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Rebalancing power relationships in research using visual mapping: examples from a project within an Indigenist research paradigm

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ABSTRACT
Engaging in respectful relationships is an essential aspect of all research and educational practices. Colonial residue, and the maltreatment and misinterpretation of Indigenous peoples by researchers, puts a great responsibility on the researcher to strive for balance in power relationships within Indigenous contexts. Even more so, in research and education involving Indigenous children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This may be easier said than done. In a PhD project on the meaning of music for First Nations children diagnosed with ASD in British Columbia, Canada, visual mapping was used to rebalance the power relationships between myself as a researcher and the research partners as a step toward decolonization. The visual maps were used to summarize conversation transcripts that could be used to validate my interpretations and disseminate the research results, create a mutual focal point for negotiating consent and participation and show progress over time. Visual methods, such as visual mapping, are beneficial to individuals with autism, and can also be useful when rebalancing power relations with other research partners, such as parents. In conclusion, visual mapping can be a useful tool for rebalancing power relationships in research and educational practices.

KEYWORDS
First Nations; autism spectrum disorder; visual mapping; rebalancing power relationships; Indigenist research paradigm

Introduction
In any research, there is always power imbalance. The researcher has the responsibility to address this imbalance. In my project on the meaning of music for First Nations children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in British Columbia, Canada (Lindblom 2017), it was of significant importance to rebalance power relationships as the research partners were children from a marginalized group who also had been diagnosed with a developmental disorder. The dark history of colonialism and how Indigenous peoples have been mistreated and misinterpreted in research made it necessary to find a tool for this rebalancing. ASD is currently understood as deficits in social interaction and communication, and restricted, repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, APA 2013). The children in the research were diagnosed with ASD, which made it essential to assure that they understood our conversations. Visual mapping, sometimes referred to as...
mind-maps, was the tool I chose. In this article, I will show how visual mapping was used to summarize conversation transcripts that could be used to validate my interpretations and disseminate the research results, create a mutual focal point during the conversation, show progress over time and negotiate consent and participation. Although the examples come from my research, using visual mapping as a tool could be considered in many types of research and practice, such as education.

**Aim**

The aim of this article is to illustrate the use of visual mapping to address the power imbalance in research and practice using an example from research with First Nations children diagnosed with ASD.

**An Indigenist research paradigm**

Historically, Indigenous peoples have been objects of research, and rarely had the opportunity to influence, give their views or deny participation in Western research endeavors. In reaction to this injustice, colonialization and power imbalance, Indigenous researchers have begun defining their own paradigms, methodologies and theories (see Smith 1999/2012, Wilson 2008, Kovach 2009/2012, Lambert 2014). Some Indigenous researchers believe that research within Indigenous context should only be done by Indigenous researchers. Others, such as Shawn Wilson (in Adams et al. 2015, p 20), have started using the term Indigenist, ‘This emphasizes that it’s a philosophical issue, not a claiming of ownership by one group of people. You can be a white Indigenist just like you can be a male feminist’. This opens up for non-Indigenous researchers, like myself, who aim to conduct critical research and address issues such as colonization and power imbalance (Lindblom 2017).

Philosophical assumptions are the foundation on which we base our research, or pedagogical, choices. This can be called worldview or paradigm (Creswell 2013), or philosophical stance or theoretical perspective (Crotty 1998). Wilson (2008) sees an Indigenist research paradigm as a circle comprising epistemology, ontology, axiology and methodology. These components are inseparable and are more than individual elements. ‘The whole of the paradigm is greater than the sum of its parts’ (Wilson 2008, p. 70). Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are respected and honored in Indigenist research, which means that the research methods ‘resonate with, and are driven and supported by Indigenous peoples’ (Rix, Wilson, Sheenan and Tujague 2018). Indigenous worldviews are relational, and reciprocal relationships with all in creation in foundational (Wilson 2008). In an Indigenist research context, this means that I as a researcher must form reciprocal relationships with not only the research partners, but to the data from the project to the ways of knowing, being and doing of the people involved, and the ancestors, coming generations and all in the natural and spiritual world. As a non-Indigenous researcher, this requires extensive reflection, and setting aside one’s own worldviews (Rix et al. 2018). Terminology can also enforce or reduce power imbalance; therefore, I use the term research partner instead of participant to emphasize the reciprocity of our research relationship. The examples in this article show decolonizing and power-balancing efforts, as well as offering a tool that can give research partners the opportunity to show their competence (see Dindar et al. 2017).
The initial PhD project was approved by the ethical board of the University of Eastern Finland and the follow-up research has been approved by the regional ethical committee in Uppsala for the University of Karlstad, Sweden.

**Visual mapping**

There are many tools used to support pupils diagnosed with ASD. Interventions and strategies need to be individualized. Visual supports are usually an integral component of ASD support (Wilkinson 2010). Visual schedules, photographs and pictures are examples of visual supports that easily can be modified to suit the individual’s needs (Meadan et al. 2011). Furthermore, the purpose of the visual support should be established. In the case of this project, the purpose of the visual support was to rebalance power, and visual mapping was the tool I chose. Buzan (2001) introduced the term mind-map in the 1970s. Åhlberg (2013) uses the term improved conceptual mapping (which he has developed from Novak and Gowin (1984)), and uses this tool in teaching, learning and research. He describes the method as empowering. Scherp (2013) uses the concept cognitive map and explains how they can be used in interviews to visualize the informant’s conceptions about a phenomenon. The use of visual mapping reported in this article draws on these previous uses, but explicitly focuses on power issues, which are closely bound to ethical considerations and decolonization efforts. In Figure 1, the research process is visualized.

![Figure 1. Visual map of the research process.](image)

**Visual mapping applications**

**Validation of interpretations and dissemination of research results**

In all research, validity is an important aspect. In qualitative research, validity cannot easily be measured (Patton 2002). However, validity can be assured by rigor in methodology. Within Indigenous contexts, research results have often been derived from Western researchers’ interpretations. Chilisa (2012) emphasizes that the validity of research in Indigenous contexts is the researchers’ responsibility and concerns conducting the research in accordance with Indigenous epistemologies. Wilson (2008) refers to this as relational accountability, which means that the research is conducted with respect and in an ethical way.
When presenting my interpretation of the first conversation with Debbie, I put the visual map on the table in front of us and focused on her interest for music.

Researcher: ... So last time we spoke, then I listened to it and I made a mind-map so we could discuss what we talked about music. And so, I put your name here, and it says that you like listening to music. You still like listening to music
Debbie: Yes.

The visual map gives Debbie, and the researcher, an overview of what the conversation is going to be about.

Picture 1. The visual map from Debbie’s first conversation in 2013.

By starting with talking about Debbie’s interest for music, and then going clockwise, Debbie gets the idea of how the conversation will proceed.

By starting with talking about Debbie’s interest for music, and then going clockwise, Debbie gets the idea of how the conversation will proceed.

An important part of the research process is disseminating the results in a way that is relevant and understandable to the research partners (Smith 1999/2012, Wilson 2008, Kovach 2009/2012, Lambert 2014). In this particular context, the primary research partners are children who have autism, which means that I have to ensure that the communication between myself as a researcher and the research partner is reciprocal. When disseminating the research results, the visual map presents the results in a summarized fashion. It also gives the research partner the option to find a bubble that they find interesting to talk about, which would change the order of the result dissemination. This allows for a shift in power.

**Creating a mutual focal point for negotiating consent and participation**

Debbie had given her written consent to participate in the research, but in order to assure that her participation was voluntary, and was held through the conversation, it
was important to me that she was active in the conversation. Debbie participated actively by asking questions, which showed her interest and motivation to partake, see Picture 2.

**Picture 2.** The question mark attracts Debbie’s attention.

Debbie: What does it say here? What does the question mark mean?

We continued to go through the bubbles in the visual map one by one, in the order that they appeared. When we got to the last bubble, Debbie put her earbuds in and started listening to her music.

Researcher: Have you had enough of our talking now?
Debbie: I guess so.
Researcher: Okay.
Debbie: How about you?
Researcher: No, I think I could talk a bit more, but I’ll talk to your mom if you want and you can go listen to your music.
Debbie: Okay.
Researcher: Thank you.

The visual map gave Debbie the possibility to overview the content of the conversation, thus shifting power over the situation to her. She showed her power by putting in her earbuds when the last bubble in the visual map had been discussed. To make sure I had interpreted her action correctly, I asked if she had had enough of talking. Debbie replied politely, and here I could probably have convinced her to participate for a while longer. However, since she had so clearly shown that she wanted to end the conversation, I respected her decision.

**Showing progress over time**

In this research, visual maps were used to summarize all the conversations, and used in the follow-up conversations with all the research partners. The following example is from a conversation with Debbie’s mother Grace. The first conversations took place in 2013, and the transcript was summarized in the first visual map, here shown in red. In 2014, the next conversation was held. Progression within the different parts, such as Aboriginal music, emerges in yellow from the red bubble. When something new appeared in the material, the yellow bubble emerges from the center of the visual map as can be seen in Figure 2.
Figure 2. Visual map showing progression over time according to conversations with Debbie’s mother Grace. Source: Adapted from appendix 2 in Lindblom (2017) using simplemind.eu.
Showing progress over time in this manner gives an overview that can be difficult to perceive from reading a text. In this case, when the visual map was presented to Grace in a conversation in 2017, it became apparent that progress had happened. It also gave Grace the opportunity to recall her previous statements and reflect on the changes that have occurred over time.

Researcher: … but also she could sometimes have tantrums, and that was the one band, that she

Grace: Oh my God, well she’s just this year, after all these years, she’s trying to reign it in.

Here Grace realizes how Debbie has matured and can listen to music from this one band and contain herself instead of having a tantrum. Both in 2013 and 2014, Debbie would have tantrums when listening to a certain band. Over the 3 years since we last spoke in 2014, progress had been made, which when we meet again in 2020, will be incorporated in the visual map from 2017.

**Discussion of future development**

In this article, the use of visual mapping as a tool in rebalancing power relationships in research has been shown. The visual maps were used to validate my interpretations and disseminate the research results, create a mutual focal point for negotiating consent and participation and show progress over time. In retrospect, visual mapping could have been used in the initial conversations, either with words or pictures, to give visual support on which topics would be discussed and give the research partner an indication of when the talk was over. Another interesting development would be involving the research partner directly in constructing the visual map. With pen-in-hand, the researcher and research partner could add to the visual map during the conversation, thus allowing for more active participation and involvement in the procedure. I can see this as a possible strategy, for instance in the school context, when interacting with the pupil in teaching and conversation. For this to be possible, deeper relationships between the parties would be need, which is fully in line with the philosophical assumptions on which Indigenist research is based.

**Notes on contributor**

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