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The Holding Space: A Guide for Partners in Tribal Research

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Abstract

Background: Although a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach is desired by American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribes, many researchers and tribes experience challenges in research partnerships. The aim of this project was to develop and disseminate an evidence-based training toolkit to help strengthen tribal–academic research partnerships. Our prior research found that governance, trust, and culture were essential pillars for successful community academic partnerships.

Methods: This article describes the development and evaluation of the new *Holding Space: A Guide for Partners in Tribal Research* toolkit, which contains a *Holding Space* Discussion Guide and the *Tribal Research Future Game*, which are delivered in a training format for participants in tribal–academic research partnerships.

Results: Results indicate that *Holding Space* is a useful tool for facilitating conversations and openly reflecting on practices within partnerships and may also be appropriate for a broader audience.

Conclusions: Future work includes further effectiveness studies as well as research focused on dissemination and implementation.

Keywords

Community health partnerships, community health research, health disparities, power sharing, process issues

Communities of color and those suffering from health inequities often prefer a CBPR approach.[1] This is especially true in AI/AN communities where a history of opportunistic research experiences has led to enhanced tribal protections, local capacity, and efforts to ground contemporary research in community priorities.[1,2] While academics may value partnerships, they may be less aware of challenges of initiating, nurturing, and maintaining partnerships.[3] These challenges contribute to the increased likelihood of funded tribal–academic research partnerships to be descriptive projects and receive less funding than projects serving multiple-race/unspecified groups.[4] The knowledge and skills needed to engage tribal communities are rarely taught in academic settings.[5]

AI/AN tribes are sovereign nations and determine their own governance structures, laws, and collaborations, including research and research priorities. Tribal interest in research and data to guide governance has grown and approximately one quarter of all tribes have established their own institutional review boards.[6] While there are several resources to help researchers understand how to work with tribes,[7] there is a lack of resources that focus on education and active engagement of both researchers and tribes while they are starting or participating in a tribal–academic research partnership.

The *Holding Space: A Guide for Partners in Tribal Research* (*Holding Space*) fills this gap.

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is the oldest, largest, and most representative national organization serving the broad interests of AI/AN tribal nations. NCAI partnered with the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) to develop *Holding Space*, an evidence-based toolkit, a resource to help strengthen tribal–academic research partnerships. The toolkit is grounded in prior research which found governance, trust, and culture to be essential to successful community–academic partnerships.[8–10] This article describes the *Holding Space* toolkit development, evaluation, and plans for its dissemination and implementation.

The *Holding Space* toolkit was based on prior research on CBPR. The NCAI Policy Research Center conducted a mixed-methods study in its Research for Improved Health (RIH) project to examine successful CBPR projects.[8,9] A study objective was to determine factors associated with CBPR partnership and community outcomes. Partnership outcomes were defined as synergy, personal outcomes, agency outcomes, power relations, and sustainability.[10,11] These analyses showed that the themes of governance, trust, and culture were strongly associated with achieving and maintaining positive partnership outcomes.[10]

THE *HOLDING SPACE* TOOLKIT

In response, NCAI and UNR partnered to conducted a subsequent study to develop and test the feasibility of a CBPR toolkit for tribal–academic research partnerships based on the cross-cutting themes. The study aimed to assess toolkit intervention characteristics[12] and evaluate the efficacy of its dissemination. The project product is the *Holding Space* toolkit. *Holding Space* represents a process in partnership development where a "third space" is created which allows for differences, fosters respect, and seeks the most meaningful impact on research outcomes while reaffirming governance, trust, and culture. The *Holding Space* toolkit consists of two parts, the: 1) *Holding Space* Discussion Guide; and 2) *Tribal Research Future Game*. The purpose of the *Holding Space* Toolkit is to provide education on governance, trust, and culture in emerging or established tribal–academic research partnerships during an interactive, day-long facilitated in-person workshop where participants engage in critical discourse and learn strategies to address potential partnership issues. The development and evaluation of the *Holding Space* toolkit components, the Discussion Guide, and the *Tribal Research Future Game* are discussed.

Development of the *Holding Space* Discussion Guide

Development of the *Holding Space* Discussion Guide (henceforth "Guide") was conducted by NCAI-UNR project staff under guidance of an eight-member advisory board. The advisory board included community members, tribal leaders, tribal and academic researchers from Tribal Epidemiology Centers, university, and community-based organizations. Before external piloting, the advisory board reviewed and experienced all toolkit content, and provided guidance on revisions. Research activity was approved by the UNR (#803839) and National Indian Health Service Institutional Review Boards (#N14-N-03). The Guide consists of four modules: 1) Introduction, 2) Governance, 3) Trust, and 4) Culture. NCAI-UNR project staff with respective topic expertise developed module content based on a review of the literature and independent variables associated with RIH partnership outcomes.[8,10] The NCAI led the development of the governance module with the assertion that tribal governments have the right to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data.[13] The first author led the development of the trust module, extending previous research results,[14] and an intercultural communication expert and RIH co-investigator worked with project staff to develop the culture module content.

After advisory board review, draft versions of the Guide were pilot tested during four- project staff facilitated training sessions with individuals who had experience being in or were interested in developing a tribal–academic research partnership. Participants self-identified as white (52%) or AI/AN (48%), academic (70%), and between 36 and 45 years of age. The mean length of partnership involvement was 7.3 years among those who reported being in a current partnership. The pilot testing helped to ensure content was relevant for established partnerships and understandable for emerging partnerships. Pilot testing of the *Holding Space* trainings took place in South Dakota, Minnesota, Alaska, and Maryland for a total of 63 participants. Project staff also presented content from the Guide at national conferences with tribal leader, tribal member, and experienced researcher attendance and

received feedback. The Guide was revised based on collective participant feedback.

The final Guide contains four modules, the first being an introduction to community engagement and not described here. The discussion begins with the second module, *Governance*, which emphasizes that tribal–academic research partnerships must begin with respecting the role of tribal sovereignty in research. The module discusses the role of AI/AN tribal governance in research and participants learn to honor tribal approval structures on health research projects.[15,16] In the Guide, participants learn that tribal governance is more than just the approval process. Previous research emphasized that governance extends beyond regulation and encompasses stewardship to protect and benefit tribal communities;[13] tribal governance is a process that is present in all phases of a research project, from planning to determinations about dissemination. The *Governance* module also reviews examples of tribal research governance structures (Table 1), discusses the role of tribes as a steward or guide to the research process, and explores tensions in tribal–academic research partnerships through case studies and discussion questions.

The Guide's third module, *Trust*, covers the role of trust in tribal–academic research partnerships. Trust is asserted as fundamental to any relationship and is largely responsible for how relationships or partnerships are established.[8,14] This module teaches key concepts and provides tips and exercises about principles of trust development, trust types, and conflict styles and resolution based on the set of assumptions presented in Table 2. Trust is characterized as demonstrating respect, safety and sense of responsibility, and having shared values and goals.[8,14] Participants apply knowledge through exercises and vignettes that highlight trust and conflict in tribal–academic research partnerships.

Table 1. Tribal Research Governance Structures

1. The tribal council makes all research decisions.
2. The tribal council grants some or all decision-making authority over research to a tribal entity (e.g., a tribal research review board, the tribal health department, the tribal college, tribal research office).
3. The tribal council sets a process for tribal participation in an inter-tribal entity to steward decision-making in research that involves the tribe (e.g., a regional tribal health board, an inter-tribal council).
4. The tribal council sets a process for tribal participation in a non-tribal entity to steward decision-making in research that involves the tribe (e.g., a university institutional review board, Indian Health Service review board).

Table 2. Underlying assumptions of trust

Trust takes a long time to build.
Trust is fragile.
Trust is dynamic, it changes with circumstances.
Direct or indirect experience contributes to the decision to trust.

The fourth module, *Culture*, discusses the important role of culture in tribal–academic research partnerships, and provides ideas on how to honor and engage culture in the research space. The module content asserts that research is not a culturally-neutral process, culture lives in ideas, institutions, interactions and individuals,[17] and tribal–academic research partners can make assumptions about the culture of tribal and research communities which impact partnership development (Table 3). The *Culture* module emphasizes the importance of practicing cultural humility and safety in partnerships, the roles of guest and host in the research relationship, the value of cultural safety, the roles for both indigenous and western

Table 3. Assumptions in the Research Process

Assumptions about Native Communities	Assumptions about Research Communities
Tribal leadership changes so frequently it is nearly impossible to sustain partnerships	Researchers are outsiders. They don't live in, and therefore cannot understand, the tribal communities they study.
Tribal communities do not embrace or understand modern science	Researchers value scientific knowledge more than community knowledge and values
Research with Native communities takes too much time and is not realistic if you are working under tight deadlines	Researchers are not interested in sharing resources—including portions of their budget, data, and research training—with tribes
There is too much fear and risk associated with offending tribal partners, it's not worth undertaking research with them	Researchers don't understand how to communicate with the community—they would rather email than pick up the phone

knowledge, and the importance of holding space for cultural integration in the research process.

Evaluation of the *Holding Space* Discussion Guide

The Guide was evaluated quantitatively by pilot site participants who completed the post-training evaluation (n = 53). Dissemination and implementation outcomes were assessed. A 5- and 6-point Likert scale was used for subscales scoring. Higher scores indicate more favorable outcome scores, except for organizational barriers; a lower score is consistent with fewer barriers. Overall, the Guide received positive evaluations on dissemination and implementation outcomes (Table 4).

Upon completion of the Guide pilot training, participants engaged in debrief discussions to provide feedback on lessons learned, perceived value and utility, target audience, and content. Evaluation of the pilot trainings was essential in the development of the Guide. Selected quotes to support common themes of audience, value of the guide, and recommendations are shared.

Audience

Initially, the Guide was intended for emerging or existing tribal–academic research partnership audiences. Participants voiced that the Guide may be a useful teaching tool for those distantly or indirectly involved in research partnerships. One participant explained, "This would be really good for scientific review offices at NIH, but it would also be good for program officers, honestly. I think and not just NIH, I think, probably also National Science Foundation, CDC." As a result, the project team has begun explore dissemination to wider audiences.

Table 4. Dissemination and Implementation Outcomes: Subscale Measures at Post-training

	N	Mean	SD	Range*
Relative Advantage	53	5.15	.85	4.62–5.43
Attitudes, Positive Outcome	53	4.61	.61	4.25–4.82
Organizational Barriers[1]	52	1.90	.71	1.83–2.75
Feasibility & Acceptability	51	4.46	.69	3.47–4.60

* six-point Likert scale 1 (low) to 6 (high)

[1] lower score is consistent with fewer barriers

Value

Participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to learn from others' experiences as well as the opportunity to participate in the space created by the project staff for open conversations and reflections. One participant summarized,

> I just wanted to add what I appreciate is that just being able to come to the table and discuss it, not as an academic, and in a place that's safe, because when I think of all that work at thousands of organizations, everything is so dollar driven. And especially in indigenous communities so much more dollars every year, so people are moving, researchers are moving so fast. Our academia's moving so fast no one's even having the conversation and, and saying like even a pre, first step is, you know, talking about it before we even move forward. So, thank you.

Recommendations

Participants felt that at times too much time was devoted to a topic where there was already a baseline understanding or that an anticipated learning objective was reached earlier than the completion of content delivery. As one participant expressed,

> You know, I get a general sense also from others that like, 'Okay a booklet might.' You wouldn't want to turn folks off of working with Native American communities because I think that generally every researcher I've approached, they're generally aware that you need to be sensitive, so they're very. So maybe some time could be saved in the, you know. You know, we all understand there are these biases and like and some basic maybe trust-building types of conversational exercises maybe would be beneficial so that people kind of get in line there.

Innovations like the Tribal Research Future Game were born from these recommendations to practically apply lessons and reinforce didactic education.

Development of the Tribal Research Future Game

The second component of the *Holding Space* toolkit is the *Tribal Research Future Game* (henceforth Game).

Project staff and Future iQ, Inc., developed this interactive toolkit component to enable partnerships to practice skills learned in the Guide. Grounded in game theory, the Game is based on concepts found in *The Future Game: The Rez*, a Future iQ product, that illustrates decision making on community and regional planning over time.[18] The game-based depiction of tribal–academic research partnerships aligns with AI/AN cultural tradition of using games for skills building and education. This approach was supported by the project advisory board, tribal leaders, community members, and health researchers with experience working in partnership with tribes. The result is a game that is not intended to trivialize but rather create space for abstract decision making. The goal is to help partnerships navigate difficult discussions and provide hands-on negotiation from differing perspectives. The Game is designed for teams of five players, consisting of:

1. Roles: Role cards are handed out to each group for players to adopt during the game. The roles include elder tribal leader, young tribal leader, tribal administrator, senior researcher, and postdoctoral researcher (Figure 1). Cards provide some role attributes (e.g., stern, motivated, etc.), but players must assume his or her role identity (e.g., race, gender) and determine how or if intersectionality impacts partnership decisions. This is revealed during the Game debrief session.
2. Context: Table sheets are provided with baseline partnership information, current events, and context.
3. Decision: Decision sheets are provided to teams with specific vignettes for decision making at years 1, 2, 5, and 10.
4. Partnership Outcomes: A decision tree, reviewed at the end of the game, maps all possible choices and partnership outcomes at year 20.

The Game is intended to help partnerships reflect on decision-making processes, assumptions, and decision outcomes of tribal–academic research partnerships.

Figure 1. Example of role card from the Tribal Research Future Game

Evaluation of the *Tribal Research Future Game*

The Game was qualitatively and quantitatively evaluated through session debrief and post-session questionnaires that assessed knowledge, attitudes, and game utility. Quantitative assessments used a 6-point Likert scale where a higher mean score indicated stronger agreement. Scores assessing the difficulty of partnering with tribes were higher than anticipated and may suggest that the training served to elucidate the partnership process to illustrate the nuances of tribal–academic research partnerships. This result may be attributed to participants' increased awareness of considerations that need to be made when partnering with tribal communities. Overall, the Game received favorable evaluation scores (Table 5).

After experiencing the Game, qualitative data from debrief and open-ended post-session survey response were gathered. Positive feedback included compliments about the interactive nature of the game and opportunity to hear differing perspectives while experiencing applied decision making. Negative feedback included concern that partnership outcome names/labels initially seemed biased toward an academic frame. Participant feedback helped the research team to revise and finalize the Game and modify facilitation. For example, facilitators explain outcomes as relating to how much risk the partnership was able to tolerate and focus participants on the partnership's degree of satisfaction with their outcome rather than the outcome itself. The partnership outcome in the Game is intended to guide future actions members take to strengthen their partnership.

Table 5. Post-Session Tribal Research Futures Game Workshop\Evaluation Results

Question	N	Mean	SD
The workshop enhanced my understanding of the roles of governance, trust, and culture in tribal-academic research partnerships	80	4.25	.77
The workshop would be a useful tool for tribal partners to enhance research partnerships	78	4.44	.73
The workshop would be a useful tool for academic partners to enhance research partnerships	80	4.51	.69
I felt the decisions our group made in the Tribal Research Future Game were influenced by governance, trust, and culture	80	4.31	.61
In my opinion, partnering with tribes on research is very challenging	80	3.70	.88
I feel that this workshop will be helpful to me in my current work	80	4.26	.74

CONCLUSIONS

The *Holding Space* toolkit is an evidence-based toolkit developed to address the development and strengthening of tribal–academic research partnerships through governance, trust, and culture. The development and evaluation of the toolkit components were grounded in research, advisory board, expert, and participant feedback throughout the process. Feedback on the toolkit was critical during its development and confirmed the demand and need for this type of resource.

Research plans include testing the delivery of the *Holding Space* toolkit training in regional settings around the country, and to conduct new research on its implementation to determine the feasibility, accessibility, and fidelity of electronic delivery and facilitation. The limitations of using this type of toolkit training include reach, participant time to devote to a day-long training, the cost of travel for facilitators, and its focus on health research. The project team is interested in future work to adapt the toolkit to various audiences and formats.

The impact of the *Holding Space* toolkit was reflected in the positive feedback from participants during its development and evaluation. The toolkit was developed to help strengthen tribal–academic research partnerships using an interactive, evidence-based format to illustrate the utility of the concepts of governance, trust, and culture. Stronger tribal–academic research partnerships because of the *Holding Space* training may result in more effective research and long-term partnerships that can help to decrease health disparities in AI/AN communities.

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