Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research

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Abstract

How does one decolonize and reclaim the meanings of *research* and *researcher*, particularly in the context of Western research? Indigenous communities have long experienced oppression by Western researchers. Is it possible to build a collaborative research knowledge that is culturally appropriate, respectful, honoring, and careful of the Indigenous community? What are the challenges in Western research, researchers, and Western university methodology research training? How have 'studies' – critical anti-racist theory and practice, cross-cultural research methodology, critical perspectives on environmental justice, and land-based education – been incorporated into the university to disallow dissent? What can be done against this disallowance? According to Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang's (2012) suggestion, this article did not use the concept of decolonization as a substitute for 'human rights' or 'social justice', but as a demand of an Indigenous framework and a centering of Indigenous land, Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous ways of thinking. This article discusses why both research and researcher increasingly require decolonization so that research can create a positive impact on the participants' community, and conduct research ethically. This article is my personal decolonization and reclaiming story from 15 years of teaching, research and service activities with various Indigenous communities in various parts of the world. It presents a number of case studies of an intervention research project to exemplify the challenges in Western research training, and how decolonizing research training attempts to not only reclaim participants' rights in the research but also to empower the researcher. I conclude by arguing that decolonizing research training

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creates more empathetic educators and researchers, transforming us for participants, and demonstrating how we can take responsibility for our research.

Keywords
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> Researchers have a responsibility to cause no harm, but research has been a source of distress for Indigenous people because of inappropriate methods and practices. (Cochran et al., 2008: 22)

This article critically discusses some of the important questions while conducting research with Indigenous communities: What are the challenges in Western research, researchers, and university research training (Ahmed, 2012)? Who should and could benefit from the research (Smith, 1999)? What can be done against this disallowance (Tuck and Yang, 2014)? Whose capacity needs to be built if Indigenous ways of knowing are to be incorporated into the research design (Cochran et al., 2008)? Focusing on these questions, this article argues that how decolonizing research and researcher from the participants' perspective can positively re-position both researcher and participants in all aspects of the research activities.

As I write this article, I am well aware of the term 'decolonization' that is often conflated with anticolonial projects and struggles that re-inscribe the logics of settler colonialism, in particular the re-occupation of Indigenous lands (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Indigenous scholar Smith (1999) explains the term 'decolonization' as a process for conducting research with Indigenous communities that places Indigenous voices and epistemologies in the center of the research process. In this article, I use the team 'decolonization' according to Indigenous scholars (Denzin et al., 2008): that decolonization is a continuous process of anti-colonial struggle that honors Indigenous approaches to knowing the world, recognizing Indigenous land, Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous sovereignty – including sovereignty over the decolonization process. I argue that *decolonization* is an on-going process of becoming, unlearning, and relearning regarding who we are as a researcher and educator, and taking responsibilities for participants.

Neither researcher nor research is well defined in Western[1] research training. Much research on Indigenous peoples has been carried out by researchers without decolonizing their research training. Indigenous scholars Battiste (2001), Kovach (2010), Lavallée (2009), Smith (1999), Wilson (2008) and others argue that Western research without decolonization can be referred to as 'oppression' towards Indigenous communities. They also suggest to researchers that, if Western research does not honor and/or consider decolonization as significant and scientific, it can

lead to economic inequality, displacement, loss of traditional lifestyles, and significant damage to many Indigenous communities. Lincoln explains Western research as the *rape* model of research, where 'the researcher comes in, takes what he [sic] wants, and leaves when he feels like it' (Lincoln, reported in Beld, 1994). Smith (1999) explains how decolonizing research training can change both researcher and research. She suggests that the process of decolonization of research will help regain control over Indigenous ways of knowing and being, ways in which research can be used for social justice. Similarly, other Indigenous scholars – Battiste (2008), Kovach (2010), Lavallée (2009), Tuck and Yang (2014), and Wilson (2008) – show in their studies that decolonizing research training honors Indigenous approaches to knowing the world.

It is important to note that this article target does not reject all Western methods and theories, rather exploring a bridge between Western and Indigenous, which is appropriate and beneficial for the local community. Indigenous scholar Wilson suggests that research methods may be borrowed from other paradigms as long as they fit the 'ontology, epistemology, and axiology of the Indigenous paradigm' (Wilson, 2008: 12). He claims that applying a Western methodology in an Indigenous context may be incompatible because the underlying epistemology of Western methods and theories is not Indigenous. This article is a call for exploring, valuing, and using Indigenous knowledge and methods on an equal footing with Western knowledge and methods, and for integrating Indigenous and Western methods when appropriate. Through my 15 years of personal decolonization journey with various Indigenous communities in various parts of the world, I learned that we as researchers must be respectful and diligent in our implementation of decolonizing research, paying careful attention to the process and being ready to acknowledge and make appropriate changes when Western methods or theories are not appropriate.

The central argument of this article is that decolonizing research training is culturally appropriate and effective for both the participant's community and the researcher when conducting research with Indigenous communities. In discussing this argument, the article examines two key areas: (i) challenges in our Western disciplinary[2] methodological research training; and (ii) the meaning of decolonization and its effectiveness. These two areas discuss how I have been trained as a Western researcher and the challenges I faced during my research and personal life as a researcher. In explaining the effectiveness of decolonization, I explain how my decolonizing research training contributed both to the continuum redefining the meaning of research and researcher and to the well-being of the participants' communities. I conclude by arguing that researchers must recognize the persistence of colonialism, oppression, and domination in systems of Western research training and seek to include such an ethical understanding in their research practice.

Challenges in Western research training

Although the Western research training has made much progress in recent decades, many researchers do not receive culturally appropriate research training for conducting research with Indigenous communities (Battiste, 2017; Cochran et al., 2008; Smith, 1999). Indigenous scholars suggest that the Western research training requires adaptation to fit Indigenous contexts (Kovach, 2010; Simonds and Christopher, 2013; Wilson, 2008). Western research needs significant process of decolonization for future research based on lessons learned from Indigenous community partners who voiced concern over methods of Western research (Smith, 1999; Tuck and Yang, 2012). However, in Smith's (1999) view of decolonizing Western research, this does not mean researchers should reject all Western methods and theories, as they may be adapted if deemed appropriate and beneficial by the local community. Critically engaging with challenges in Western research training is a process of exploring a collaborative space where both participant and researcher benefit from the research (Wilson, 2008).

The Western research training can be challenging to the Indigenous people, if research is not culturally appropriate, respectful, honoring, and caring of the local community. In this section, I explain how my academic research training was problematic for me as a researcher and how it negatively impacted my participants' communities as well as me. I divide Western research training challenges into three categories: challenges in disciplinary research training, ethnographic research training, and interdisciplinary research training.

Challenges in disciplinary research training

Disciplines are constituted by defined academic research methods and objects of study. They include frames of particular theoretical reference, methodological approaches, topics, theoretical canons, and technologies. Disciplines can also be seen as subcultures with their own language, concepts, tools, and credentialed practitioners (Petts et al., 2008: 596). However, the disciplinary form of research training created many challenges for me as a researcher, including disconnection from practice, unclear responsibilities towards participants, confused neutral position as a researcher, and a strictly academic-based research guideline.

Disconnection from practice. Disconnection between research and practice in research training can be a significant challenge as a researcher (Datta, 2017). For instance, during undergraduate and graduate programs the sociological methodological training was a significant challenge in my research training. In my four graduate research methodological and methods courses, I learned a number of important things, including how to critically observe social problems in a structural

process, how to analyze social problems, and how to write projects and theses. Throughout the methodological training processes we, as student researchers, were also taught how to: maintain neutrality in our field research, such as during data collection and data analysis; follow the validity and reliability of collected data; and find the predictability in our research. We were taught that by remaining neutral in our research, our research would be valid and predictable. However, I faced many challenges during my field research as my research training was not connected with practical life, people practice, and culture. During my undergraduate project and master's thesis data collection, I had to develop my research objectives with open- and close-ended interview questionnaires, survey forms, and interview guidelines. Most of the research goals were prefaced through our research proposal instead of the participants' practice. I understood that our research training was not about methodological issues (i.e. qualitative or quantitative) but rather our epistemological position (i.e. the way we want to see ourselves as researchers and our research findings) (Wilson, 2008). In this training process, I found that academic research may sometimes have much invisible power over people practice, including explaining, predicting, and arguing about the participants' life, culture, and values.

   Participants' trustful and meaningful engagement in research can be a significant challenge for a researcher, and these are generative because they redirect the focus of research towards processes of power, thus decentering narratives of damage or destruction (Tuck and Yang, 2012). For instance, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014) discuss three significant challenging situations (i.e. refusal from both research and participants) which can make research as challenging for the community – for example: (i) when a research participant refuses to engage in a particular conversation; (ii) when a researcher refuses to value participants' knowledge, culture, and practice; and (iii) when Indigenous sovereignty over their knowledge is not maintained.

Unclear researcher responsibility. Researcher responsibilities are important to both researcher and research in Indigenous research; it can be a significant challenge if researchers are not well trained in their responsibilities (Datta, 2015; Wilson, 2008). In Smith's (1999) view of research, the researcher should center participants' values and follow their protocols. For instance, during my academic programs, I was trained how to follow researcher responsibility as an academic, but I was not trained as to who can be a researcher and their responsibilities to their research participants. I was not prepared, as a researcher, for how to answer participants' questions. For example, during my master's research in a minority community an Elder participant asked me, 'Why are you doing research and for whom? How can we [participants] benefit from your research?' I was not trained in how to answer the Elder's questions. I knew that the answers I was giving were not

enough. I felt that most of my answers were not coming from my heart. I also felt that my answers were not connected to reality in most cases, and I did not know what to do. Many times I was not comfortable with my research participants; many nights I couldn't sleep for thinking about what I was doing in the name of academic and professional research. I concluded that sometimes I had had to deceive my participants in order to meet my academic needs. I realized that although I needed a degree to get a job or to be a researcher, I should not exploit my participants. I was unsettled as a researcher. I questioned myself: 'Is this academic research all about deceit for our own interest/jobs/purpose?' With this researcher-oriented research training, I was dissatisfied with my Western research training, and it negatively influenced my two years of professional service.

Western forms of neutrality. Neutrality became another significant challenge when I went to the community[3] for my research. During my master's field research, I thought I was ready to conduct my research and remain neutral. However, during my field research with Indigenous communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh, the term 'neutral' was very confusing for me. I was not sure what the term meant in field research. My confusion was on how to be neutral when I was sharing stories as a process of relationship-building. When I was in conversation with participants, they wanted me to listen to their story with empathy and act on their issues. I was not clear enough about how I should consider a participant's voice in my research. Many times, I thought, 'Am I going to lose my neutrality as a researcher if I respond to my participants' feelings?' While I was conducting survey research, participants wanted me to add their questions into my research, but I was not sure how to do it. Because participants' questions were important to them, I was also not sure how I could ignore/reject their questions as a researcher, but if I accepted participant questions and stories, how was I going to maintain the validity of neutrality as a researcher? I went back to my research methodology professor to understand the meaning of neutrality as a researcher. I was told, 'You can listen to a participant's answer/questions, but you cannot respond to it as a sociology researcher in your report. You need to be free from your personal biases.' I was not clear enough on my personal biases, so I asked again the meaning of neutrality to him. I was given an example in my class with other sociology researchers who were also ready for their research:

> All of you as sociology researchers, you need to be a neutral actor [person] in your research. You need to strictly follow your research proposal/your research guidelines. If your participants go beyond your research questions, you should remind them about your research questions; otherwise, you only need to consider whatever is relevant to your research. You cannot add your personal reflections and/or participants' unrelated issues to your research. If you do so, you will lose your neutrality. It will lose reliability and your research will not be valid anymore.

The term 'neutrality' was confusing to me, but as a young researcher I was not bold enough to challenge this issue in my research.

Overlooking participants' cultural protocols. Favoring the academic research protocol over participants' cultural protocol was another challenge in my disciplinary research training (Lavallée, 2009). For example, in my master's research, the academic research protocol became a barrier for me as I was not able to consider participants' culture-based research protocols in my research. During my disciplinary research training, I was trained how to follow my academic protocols regardless of participants' practice, culture, and values. Many times I felt that if I only followed the academic guidelines in my research, it would not be respectful of my participants' culture. I was not respecting my feelings. In my research, I often felt that I was overlooking participants' stories and modifying participants' answers according to my research questions and/or guidelines. I felt guilty that in most cases, during my research interview conversation, I was only focusing on my research guidelines instead of focusing on the participant's everyday issues. In some cases, I used to learn about many significant issues that were important for the community, but I was not able to add these, either because they were not related to my research objectives or because of my academic research goals.

Challenges in Western ethnographic research training

My Western ethnographic research training in anthropology was a significant challenge as an Indigenous researcher. Like disciplinary research training, my ethnographic research training could not satisfy my research empathy. When I found that my sociological research training was not sufficient, I had the opportunity to take two ethnographic research methodology courses in one of the top-ranking universities in Norway. In my ethnographic research training, I had opportunities to meet well-known classical anthropological researchers. I learned many different and positive ethnographic research techniques from them. For example, I learned ethnographic research techniques featuring participant observation in which the researcher observes and participates in daily life. Study about a particular culture issue was primarily based on fieldwork. My ethnographic research training in sociology was significantly more in-depth than my sociological training. For example, I learned that as an anthropological researcher I needed to commit to social justice and human rights and be actively involved in efforts to assist local communities, peasant communities, and ethnic minorities. However, I faced two significant challenges in ethnographic research with discovery and invisible power.

Challenges in discovery. The first significant challenge in my ethnographic research was with who owned the research findings. For example, one of my mentors (a

faculty member) told me during my field research, 'I did many years of ethnographic study with many Indigenous communities, and I *discovered* [emphasis added] many of their issues in my studies.' For me, this statement of discovery was not only an individual issue; it was an academic, epistemological issue of ability. The term 'discovery' can be explained as the power to discover community knowledge that is not already owned by the community. I was uncomfortable with this use of the term 'discovery', and discussed it with my community's Elders and with other Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, Canada, and Norway. One of the Elders from our Indigenous community in CHT Bangladesh responded to the term by stating, 'I know from my ancestors that knowledge has been practiced in our Indigenous communities for many centuries; knowledge has been within us and within our land from long before I born. We cannot discover knowledge; rather, we learn from our land.' Similarly, when I asked my mother, she told me, 'Do not listen to them [ethnographic researchers]. I learned from my ancestors. My ancestors learned from their ancestors that knowledge is here in our land; we just carry it from one generation to another. We cannot discover anything; we can only learn.' The last part of this statement: 'We cannot discover anything; we can only learn' was significant for me in understanding the challenges in my ethnographic research training. Another Elder from a Dene First Nation community in Canada said, 'Our knowledge comes from our ancestors. I learned from them. If I share our knowledge with you, you should not say that you discovered it. If you do so, it will be stealing.'

Hierarchical relationships. Being an Indigenous person and working with various Indigenous communities, I found my ethnographic research training was not enough. For instance, during my field research in my Anthropology master's program in CHT Bangladesh, I found that although I had been conducting ethnographic study and I am from one of the minority Indigenous families in Bangladesh, I had more invisible power than my Indigenous participants. During conversations with Elders and Knowledge-holders, they explained that Western researchers hold invisible power over Indigenous people, such as selecting research topics, and deciding how research data are collected and analyzed, and how they are presented. Both professional and academic Indigenous participant communities acknowledged that ethnographic challenges in their communities were not problems related to an individual researcher; rather, the challenges rested on our academic research training – our fixed Western and academic mindset. I found a similar concern in Indigenous scholar Tuhiwai Smith's studies (1999, 2008); although the Western research was collected for the greater good of serving all mankind, colonialism was far from being a finished business. Invisible power practices are embedded within the system, which is about the unequal power of defining, essentializing, labeling, and thus alienating the other. Smith also

explained that the researcher epistemological issue is significant. Researcher epistemology frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions we seek. Smith believes that research should set out to make a positive impact on the participant's community. Cochran et al. also argue from their study with the Indigenous community that there are hierarchical relationships between participant and researcher; an Indigenous participant explained the meaning of Western research in saying, 'Researchers are like mosquitoes; they suck your blood and leave' (Cochran et al., 2008: 1).

Another challenge I faced during my master's research with one of the Indigenous communities in CHT was the participants' fear of the Western form of ethnographic research. One of the Elders explained why he feared ethnographic research, by saying, 'Many ethnographic researchers have come to our Indigenous community and did ethnographic research but did not have any positive impact on our community.' He explained further, 'Researchers stayed in our house, lived with us, learned from us about what we do, how we do, and they wrote our stories as their discovery. It is stealing our knowledge.' Another Elder suggested a means of overcoming this challenge by saying, 'If your research cannot talk about how we are facing problems in our everyday lives, why should I engage with your research?' He also said, 'Research should be action-oriented so that it can contribute to us solving our issues. It should focus on our voice instead of only your academic priorities.'

Challenges in Western interdisciplinary research training

Although the importance of interdisciplinary research training has been widely recognized, it is still very much concentrated within specific disciplinary areas, and the integration of interdisciplinary studies has become unusual in traditional fields of study (Haraway, 2004; Latour, 2004). I also found that despite some success in educating the different disciplines to work collaboratively, the degree of interdisciplinary research training at present is insufficient and sporadic (Datta, 2016, 2017; Latour, 2004). In fact, I found the concept of interdisciplinarity confusing. One of the important challenges during my interdisciplinary research training was how to overcome dynamic notions of static disciplinary practice. I realized that research training in my interdisciplinary department did not change its disciplinary research approach. My research training was mostly either mutually connected with a core social science or with natural science research training. My expectation in interdisciplinary research training was to solve and/or understand the practical challenges from various perspectives. I thought our training focus would be on the dynamics of community engagement by advocating participation in community-based projects and service learning. However, in our research training we were taught how to be more scientific in our research. In fact, it was a

similar challenge to the one I faced during my master's and bachelor's programs. In our interdisciplinary research seminar, many disciplinary speakers came and talked about the importance of their research and how their research was more promising than others. I acknowledge the significance of disciplined theoretical and methodological issues, but I did not find a difference from my previous disciplinary research training. From my professional and academic research work, I found that my interdisciplinary research training was not only linked to disciplinary research but was interconnected with our static research epistemology. From my long-time, community-based activities, I learned about many issues that my interdisciplinary research training could not cover. These omissions included training on:

- how to interact with participants;
- how to build relationships with participants;
- why we should care about participants' feelings, relationships;
- community protocols;
- who can own the research findings;
- how to recognize participants' community needs; and
- how to share research with participants' communities.

Challenges from participant perspectives. Western research training became more problematic when I faced challenges from my participant communities. Cochran et al. (2008: 1) suggest 'it is important to consider and understand the reasons Indigenous people might object to the idea of partnerships with researchers—why communities are wary or apprehensive' of the research. Other studies with Indigenous communities claim that, historically, research conducted on Indigenous people has been inappropriate because it has often served to advance the politics of colonial control (Caldwell et al., 2005; Dodson, 1994).

As a result, Indigenous peoples continue to regard Western research (i.e. research originating outside of Indigenous communities) with a certain apprehension or mistrust. For instance, during my PhD research with the Laitu Indigenous community in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh, one of the Knowledge-holders, Kasamong Pure Khyeng from the Laitu Indigenous community in CHT, explained how research could be oppression if the researcher did not come from the participants' community:

> Many researchers have been using our community people, our culture, and knowledge to do business. For example, lots of student researchers get their academic degree through using our knowledge. Lots of university and research institute researchers have been making money by using our traditional knowledge. Lots of NGOs have been getting money from various donor agencies by selling our traditional knowledge. What have we gotten from these university student researchers, university and research institute researchers, NGO and government

researchers? I have not seen any benefit from these researchers and their research for me, my community, and our culture. I see this research as a business making use of our community's people, culture, and practice. We are fearful when we hear the word research. It takes our time, knowledge, and practice for other people's business and we do not get anything from it; we do not even know what knowledge has been taken or how it has been used. All we get is a couple of drinks [tea/coffee]. We do not want this kind of research in our community. We are so disappointed in any kind of research nowadays. We have not seen any findings from many of the researchers. Researchers take our knowledge that we shared as friends; they use our knowledge for their discoveries, funding, and academic degrees. We helped many researchers in many ways so that they could get the proper information that they were looking for; however, the researchers did not give us anything.

On a similar issue, another Indigenous Elder asked us why they should participate in these exploitative forms of research. She said (Anonymous):

Now that you are planning to do research with us, I would like to know what kinds of benefits we [as a community] will get from your research. Will we get any benefits from your research at all? We need to know how you as a researcher and your research can be useful to our community. Can you promise us that you will not be like previous researchers? We want promises from you and from your research before we get involved with your research. We would also like to know how you are going to use our knowledge. Who will be the owner of our knowledge?

All these and many other challenges in my academic and professional research activities inspired me to rethink who I am as a researcher and my responsibilities towards my research and research participants, motivating me to decolonize from the Western form of researcher to a participant-oriented researcher.

Decolonization and its effectiveness

Decolonizing research is a process of conducting research with Indigenous communities that places Indigenous voices and epistemologies in the center of the research process (Battiste, 2000; Smith, 1999). It critically examines the underlying assumptions that inform the research, and challenges the widely-accepted belief that Western methods and ways of knowing are the only objective, true science. Holding Western beliefs and methods as *the* true science marginalizes Indigenous methods and ways of knowing by denigrating them as folklore or myth. In Smith's view of decolonizing research, the researcher should center Indigenous values and follow Indigenous protocols. Decolonization does not mean researchers should reject all Western methods and theories as they may be adapted if deemed appropriate and beneficial by the local community. Decolonizing researchers need to break down the barriers between researcher and subject (participants) and deal with emerging ethical issues (Denzin and Norman, 2007). Indigenous scholar Zavala (2013) explains that decolonization is less about method

and more about providing space for Indigenous people and voices. This process can start by including research ethics for protecting Indigenous knowledge, relational ethics in research with intimate others, and challenges in ethical research practice.

Mi'kmaw Indigenous scholar Dr Marie Battiste shared the meanings of decolonization on a CFCR 90.5 Radio program with radio host Jebunnessa Chapola and me on 12 March 2017. According to Battiste, decolonization has two pillars. First, we need to understand that 'our system of education is deeply colonial,' and decolonization is to 'help people to understand where colonialism came from and … colonial histories, and unpack these histories from our own perspectives.' She said, 'Education needs to not just be a colonial experience … but it has to be a way to help people to understand their situation where they are and how they are in an inequitable situation.' Secondly, decolonization is 'recovery from colonial impact, restoration of Indigenous people's identities, Indigenous people's languages, Indigenous people's experiences, and all things that we [Indigenous people] need for restoring us in this country [Canada] which builds in treaties that have been signed, ignored, marginalized for many, many years in Canada.'

Battiste also explained how decolonization learning can empower researchers, educators, and others. For her, decolonization is a life-long learning process. It can inspire us to ask questions: 'How are we related to the colonization, oppressions? Who are the people who belong to the colonial culture? Who are the people benefiting from the oppressive systems? Who is privileged by oppressing others?' In decolonization, once we are able to understand historical colonial legacies of oppression, colonial culture, and colonial impacts, we will be able to understand our relationship as a researcher. More importantly, in explaining processes of empowerment through decolonization, she emphasized not only 'understanding and/or unpacking whiteness, colonization, oppression that belongs with the kinds of language,' but also suggests that we need to understand our own relationships to that. Once we are able to understand the processes of colonization and our relationships with them, we can find out who we are and what we should do as researcher and educator. According to her, decolonization is 'beginning to understanding that "I got it". Once we get it, we will not go back to the colonial process in our research.' In relation to research with Indigenous communities, Moje (2000: 25) says, 'researchers should engage in research not only to produce knowledge but also to make positive change in the lives of those who participate in research, change that the participants desire and articulate for themselves'.

In relation to Battiste, Denzin, Norman, and Smith, my decolonization was a process of ceremony (Wilson, 2008). I enjoyed each step of my decolonization as researcher. In the following section, I discuss how decolonization training started in my life, how I was able to refuse colonial research, and how it transformed me into an anti-colonial, community-based researcher.

Decolonizing researcher

My decolonizing as a researcher started with anti-racist theory and practice, cross-cultural research methodology, critical investigations, and a land-based approach, particularly during my interdisciplinary PhD program at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan, Canada. I learned how to see and use the term 'researcher' rather than use the Western form of researcher. I know that every decolonization action is a story and each story has power and impacts on who I am as a researcher (King: 2003). My decolonization stories are neither chronological nor in the past; rather they are lived, influential, and relational. My stories have a great deal of influence on my thinking and doing. Sharing my decolonizing stories can benefit others who are not only conducting research with Indigenous communities but also seeking social and environmental justice.

Antiracist theory and practice. Understanding antiracist theory and practice was a significant epistemological shift for me as a researcher. My learning on antiracism was guided by an Indigenous scholar, Dr. Verna St Denis. Through this theoretical understanding, I was able to identify, understand, and analyze theories, practices, and critiques regarding the relationship of colonialism, postcolonialism, racism, and anti-racism with feminist scholarship. From this educational training, I learned how to examine the historical, economic, and political processes and practices of racialization and the ways in which these processes and their effects become entrenched in our social and educational institutions. Through my learning processes I have seen how theories and practices of integrative anti-racist education and practices are explored, including their application in a variety of workplaces. For developing this theoretical understanding, I used some strong postcolonial theories and practices, such as Edward W Said's *Orientalism*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?, P Gorski's *Savage Unrealities*, Z. Leonardo's *The Color of Supremacy*, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, and Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism*.

Cross-cultural learning. Another important part of my decolonizing research training was learning cross-cultural research methodology and methods, which led me to rethink who I am as a researcher and my empathy (Becker, 1967). It was guided by another Indigenous and two-spirited educator, scholar, and activist Dr. Alex Wilson. For the first time, I had opportunities to self-reflect on ways of unlearning and relearning (Who am I as researcher? What are my relationships, empathy, and responsibilities?) (Wilson, 2008). Through this cross-cultural learning, I realized how to take a political stand in research on behalf of research participants and social justice, how to make theories and methodologies applicable to Indigenous and cross-cultural research contexts, and how to do research within Indigenous, relational, and trans-cultural knowledge frameworks (Becker, 1967; Datta, 2015; Wilson, 2008).

Cross-cultural learning as part of decolonization has had a vital impact on me in terms of how to develop an ethical relationship with my participant community (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2009; Wilson, 2008). For example, in my PhD research with one of the CHT Indigenous communities, we (Indigenous Elders, Knowledge-holders, youths, and researcher) did not consider hierarchical relationships amongst ourselves; our main target was to prioritize community knowledge and voice (Datta et al., 2015). We used participatory action research (PAR) to explore Indigenous perspectives on land/water, environmental resource management, and sustainability with the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community in Bangladesh. Through our relational accountabilities, I learned that my participants' research rights are as important as my own rights, and that my participants' environmental well-being and environmental justice are my responsibilities. These forms of research methodological training helped me to develop a strong understanding of my research issue and my relationship with my participants' community.

Critical ethnographic narratives. The third significant theoretical issue was a critical ethnographic narrative, which was guided by environmental justice scholar and activist Dr. Marcia McKenzie. It uses a critical lens for understanding colonial and postcolonial place, nature, space, time, and culture. The meanings of place, nature, and culture are different, complex, and dynamic. We learnt that the human connection we have with place cannot be denied and has to be a part of the process of understanding the connections between culture and environment. Through this learning, I had an opportunity to examine the interconnected relationships between culture and place through various short ethnographic studies. I developed my thoughtful and critical engagement with a range of literature and experiences related to what it means to develop understanding and actions in regard to the environment. Through exploring a breadth and diversity of sources in areas such as cultural geography, sociology, philosophy, postcolonial studies, environmental justice, the arts, and education, we were able to develop a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of related fields of inquiry and of how our research and practice could build on and into our existing work.

Through critical investigation research skills, I learned how to bridge together recent theoretical trajectories in economic geography, sociology, and interdisciplinary studies in order to review and generate research questions and methods for critical research. This learning developed strong critical and collaborative writing skills. For instance, in my PhD research we critically examined existing research literature, government and NGO reports on Indigenous communities, and selected qualitative methods for community relevance and application to Indigenous and cross-cultural contexts, as well as developing emerging research interests, approaches, and skills. Using guidelines from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders, we critically analyzed existing forest/land management

problems in relation to everyday land-based practices and traditional experiences. Our critical lens taught me to address the following: How have I been shaped as who I am today? How do I see myself, my relationships with the land, and my reciprocity?

Land-based learning. This land-based learning helped me to rebuild my relational belonging as a researcher. An important aspect of land-based learning as an Indigenous person is the concept of positioning (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012): essentially, who am I and where do I situate myself within my research? In land-based learning, the land is a significant source of knowledge and understanding and can provide a physical, social, and spiritual sense of learning. Land-based education provides a decolonization perspective that 'if colonization is fundamentally about dispossessing Indigenous peoples from land, decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledges and languages that arise from the land' (Wildcat et al., 2014: I). This learning covered topics such as decolonizing and reclaiming our relationship with the land through exploring the five senses in learning, using art and poetry in ecological learning, decolonizing place and historic site visits, the history of Aboriginal and settler peoples, natural history and species identification, nature sketching, framing and debriefing effective solo experiences, and connecting place-based learning to the curricular content areas. This valid form of integrative practice, centered in Indigenous culture and wisdom, recognizes that people are intimately interwoven and connected with their traditional lands, and that directly cultivating this fundamental relationship can shape and influence all areas of interaction with society, including social and environmental well-being.

Justice-based activities. Engaging with environmental and social justice activities was a significant part of my research training. For instance, during the last 10 years I have been involved in and introduced to a larger community, through participation in social well-being and justice movements, such as the Idle No More, Standing Rock, First Nations Land Rights, climate justice, and food sovereignty. Through all these past and ongoing roles, I have learned a range of decolonizing skills, including critical perspective from a community perspective, collaborative decision-making, and management, and, perhaps most importantly, I have learned how it is possible to transform ideas into practice through commitment and collaborative engagement.

Community activities. The most important lesson learned from my experience of working with various Indigenous communities has been how to transform myself from a science-oriented researcher to a participant-oriented researcher. For instance, I was involved in an Indigenous collaborative science research project

with a Dene First Nation (FN) community in Saskatchewan, Canada. Using autoethnography in this study, I had the opportunity to share and expand our knowledge, and mentor, teach, and co-learn with K-12 FN students. I co-learned and shared science and Indigenous governance with FN Elders, Knowledge-holders, teachers, and students. I was also involved with Aboriginal youth in Saskatoon public schools in developing a greater understanding of Aboriginal perspectives in addressing the water crisis. In this study, we had the opportunity to learn through community experience, share and expand our knowledge, and mentor, teach, and co-learn with First Nation students and teachers from schools in the public school division. As a research assistant, I was involved and conducted research with homeless two-spirit/queer Indigenous people in urban centers in Saskatchewan. My research activities included a literature review and program/initiative scan of the various materials out there pertaining to two-spirit/queer Indigenous people in Saskatchewan as well as a series of in-depth interviews with four community service providers, I learned how to be empathic in research, which I did not get in my Western research training.

All of the above issues played a vital role in transforming who I want to be as a researcher. I learned how to decolonize myself from a science-oriented researcher to an empathy-oriented researcher (Becker, 1967) who not only conducts research for academic purposes but also creates critical and ethical research that is based on solidarity.

Decolonizing research

Decolonization creates a significant opportunity to redefine the meaning of research from and within the community. It connects participants and researcher with all parts of the research as a collective and collaborative endeavor. I was able to redefine the meaning of research in my PhD research with Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. The meaning of 'researcher' in my relational research was different than the Western meaning of researcher. For example, using participatory action research (PAR) in my PhD research, we (Elders, Knowledge-holders, and youth) redefined the meaning of research through collaborative ways of conducting research, building collective ownerships, doing collective data analysis, making collective presentations, and publishing collectively.

Redefining interdisciplinary research. The concept of interdisciplinarity was confusing for me until I received a decolonial form of research training through anti-racist, land-based, and cross-cultural research training from Indigenous scholars, educators, and activists. Through these decolonization processes, interdisciplinary research training in environmental sustainability has become a prominent research

tool for many challenging issues of resource allocation, environmental management, poverty, social justice, and globalization. The research becomes a form of empowerment because of decolonization. Processes of decolonization helped me to challenge interdisciplinary research that was not connected with practice by reconfiguring the meaning of a community-based, interdisciplinary approach (Datta, 2017). For me, interdisciplinary research involves meaningful involvement and ethical relationships with participants. I argued elsewhere the first priorities of interdisciplinary research in saying, 'Special attention is given to the community's practice: how do community people deal with environmental matters, and in what way do they interact, communicate, understand, evaluate, and manage the connections between their everyday needs and practices?' (Datta, 2017: 2). The decolonial forms of interdisciplinary research objectives were inspiring when choosing my PhD program in environmental sustainability.

Collaborative research. I learned how to conduct collaborative research with participants from my PhD research community Elders and Knowledge-holders. For example, researcher and co-researcher participants conducted the research collaboratively in the community. We decided together our research title; research questions and research objectives were identified according to suggestions from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders. Community needs and voices were prioritized in selecting our research topic and research questions. To redefine the meaning of research for the community, research needs to be based on local knowledge, and Elders and Knowledge-holders need to be included as a significant part of the research. The researcher was identified as 'we', instead of an individual researcher. The term 'we' included the researcher and all community participants as part of the research; however, we gave more importance, respect, and honor to the community Elders, Knowledge-holders, and leaders. According to our Elders and Knowledge-holders' suggestions, we created a research team with the university researcher and four co-researcher participants from the community. These four co-researchers (two female and two male researchers) were from various backgrounds. The first co-researcher was a school teacher who had been working with community children for a long time. The second co-researcher was a student leader who had been involved with various Indigenous land, language, and education right movements. The third co-researcher was a woman leader who had been involved with various Indigenous women's and land rights movements; she also led various land rights movements in the community and beyond. The fourth co-researcher was a university student who had been fighting for Indigenous education in the community and nationally. According to community Elders and Knowledge-holders, diversity was an important issue for the community. They thought that co-researchers from different backgrounds could cover different issues for the community. Although our research team was created with a researcher and four co-researcher participants, we

were mostly guided by community Elders and Knowledge-holders. In each research step, we followed community Elders and Knowledge-holders' directions in our research. Elders and Knowledge-holders should be considered to be researchers, as Elders and Knowledge-holders are important parts of Indigenous culture because of the traditional knowledge that they impart. They carry the traditional teachings, the ceremonies, and the stories of all our relations. They are considered to be Knowledge-keepers for the community (Datta, 2015). During my PhD research (through PAR), I learned from conversations with Elders and Knowledge-holders that academic researchers should be considered as learners instead of discoverers of community knowledge as outsiders. We collectively talked and shared Elders', Knowledge-holders', youths', and other participants' stories. We collectively wrote our own learning reflections and other forms of writing. At the end of the study, our writing was published as a book, for the first time in the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community.

Collective ownership. Collective ownership of our research was one of the important differences from the Western form of research. Community Elders were included as some of the main owners of our research findings. Elders had copies of all the transcriptions, recordings, and our notes. Elders and Knowledge-holders were the first owners of the research findings, and the paper and electronic copies of our research findings and publications. Elders and Knowledge-holders were included as researchers in conference presentation and journal publications (Datta et al., 2015). We also asked community Elders and Knowledge-holders' permission each time we presented our research and, if possible, we tried to invite them to the presentation.

Collective data analysis. Collective data analysis was significant for the co-researcher participants in understanding how their community's oral stories were transformed into a written format. Although our academic researcher was trained for computer data analysis (i.e. Nvivo10 software), we intentionally did not use a computer system because co-researcher participants, Elders, and Knowledge-holders did not know how to use a computer. We manually selected themes from our transcriptions, and we shared our themes with our Elders and Knowledge-holders; they changed some themes and added new ones. This collaborative analysis created a ceremony among us; we learned so much from our Elders and Knowledge-holders.

Collective presentation. Collective presentation was an important part of centering Indigenous voice in our research. For example, we collectively presented our research in various places: first to the community Elders and Knowledge-holders, collecting their feedback and incorporating it in our findings and then to the

community, collecting the community's feedback. Once we received permission from the community Elders and Knowledge-holders, we presented to the multinational agencies (UNDP, UNSCO, and University), government ministries, and policy-makers. We also collectively presented our research at four international conferences and published in three international, peer-reviewed journals.

Building ongoing relationships. Our research is building ongoing community relationships. The current state education system creates a gap between community youth and community Elders and Knowledge-holders as state education does not respect the community's traditional knowledge and practice. Elders said '[State] educational institutions have stolen our children from us through mainstream education. The State does not teach and respect our knowledge practice. Once our children get state education, they cannot stay with us; they have to go to the city and need to work for mainstream people.' An Elder stated, 'This research is different from state education; we want this kind of research in our community.' Likewise another Elder said, 'With this research we can build relationships. We say what we want in this form of research.' Another Elder suggested, 'I am hopeful for this research and I look forward to working together again.'

Research is action. Research was not only a written paper for us. Rather, we considered research to be an ongoing action with the participants' community. We believed that with research we can speak up for our rights and justice and against oppression. A Knowledge-holder said, 'In this form of research, we can talk; we can say, this is our work.' Another Indigenous leader said, 'I do not see this as research. This is a new relationship tool for our community in which we can trust and hope for positive change.' An Elder said, 'We are so happy about this research commitment to our community. I have not seen this kind of commitment from government and other researchers. This research and these researchers have taken so much responsibility for our community. We really do want to see more of this form of research in our community.'

Honor and respect cultural protocols. In conducting research with Indigenous communities, the first priority should be on cultural protocols (Wilson, 2008). For instance, during my research with Indigenous communities, participants complained that researchers from governmental, non-governmental, and academic institutions only cared about institutional priorities in their research protocols. Strictly institutional protocols do not have enough respect for Indigenous culture, practice, and Elders/Knowledge-holders' knowledge. Participants identified these forms of knowledge as different forms of oppressions of the community (Datta, 2016). For culturally appropriate research, the community's protocol needs to be followed strictly. When I had questions related to the research, such as who should

be included and what cultural protocols needed to be followed, the Elders and Knowledge-holders were my first contact. All forms of protocols, oral and written, should be followed. During my PhD research, based on community need, I prioritized community oral knowledge for my research protocols rather than the written protocols from my research proposal.

Local knowledge is scientific. In my PhD research, I acknowledged that community Elders, Knowledge-holders, and leaders are the main source of research, and their knowledge is scientific (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Little Bear, 2009). Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1966) questioned that if traditional knowledge or any traditional myth has been sustainable for so long to the community, why do we not as researchers call this myth or traditional knowledge scientific? Indigenous scholar Little Bear (2009) explained that Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders are important scientific Knowledge-holders for their community. He also suggested that we as researchers need to redefine our meaning of science from the community's perspective. As the Indigenous community has been living sustainably on their land for centuries, their traditional knowledge, culture, and practice are also sustainable. In our research, we acknowledged that community Elders and Knowledge-holders had knowledge of how to do research according to Indigenous research protocol. According to community Elders and Knowledge-holders, Western academic research and traditional knowledge can together build a significant knowledge bridge for the community. However, community Elders and Knowledge-holders clearly articulated that when building a bridge between Indigenous knowledge and Western research, Indigenous knowledge should be considered equal to scientific knowledge. Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders also said that if Indigenous knowledge is used as a Western research tool, Indigenous sustainable knowledge will be lost, and they did not want this to happen.

Conclusion

My decolonization journey was not easy; however, I consider my decolonization journey as my ceremony (Wilson, 2008), which forced me to rethink not only my research but also challenged who I am and what I should do as a researcher when working with participants. From my decolonization process, I understood that, although Western quantitative and qualitative research methodology, methods, and research tools were helpful throughout this process, their principles were challenging. Through my 15 years' experience working with various Indigenous communities, I learned that research without decolonizing can exploit the community. Therefore, decolonizing both research and researchers is the first step when conducting research with an Indigenous community (Simpson, 2001; Smith, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

My research training as a ceremony became my relational responsibility to myself, my family, my community, and my participants. Therefore, the meaning of research and researchers is to me a continuous form of decolonization. The term 'decolonization' to me as a researcher means becoming, learning, and taking responsibility for participants. In this process, the researcher should not only learn from community participants but should also consider participants as educators, scientific Knowledge-holders, and owners of the knowledge. My cross-cultural identity and socialization, unique interdisciplinary education, research skills, and passion for understanding Western methodological challenges helped me to decolonize my research training and transformed who I wanted to be.

My decolonization created a space to embrace ways of challenging and countering acts of oppression while advancing Indigenous knowledge(s), perspectives, histories, experiences, spirituality, and realities. It also incorporates and bridges Western and Indigenous research, with people learning to challenge past wrongs and restoring participants' voice in a show of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. I realize the importance of decolonization that can be culturally appropriate, respectful, honoring, and careful of the local people for building an appropriate collaborative approach between Western and Indigenous research. I hope my decolonization stories may inspire other researchers to transform themselves, not only to be participant-oriented researchers but also to take inspiration from how they can be empowered by their research.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. The term 'Western' refers to a mind-set, a worldview that is a product of the development of European culture and diffused into other nations like North America. As the dominant meaning system, Western discourse is the primary expression of that culture (Minnich, 1990). Western is representative of an archive of knowledge and systems, rules, and values extracted from and characteristic of Europe and the Western hemisphere (Smith, 1999: 42).
2. The term 'disciplinary research training' refers to controlled knowledge practice with hierarchically organized scientific and technological projects (Datta, 2017; Haraway, 2004). Feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1996) explains it as controlled knowledge by continuing to work away at the themes of science, technology, and knowledge as social practices with real consequences. She argues that this form of knowledge training is not only insufficient, but also sporadic to explain the reality.
3. The term 'community' is used to refer to the system of relationships within Indigenous societies in which the nature of personhood is identified. This system of relationships not only includes family but also extends to comprise the relationships of human, ecological, and spiritual origin (Datta, 2016). Community is a structure of support mechanisms that include the personal responsibility for the collective and, reciprocally, the collective concern for individual existence. Cajete (1994: 164) suggests that 'community is the place where the forming of the heart and face of the individual as one of the people is most fully expressed'.

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