – although all colonizers are racist – the former were "bandit-kings…[who] robbed, maimed and killed" without a civilizing mission, while the latter were "well-meaning, hard-working, middle-class missionaries" who wanted to help (170). This is the fine line that university researchers walk because our methodologies – particularly when our research is community-based and done with the intent of helping others – must be done in a way that consciously acknowledges power imbalances based on class, race, gender, and other forms of social stratification. In addition to acknowledging power imbalances, our methodologies must aim to fundamentally disrupt such imbalances by conducting research in collaboration with so-called research "subjects" by taking direction from community members with regards to development of interview questions, having community members conduct the interviews in partnership with university researchers, and disseminating research findings in a meaningful, culturally aware way. As Nandy notes, the key difference between first generation colonizers and subsequent colonizers is that the latter have sought to colonize the mind in addition to the body and that the rulers of a given society set psychological limits for the oppressed by reproducing colonial knowledges. This is what we must aim to disrupt in community-university research projects. As we have discussed throughout Njoki Wane's Cultural Knowledges course, the only way for the colonized to break this

dependent relationship is by rejecting the ideology of the colonial system and refusing to accept the colonizer as a legitimate source of identity. Likewise, the only way for the colonizer to disrupt this relationship is by de-centering dominant ways of knowing and research methodologies.

As a university researcher conducting interviews, I was paired with Gail, a long-time Mt Dennis resident and community organizer. I conducted many of the following interviews in partnership with Gail, where at times she would lead the process and at other times I would lead. Because our interview questions focused on how and why people become community organizers, the actual content of the interviews is directly applicable to the topic of decolonizing methodologies in that interviewees reflexively discuss the power imbalances inherent in doing community work and how they consciously disrupt such imbalances. Throughout the process of conducting interviews for the APCOL research project, we noticed an emerging theme of residents coming together to collectively organize based on shared cultural values, and with a shared opposition to dominant ideas of individuality and competing interests. An organizing strategy used by Shadya, a staff person with the York Youth Coalition, is to begin meetings in which there is a shared culture among participants, by asking: “What is our purpose?” As Shadya explained:

> One thing I’ve noticed is that it actually solves a lot of conflict. The conflict that was about to happen or the conflict that has already happened. It calms things down. It sizzles the tensions. People start thinking clearly. Start seeing that ‘I was wrong on that level’. It opens up the

> communication channels. It's interesting because with that group, it's a homogenous group, it's like all Somalis, all Muslims. It's easier that way because there's a cultural and religious understanding on one level. You don't want to be accused of bringing your religion into it, but taking it to a new level and asking 'What is our purpose? Why are we here?'

Similarly, long-time Mt Dennis resident and community organizer Michael expressed that community members living in poverty must recognize their positioning as oppressed members of society and from this recognition develop a collective organizing strategy to improve their situation. As Michael stated:

> I realized throughout my own organizing and throughout my own struggle and that kind of stuff, is everybody, even those of us who are impoverished have a sort of responsibility that we have to take to get us out of this situation. And our own weaknesses and our own divisions and our own type of trying to be the top of everybody else, instead of trying to be equal within ourselves, is what is holding us within our own impoverished situation. If everybody came together, and actually organized and came together we could all change our situation. We're under this oppression because we allow ourselves to be, right?

Community organizer and local entrepreneur, Nicole, also noted the importance of working together collectively to address social inequalities. Rather than starting a business that relies on competition, Nicole founded a make-up business that relies on

constant recruitment of local salespeople for its growth and sustainability. Nicole explains:

> In the corporate world it's not always advantageous for your peers or higher ups to tell you everything they know to help you succeed. You're a threat for their job. In our environment you're encouraged to learn as much as you can because you will make more money, you'll impact more people and you'll have more success. So it's totally different. So when I'm out on the street and I see a young mother with children, you're able to personally be that example for her and tell her where you came from. And immediately she has the confidence to step out and get a job or start to get the skills that help her become top in another field or go back to school.

In our Cultural Knowledges course we have also discussed spirituality as a form of resistance and the ways that we are differently implicated in this act of resistance. In *Theory in the flesh: toward an endarkened epistemology* Aida Hurtado writes of black feminist theory as coming from the collective experience of women of colour and the role that spirituality has in this process. She argues that ignoring the spirit does damage to the self and that therefore spirituality is necessarily integral to our embodied ways of knowing as well as resisting dominant and colonial knowledges. However, what it means to have embodied knowledge as a white body is an ongoing question that I ask. Much of white identity and history is predicated on the objectification of other cultures and histories so my embodied knowledge begins with that acknowledgement. In a

society where whiteness is hardly ever suspect, what can be learned in those spaces where it is made suspect, such as when I conduct interviews as a university researcher in the largely racialized neighbourhood of Mt Dennis? Specifically, in the context of participatory research projects such as APCOL, how can we talk about our personal and collective implications in the decolonizing project?

Gail and I often discussed these questions together, when we met before and after conducting interviews. Gail felt that these questions were also relevant to her experiences as a woman of mixed-race from South Africa, because she felt that she was often perceived by interviewees to be a white woman. She also felt that this perception often affects her ability to participate in community organizing efforts. As Gail explained:

> Sometimes I think it's my funny accent or the way I look that prevents me from helping people. People have the perception that I'm a white person from South Africa with this accent I have. People assume I come from a very privileged white background. They don't know my background. That I'm a person of mixed race. They don't know my history. They assume I'm a privileged white person who oppressed people in South Africa.

Recognizing and respecting diverse cultural identities is a key aspect of decolonizing research methodologies. According to Tyson Yunkaporta and Sue McGinty in *Reclaiming Aboriginal Knowledge at the Cultural Interface*, one way to decolonize methodologies and interrupt power imbalances inherent in the interviewer/interviewee

and researcher/research subject dynamic is to privilege Indigenous and local place-based knowledge, rather than view it as a limitation (58). To do this, Yunkaporta, et al contrast positivist research focused on individual, non-local, objectifiable, generalisable inquiry with participatory research focused on communal, local, subjective inquiry that is emancipatory for those who partake in its development.

The APCOL project, for example, can be considered a participatory action research project because of its pairing of university researchers with community researchers. As James Joseph Scheurich and Michelle D. Young point out in *Coloring Epistemology*, it is often the case with mainstream research projects that Indigenous and local epistemologies are not considered "legitimate" ways of knowing by the mostly white, male researchers who carry out such projects. This lack of cultural awareness and perpetuation of dominant social histories is a form of epistemological racism that can only be addressed by asking if our ways of knowing as researchers are racially based, and if so, moving toward teaching and promoting epistemologies that are representative of diverse experiences and cultures. For example, Shadya pointed out that some of the murals in Weston – Mt Dennis are painted by dominant bodies to reflect dominant experiences. Shadya explains:

> You could walk in the neighbourhood and see certain murals and ask who these murals represent? These were done by young people but with outside artists who came in. Who's questioning who, whose story being told? What organizations are being served by this? It all comes down to who has power. Some resident groups have more power than others. How

> do you bring this awareness and power to the other side of the community so that they stand up and say no this has to stop, this is not our story. We need to recognize that this is the story.

Some scholars, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, have extended the analysis of mainstream research projects perpetuating epistemological racism to argue that research methodologies are inherently imperialist and the pursuit of knowledge is deeply entrenched in colonial practices (2). As Tuhiwai Smith powerfully states:

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract, and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations (1).

In other words, the dominant researcher obsession with objectivity and control over methodologies is a form of colonialism because it attempts to learn everything there is to learn about an oppressed community, and then use this knowledge to profit and benefit the privileged researcher, in the form of scholarship and knowledge ownership. An interview with long-time Mt Dennis resident and community organizer, Sojica,

addressed the question of whether community organizations and researchers are held accountable for the impact of their research:

> A lot of organizations aren't completely honest with the community. They say they want to do anti-oppression work or whatever but they're not honest all the time. I want to make sure the community gets back on its feet. So let's be honest with the community. Because I have a reputation to keep. When I work with people in the community, that's not just work for me. I didn't just come from out of the community to work here. This is my life. These people know me. They're still gonna see me after the work is done. I don't want to be called a liar. It seems like if you're honest about what your goals are, then it gives people an opportunity to make an informed decision about whether they want to be involved. If they don't know, you're tricking them. And the outcome in the end is the worst. You're not benefitting them. And you bring distrust into the community. And the next organization coming in will have a harder time.

Similarly, Kurt emphasized the importance of research projects such as APCOL following through on their stated goals and promises. Kurt stated:

> My aim is that you guys follow on what your promises are, so that my integrity doesn't fall in the mud because of what I'm promising. Because now I'm letting these people let their guards down. I'm saying 'this is what's going on and you need to be a part of it.' They already have a bad

> taste in their mouth from things that have happened in the past. If you give them another bad taste, you're going to push them even further away from any kind of activity like this. So that next time a person approaches them about something like this, they might be violent.

Throughout *Reflections from the Field: Three Categories of Cultural Knowledge Useful in Doing Cultural Therapy*, George Spindler argues that researchers must be aware of their culture how it may bias the transmission of skills and knowledge. In an exercise he calls "cultural therapy", Spindler argues that researchers must identify potential biases by classifying all cultural knowledge as belonging to one of three categories: mundane cultural knowledge, self-other cultural knowledge, and submerged cultural knowledge (467-69). While mundane cultural knowledge helps us function in everyday situations and has little impact on research methodologies, the latter two forms of knowledge must be held to account. Self-other knowledge affects how we express ourselves and how we relate to others, while submerged cultural knowledge refers to subconscious cultural understandings and hidden assumptions. Ultimately, what Spindler advocates for is a reflective approach to conducting research, in which the researcher attempts to name their biases and understand how these biases shape the outcome of research findings.

Community-based researcher and community organizer, Kurt, shared that becoming financially successful is challenging when you come from an impoverished community. As someone who has gained class privilege as an adult, Kurt has developed certain awareness with regards to "self-other cultural knowledge". Kurt explains:

> I don’t want to grow up in a neighbourhood like this and then suddenly become successful. Would I have to move out of the neighbourhood? Or be afraid of coming home at night? Those are your options when you become successful in a neighbourhood like this. Your peers become your enemies. Because they feel like you owe them. Because they feel like you just won the lottery. They didn’t see you going to work every day, they see where you’re at now. They don’t feel like they can do it because they didn’t see the process it took to get to where you are. Whereas if they can identify with you, and feel that you and them have something similar, and they can see you actually achieve it, then it’s real. It can be done. It’s not just ‘buy a ticket and you can have it’.

CONCLUSION

While many dominant researchers view the values and beliefs of Indigenous and local communities as “barriers” to otherwise “objective” methodologies, other researchers are emphasizing the importance of approaching cultural knowledges, values and behaviours as integrally linked to methodology (Tuhiwai Smith, 15). The findings of this research project include implications for creating methodologies that are based on local experiences and knowledges, and that these methodologies be continually open to discussion and reflexivity. Importantly, any writing that is done as a result of such research – such as this paper and the interview transcriptions included in it – must be done so respectfully and then disseminated to the people who helped create it. Finally, research dissemination is an ongoing process and must be done in culturally

appropriate ways and in partnership with the community that produced the research. It is important to note that for this very paper, Gail and I plan to create a ‘zine’ or self-published magazine and then disseminate it to members of the community. We are also in the process of co-authoring a paper together for submission to the APCOL working paper series almanac.

Throughout the process of interviewing, many participants and co-researchers in the APCOL study talked about the importance of supporting individual community members in their efforts to organize around specific issues as they define them. This is one of the most important lessons that I learned throughout the project. The point was often made that community organizers and researchers must avoid taking on too much as an individual because the real work is in taking a step back and creating space for others to step forward. As a “community-based university researcher” this has caused me question my own role in documenting community organizing activities and the inherent power in researching a community that is not my own and where I am a dominant body. Throughout my work as a researcher, I will challenge myself to always ask: whose knowledge is being represented and whose is being reproduced?

WORKS CITED

Gail. Personal Interview. 12 October 2011.

Hurtado, Aída. "Theory in the Flesh: Toward an Endarkened Epistemology." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16.2 (2003): 215-25.

Kurt. Personal Interview. 17 November 2011.

Michael. Personal Interview. 30 November 2011.

Nicole. Personal Interview. 2 October 2011.

Rahnema, Majid, and Victoria Bawtree. *The Post-Development Reader*. London: Zed, 1997.

Scheurich, James Joseph, and Michelle D. Young. "Anti-Racist Scholarship: An Advocacy." *www.sunypress.edu*. 1 Mar. 2002. Web. 13 Dec. 2012.

Shadya. Personal Interview. 18 October 2011.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed, 1999.

Sojica. Personal Interview. 14 October 2011.

Spindler, George. "Three Categories of Cultural Knowledge Useful in Doing Cultural Therapy." *Anthropology Education Quarterly* 30.4 (1999): 466-72.

Yunkaporta, Tyson, and Sue McGinty. "Reclaiming Aboriginal Knowledge at the Cultural Interface." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 36.2 (2009): 55-72.