



USAI

UTILITY
SELF-VOICING
ACCESS
INTER-RELATIONALITY

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Second edition Developed by: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres ©2016



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

About the OFIFC

Founded in 1971, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) works to support, advocate for, and build the capacity of member Friendship Centres across Ontario.

Emerging from a nation-wide, grass-roots movement dating back to the 1950's, Friendship Centres are community hubs where Indigenous people living in towns, cities, and urban centres can access culturally-based and culturally-appropriate programs and services every day. Today, Friendship Centres are dynamic hubs of economic and social convergence that create space for Indigenous communities to thrive. Friendship Centres are idea incubators for young Indigenous people attaining their education and employment goals, they are sites of cultural resurgence for Indigenous families who want to raise their children to be proud of who they are, and they are safe havens for Indigenous community members requiring supports.

In Ontario more than 84 per cent of Indigenous people live in urban communities. The OFIFC is the largest urban Indigenous service network in the province supporting this vibrant, diverse, and quickly-growing population through programs and initiatives that span justice, health, family support, long-term care, healing and wellness, employment and training, education, research, and more.

Friendship Centres receive their mandate from their communities, and they are inclusive of all Indigenous people – First Nation, Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit, and those who self-identify as Indigenous.

Learn more about the work the OFIFC does to support Friendship Centres at www.ofifc.org.



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First edition published 2012

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Background

The USAI Research Framework was conceived and developed by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) to guide all Indigenous research projects conducted by the OFIFC and urban Indigenous communities, in which the OFIFC is involved.

As the OFIFC welcomes all informed and principled allies to partner, cooperate, and collaborate with the Federation and the communities, when appropriate and required, this document is a guide to our research principles and ethical considerations. It encompasses our rules of research conduct and the goals of our research endeavors. A companion training manual for community researchers supplements this document.

Our work is guided by the fundamental recognition that Indigenous knowledge is not a singular entity that can be discovered by social scientists, translated and interpreted, critically analyzed, and summed up in scientific journals or academic dissertations. We recognize that Indigenous knowledge comes from all relations; it manifests itself in the voices and actions of people, it is generated when people get together, it arises simultaneously from the past, present and future, and it lives in words, stories, movement, dance, feelings, concepts, and ideas.

Indigenous knowledge is participatory, historical, and political. “This political form of participation affirms people’s right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a:9).

Based on our experiences and lessons learned, the second edition was created.



Sylvia Maracle
Executive Director



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Second edition
November 2016



Executive Summary

The USAI Research Framework takes its acronym from the four principles of ethics that guide it: Utility, Self-voicing, Access, and Inter-relatedness.

Our work is faithful to Indigenous identity, harmoniously inscribed within the four directions of the medicine wheel.

Our approach to research is practical; we recognize communities as authors of the knowledge that community-driven inquiry generates.

USAI stresses the inherent validity of Indigenous knowledge, acknowledges its historical and political contexts, and positions Indigenous knowledge within all relationships.

The USAI Research Framework delineates preferred research methodology, called “orientation to research”, to encompass research practices appropriate Indigenous research.

USAI also responds to evaluation requirements with a culturally-relevant approach to evaluation practices.

FUNDAMENTAL TO THE EXERCISE OF SELF- DETERMINATION IS THE RIGHT OF PEOPLES TO CONSTRUCT KNOWLEDGE IN ACCORDANCE TO SELF-DETERMINED DEFINITIONS OF WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS VALUABLE.

-- Marlene Brant Castellano

Before the 20th century, the term “culture” was associated in Europe with the cultivation of the mind, “enlightenment”, “progress”, and “civilization”. Since the 20th century, when American anthropology adopted the term “culture” as a guiding principle to understand communal behavior and meanings that people attach to what they do, the word “culture” has been used to define how societies use shared and understood-by-all symbols to represent what’s important to them. Since then, anthropologists (academics and practitioners alike) have debated whether the term they use refers to a bounded and stable entity (a culture) or a collection of various symbolical expressions of people’s everyday lives (culture-s).

For Indigenous societies, these definitions of “culture” and the term itself are imposed, foreign concepts, often conveniently used by others to authoritatively represent, label, compare, and study Indigenous systems of knowledge and practice.

Since the word “culture” is now widely recognized as a term of convenience, we note its everyday use when we refer to Indigenous ways of seeing, knowing, believing, and acting. However, in our work, we are guided by the multigenerational knowledge and experiential insights that counteract the externality of the term “culture”. We bring forward the inherent and real sense of what it means to balance all aspects of life -- physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual -- to guide communal knowledge and practices, all our relations, roles, and life cycle responsibilities.

OFIFC represents and supports 28 Friendship Centres across Ontario in a way that is faithful to Indigenous identity, harmoniously inscribed within the four directions of the medicine wheel. This balanced, complete, and fulfilled reality of people’s everyday good living is our goal and is closest to what the term “culture” means for Indigenous people: not an object, not an entity, but a felt sense of great peace

within us. This wisdom, inherited from many generations who came before us that tells us to practice who we are every day, we describe as “everyday good living”. This wisdom is the foundation of all OFIFC’s endeavors, including the USAI Research Framework.

In recent decades, research approaches within social sciences underwent radical transformations under a paradigm called Participatory Action Research (PAR). This new way of knowing, reflecting, and acting came from historically imposed and contemporarily maintained cultural and socio-political margins to challenge the positioning of researcher vis-à-vis the “researched”, to test boundaries between research and praxis and to infuse seemingly “objective” and “pure” research procedures and academically-habituated routines with diverse narratives, localized meanings, geo-politically grounded symbols, and historically-shaped cultural discourses.

PAR pulls thoughts, reflections, and actions out of The Predicted and The Validated into The Possible and The Real: “human actors are both willful and capable of thwarting research prediction, and willful and capable of selecting and implementing theories or probabilities they want to see manifested! Conventional science sees this as undesirable ‘contamination’ and ‘bias’. Participatory Action Research sees this as a goal, and the stuff of which ‘real life’ is made or enacted” (Wadsworth, 1998).

Various definitions of PAR position it as a collaborative research, education, and action process that recognizes plurality of knowledge, generated by and inherent in places, spaces, and people. All forms of knowledge are valid. All voices, even those deeply marginalized, colonized, and silenced, have the power to articulate, express, declare, and tell “the story”. All knowledge leads to action and transformation that gives people power and competence to define their own world.

In the last decade, much has been written about decolonizing research approaches and the ethics of research with Indigenous communities. We welcome the fact that with the introduction and blossoming of PAR, Indigenous knowledge and practice, as well as culturally-appropriate research methodologies, have gained momentum.

However, most PAR research projects do not go far enough to recognize local systems of knowledge and practice as fully authoritative and competent to design, conduct, and evaluate their own research. PAR paradigms often fail to recognize a subtle but crucial difference between “participation” and “authorship”. In the former, Indigenous communities and people remain more “...trusted informants, confidants, and advisors”, while in the latter, Indigenous communities and people assume the rightful position of Creators and Keepers of knowledge and praxis.

The OFIFC has practiced community-driven research for most of its history. With the *Report of the Task Force on Native People in an Urban Setting* (1981), to *Gidizhigiizhwewinaanan: Our Languages* (2015) and several more recently noted research projects including: *“We are L’il Beavers”: Reflecting on a Program that Created Safe and Culturally-Grounded Spaces* as well as *“Wiisinadaa: Let’s Eat”: Traditional Foods and Diabetes Research Project* (2016), OFIFC solidified its position within the urban Indigenous community in Ontario to welcome principled partnerships, ethical cooperation, and meaningful collaboration with research allies who share our goal to improve the quality of life of urban Indigenous people.

Our Research Framework, named USAI after the four ethical principles that govern it -- Utility, Self-voicing, Access, and Inter-relationality -- is designed to ensure research integrity from the perspective of Knowledge Authors and Knowledge Keepers. The unique, trauma-informed features of our

research paradigm, where both the historical perspectives and contemporary socio-political context of Indigenous knowledge and praxis are fully recognized, make the USAI framework an effective decolonization tool to situate Indigenous knowledge as pragmatic, authentic, and valid.

USAI reflects lived reality that does not need to be mediated, translated, and interpreted to gain mainstream academic legitimacy. USAI research takes place in communities, is driven by communities, and speaks the language of identity, in people’s own voices and on their own terms “to construct knowledge in accordance to self-determined definitions of what is real and what is valuable” (Brant-Castellano, 2004:99).

Trauma-informed approaches in Indigenous research are a critical component of community-driven praxis and a central feature of USAI. Trauma-informed approaches recognize the impact of historic systemic violence and prioritize the creation of safe, culturally competent relationships throughout the research process. All research relationships are built on a shared understanding of both the meta-narrative of historic trauma, as it impacts Indigenous people broadly, and the specific coping mechanisms of inter-generational trauma transmission (i.e. mistrust of authority, internalized violence) as it occurs locally.

Trauma-informed approaches do not problematize the specific coping mechanisms but instead, recognize the impacts of unresolved historic and systemic violence. In this way, trauma-informed approaches to research are transformative; they create the potential for relationships that recognize the impact and prevalence of historic trauma, move beyond the stigma of problematizing behavioural outcomes, and create strategies that are responsive to addressing underlying issues. In USAI-principled research, trauma-informed approaches begin with establishing trust, friendship, and mutual respect.

USAI Research Framework

Research Statement

The OFIC conducts, supports, and recognizes community driven, community relevant, faithful to Indigenous identity, self-voiced, useful, accessible, and relations-based research that generates locally-authored Indigenous knowledge and locally-determined, well-informed, and effective action that brings desired changes and benefits to urban Indigenous communities.

The OFIC conducts, supports, and recognizes only those research projects and activities that are informed by the following four ethics principles:

Principle I: Utility

Research needs are based on community priorities.

- Research inquiry is practical, relevant, and directly benefits communities
- Research findings are immediate resources that benefit communities and build local capacity
- Generated knowledge must be useful and relevant to communities and people involved in research activities
- Communities decide on nature of actions that follow research activities

Principle II: Self-voicing

Research, knowledge, and practice are authored by communities that are fully recognized as knowledge Creators and Knowledge Keepers.

- Knowledge production, authorship, and dissemination constitute a political process to decolonize Indigenous knowledge and praxis
- All community voices frame research reality; all research activities are self-determined; all research findings are authored by communities
- Research goes beyond “inclusion” and “engagement”; communities construct and author their knowledge and define their own actions

Principles of Ethics

Recognition and acknowledgement that Indigenous people have been, and remain, disfranchised, disadvantaged, and dispossessed, are essential to understand that only through full control over generation and dissemination of knowledge, can urban Indigenous communities make decisions about their lives, assert their rights to execute plans, goals and priorities, and own their cultural, socio-economic, and political reality.

Principle III: Access

Research fully recognizes all local knowledge, practice, and experience in all their cultural manifestations as accessible by all research authors and Knowledge Keepers.

- Local knowledge, lived experience, community narratives, personal stories, and spiritual expressions are reliable and valid forms of authored research, both as researched reality and methods to understand and relate to it
- Research is part of everyday life; it is never static or finished; it speaks everybody’s language; it is situated in the present, supported by the past, and contemplates the future
- No mediators or cultural translators are needed to interpret or validate local knowledge, actions, and reflections

Principle IV: Inter-relationality

Research is historically-situated, geo-politically positioned, relational, and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is generated.

- Research takes place within the complex web of interconnected relationships and encompasses all stages of life
- All knowledge and all practice are situated within all relations; there is no objective knowledge or neutral praxis
- There is always an historical context to Indigenous knowledge and praxis, which are inseparably linked to Indigenous identity and all its interrelated socio-political expressions



Spaces for Research Collaboration

USAI research recognizes the value of alliances with informed and respectful parties to work for the advancement of urban Indigenous communities.

Situated within interconnected relationships, USAI creates contextualized research spaces (procedures), where different research alliances are fostered to generate specific types of knowledge, depending on the on-going interactions and types of research projects. Many research endeavors may benefit from creative fusions, inventive “assemblages of thought”, and inspired blends of ideas. These, however, must be rooted in genuine respect and careful balance of authority where invited allies never assume positions of “benefactors” or “patrons” of a shared research project.

Research spaces shape how community-driven projects are developed and frame how we work with our allies in a culturally-appropriate and strength-based approach. In the USAI Training Manual (OFIFC, 2014), rules of research conduct prescribe how community-driven projects should be conducted.

USAI Research Spaces

Community Research Space

A community research space is a self-designed and self-executed methodical inquiry by the community/OFIFC that is entirely community-based and driven, as opposed to “community-placed”. On invitation, partnerships may be forged to secure funding or in-kind contributions, or to create advisory capacities to inform political processes, with the partners’ full recognition and acceptance of USAI research principles, procedures, and ethics. Knowledge that is self-voiced by the community represents the community reality “as-it-is” and does not have to be validated by comparative research or deconstructed with “academically correct” analytical tools.

Collaborative Research Space

A collaborative research space is a research relationship between a researcher, not identified with any given

community, who is working with local researchers and/or the OFIFC on a community-driven project. A collaborative research space can be created when a researcher approaches local researchers and/or the OFIFC to invite them to participate in a research project.

The researcher is a trauma-informed ally and fully adheres to the research principles, procedures, and ethics, committing to a long-term alliance with a mutually-shared goal to reach an identical objective that directly benefits urban Indigenous communities. When a researcher is affiliated with an institution(s), the ally researcher ensures that the institution(s) understand and accept USAI research principles, procedures, and ethics.

Educational Research Space

An educational research space is a research-support relationship between a knowledge seeker and the community/OFIFC. A knowledge seeker may or may not be a member of the community and is a partner or collaborator (often a student) undertaking a supportive role on a research project. A knowledge seeker works cooperatively with Knowledge Keepers to communicate a very specific type of knowledge situated in their interaction. Knowledge seekers often engage this space to fulfill educational needs, credit requirements, and community-based responsibilities.

The Knowledge Keeper is the sole author of the narrative/story/facts being shared; every effort must be made to recognize that the Knowledge Keeper and the knowledge seeker share the situated, co-produced knowledge that comes from the relation, the act of sharing, and the exchange of ideas.

Other Research Spaces

Local communities may design other research spaces, appropriate in any given research context and governed by the USAI principles. Upon identifying a research space, communities develop rules of research conduct that prescribe how the community-driven project will be conducted.

Orientation to Research

USAI research stresses that it is entirely up to communities to choose methods of inquiry most appropriate in any given research context. In this way, community-driven research approaches are inter-disciplinary and incorporate diverse branches of Knowledge that inform the shape of Indigenous methodology within community-driven research, called the USAI-based orientation to research.

USAI recognizes all manifestations of community life as both appropriate spheres of research and valid methods to address research questions.

OFIFC's USAI-based orientation to research may challenge academic research methodologies where the research agenda, methods and instruments, types of analysis, and ways of evaluation are imposed by academic conventions. This does not mean, however, that USAI categorically excludes the use of "academically conventional" methods if a community deems them as appropriate for the research context.

We understand that the realities of urban Indigenous communities are rooted in various interactions that move through various circles of life, where everything is interrelated, interconnected, and open-ended so that transformation and change are expected and welcome. Our orientation to research calls for the use of effective practices that generate concrete knowledge in interrelated and vibrant social environments; not just in environments that are efficient in data gathering.

Research into spiritual meanings held by a community calls for practices respectful of those meanings: shared analysis of symbols, cultural imagery, indirect modes of communication, story-telling, visualization, and others. Research into effects of assimilation on youth needs to speak to youth's emotions and feelings: learning by doing, community art and media, photo-voice, concept mapping.

Whatever practices are chosen as appropriate for community-driven projects, the most important feature is "their 'hands-on' nature . . . to enable people to generate information and share knowledge on their own terms using their own symbols, language or art form" (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, 2007:17).

Practices that USAI research supports as appropriate in community-driven Indigenous research are contextual, not necessarily standardized, never static, always making sense to community members involved in a research project, intuitively "right", and reflecting the richness of relationships. All practices recognize that, in Indigenous communities, people are "sophisticated in the stories" or, as Gardner (1995:11-14) says, "to put it simply, one is communicating with experts... (who) come equipped with many stories that have already been told and retold".

USAI research does not "collect" stories or facts. Instead, USAI practitioners respectfully listen and learn using most effective research practices that grasp how stories, experiences, voices, symbols, facts, and actions embody community priorities, identities, strengths, and aspirations.

Evaluation

In the course of USAI research process, just as in all types of action research, communities and individuals become self-reflexive and self-critical as they deliberately observe their reality to formulate research questions, choose appropriate practices to gather and generate knowledge, and reflect again to understand what this knowledge tells them about their future actions. USAI research participants acquire a critical lens for the subjectivity inherent in inquiry and become skilled in the articulation of their perspectives. They also master their awareness of possible biases.

Specific to Indigenous research and to the USAI Research Framework is the recognition that, just as the research orientation incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, any evaluation of research or an attempt to develop "measures and indicators" must be self-reflexive, highly participatory, respectful of and rooted in relationships, wholistic, and closely tied to appropriate teachings.

As USAI research is conducted within the intricate web of relationships, connections, interactions, and stories, we recognize that the most challenging aspect of evaluation is that what is to be "evaluated" and reported on are those very relationships, those connections, those interactions,

and those stories. In keeping with its principles, USAI does not expect or envision consensus on how relationships, connections, interactions, and stories be evaluated. Instead, USAI-based evaluation examines the planning and implementation process, from start-to-finish, to review the extent to which what is being evaluated remains in line with USAI principles.

The USAI-based evaluation model provides communities with check-points to help identify and reflect upon throughout their research process. OFIFC's *Indigenous Research Training Manual* (OFIFC, 2014) includes an Evaluation Circle tool to help communities establish where they are in their process and to what extent their research goals are realized. The training package also provides suggestions on how to frame and phrase knowledge exchanges to preserve its independence, without the need to re-affirm itself and re-claim legitimacy vis-à-vis mainstream and often competing types of knowledge.

The ultimate assessment of project and program "validity and reliability" is in the hands of the community and we emphasize that no translation, interpretation, or validation is needed for those "data" to declare them accurate and authentic from any research perspective.

The USAI Evaluation Path

The USAI-based evaluation model is outlined in the *USAI Evaluation Path* (OFIFC, 2016). Evaluation starts in the beginning of the project, program, or initiative and it is ongoing to allow for real-time change if and when change is needed.

The USAI Evaluation Path employs a reflexive lens. Reflexivity is multilayered and involves both self-critical and collective approaches. Engagement with reflective practices enables us to pause, take stock, and make changes when and as needed, in real time. When we step back to identify check-points in the evaluation process and determine the way forward, we seek guidance from the Elders, ceremonies, medicines, and engage in a variety of traditional practices.

The USAI Evaluation Path is highly sensitive to context, participatory and socially responsible, as it supports the development of social agency. It is a non-fragmentary and wholistic process that includes contextual, multi-layered variables. Rather than being driven by a universal set of indicators and standards of performance, USAI Evaluation relies on context-dependent understandings that reflect urban Indigenous communities' lived realities. This approach acknowledges that historical context and colonial legacy are important social determinants that require scrutiny within a broad evaluative perspective.

The Path follows four USAI principles examining four development and implementation stages: relationship-building; design; initiative; and relevancy.

UTILITY: The USAI Evaluation Path focuses on usefulness

We start with community project visions. Where a non-indigenous evaluation begins at the end of a project with the intention to measure, assess, and/or evaluate its efficacy once it is completed, the USAI Evaluation Path examines the utility of a project to the community throughout the project – from beginning to end -- to reflect on all project components and produce change as needed to best serve community visions in real time.

SELF-VOICING: The USAI Evaluation Path is explicitly value-laden

Most non-indigenous evaluation approaches are value-neutral, in search of generalizable patterns for use as replicable best practices. Alternatively, OFIFC's USAI Evaluation Path is a reflective process that searches for what works best for a community in a distinctive context: wise practices that can be shared, but not necessarily replicated.

ACCESS: The USAI Evaluation Path is open to all

While mainstream evaluation approaches apply a cost-benefit analysis to plan and act once the evaluation is done, we ask: are we doing the right thing? Everybody related to the project has the right and obligation to contribute to the analysis. In the non-Indigenous evaluation models, the focus is on completion, on outputs and outcomes, most of the time presented in a linear, decontextualized fashion of a "logic model". We ask what influences the results of the project, intended or not, looking for contextual clues and abandoning the linearity of "means-to-ends" reasoning.

INTER-RELATIONALITY: The USAI Evaluation Path runs through the intricate web of community relationships, connections, and interactions.

We ask if a project creates or fosters relationships and connections, and how this is done. We regard evaluation as a time to collectively reflect while acting so we can continuously assess our commitment to action. We take under consideration the wide context, in which the project is located: past and present, experience and knowledge, while most non-indigenous evaluation models focus solely on a decontextualized or context-limited project at hand to establish whether the available means result in projected ends.



Last Thought

USAI Research is a culturally-appropriate, methodical, and practical inquiry, conducted by urban Indigenous communities so that they can nurture their own capacity to self-actualize and realize positive futures that they conceive for themselves.

We envisioned USAI as a mechanism to shift the balance of authority, and contribute to a systemic change in how Indigenous knowledge and praxis are positioned vis-à-vis other knowledge systems – historically, intellectually, politically, and culturally.

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