Rejecting, Revitalizing, and Reclaiming

First Nations Work to Set the Direction of Research and Policy Development

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ABSTRACT

Background: The history and legacy of Western, colonial research methodologies and policy frameworks continue to create and maintain dichotomies of superior/inferior, and valued/not valued between Western and First Nations cultures, peoples and knowledge.

Methods: This article was written to awaken discussion on how First Nations are working to shape the direction of research and policy development. It draws upon the author's personal observations and experiences of Western and Indigenous frameworks. The author also draws upon the growing body of work on this issue presented by indigenous researchers and scholars.

Findings: The Health Information Research Committee of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs rejects colonial research frameworks and promotes and supports culturally-respectful research. The Dakota in Manitoba are identifying our own Quality of Life indicators and developing policies based on our own cultural values. The Mohawk of Akwesasne have developed research ethics and protocols based on their cultural principles of skennen (peace), kariwio (good word), and kasastensera (strength).

Conclusion: First Nations people in Canada and the world are increasingly rejecting Western, colonial frameworks of research and policy development. Instead, we are reclaiming our right to be who we are, and we are revitalizing our cultures through promotion and utilization of indigenous research methodologies and development of culturally-rooted policy. Though the response of researchers and policy-makers is not yet known, these developments will continue into the future due to the commitment and work of First Nations people.

MeSH terms: Indigenous research methodology; culturally-rooted policy

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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The purpose of this paper is to present how First Nations people in Canada are working to shape the direction of research and policy development. These efforts include a process of rejection, revitalization, and reclamation. First Nations are *rejecting* colonial frameworks, and instead, are *working within our own indigenous frameworks*, from research to policy development. The latter approach inherently includes *revitalizing* our languages and traditional knowledge, and *reclaiming* our right to be who we are as Lakota/Dakota/Nakota, Ojibway, Cree, Dene, and other numerous and diverse First Nations cultures.

This article is neither a comprehensive review of all efforts on this topic – as such a review would exceed the scope of this article – nor is it specifically focussed on health. Rather, it reflects the author's, and other indigenous researchers' and scholars', experiences and observations of research and policy development in general, as undertaken within both Western and Indigenous frameworks.

Rejecting colonialism

'Research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned... "it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful."¹

In her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Maori Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes the many concerns and problems indigenous peoples have with the way research has been, and continues to be, conducted with our people and within our territories.¹ Colonial research entails establishing the superiority of Western knowledge, ecological imperialism, and cultural appropriation.¹ First Nations people *reject* these assaults through research on our people and cultures.

The Health Information Research Committee (HIRC) of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs functions similarly to a research ethics review board, and is mandated to monitor and oversee health research conducted with First Nations in Manitoba. It rejects colonial approaches to and methods of health research, and instead, builds upon the sovereignty of First Nations to make decisions about research in their communities, including

decisions regarding ownership, control, and access over information resulting from such activities.² These principles were coined by the Steering Committee of the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey, and within a few months, also included “possession of data”, and stand today as OCAP principles.² The HIRC process affords First Nations in Manitoba an opportunity to work towards avoiding those challenges identified by Smith. This entity is still evolving, and it is certain to become more fully developed and to strengthen over time.

As research today is still being conducted within the colonial framework, it should be no surprise that policy development within the same framework is still occurring; for example, defining and measuring “well-being” of on-reserve First Nations people for social policy uses. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) has authority over five on-reserve First Nations social programs – Child and Family Services, National Child Benefit Reinvestment, Social Assistance, Family Violence, and Personal Care Homes.

Currently, Treasury Board of Canada is requiring INAC to develop performance indicators for each of these programs in an effort to improve accountability and evaluate performance.³ This involves identifying an “ultimate outcome”, which INAC has identified as “improved well-being” of First Nations people.³ First Nations, of course, want to define what this means for their own people and their own future. Unfortunately, a collaborative approach involving a partnership with First Nations is not how INAC is proceeding or intends to proceed.

At a 2003 Aboriginal Strategies Conference in Edmonton, Alberta, Dan Beavon, Director, Research and Analysis Directorate, INAC, made a presentation entitled, *Application of the United Nations Human Development Index to Registered Indians in Canada*.⁴ This is his adaptation of the United Nations (UN) index, with the application of 1996 Census/Aboriginal Peoples Survey data. Mr. Beavon indicated that this index would be applied to INAC programs and policies, and, in particular, those that require a measure of First Nations “well-being”.

The UN recognizes the limitations of its own index, and cautions against using it as

an exclusive measure of development, yet these concerns are clearly being ignored in the case of its adaptation for use on First Nations. At the United Nations (UN) website, the stated intent of the Health Development Index is for it to be an alternative to the typically economic-based indicators of “well-being,” as it recognizes the importance and significance of “human outcomes.”⁵ The UN recognizes that the “HDI is not an adequate measure” of a country’s level of development and that “the concept of human development is much broader than this index.”⁵ For instance, participation, gender, and equality are measured in other indices of the Human Development Report, including Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), Gender-related Development Index (GDI), and Human Poverty Index (HPI).⁵ Parallel development of these latter indices is not being undertaken. However, even if they were developed, the reality of First Nations people would not be captured because of the lack of culture as a central feature. This is the second reason why adaptation of the HDI in this manner is inappropriate and problematic. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a UN agency, “defends that case of *indivisibility of culture and development*” understood as “a means of achieving a satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual existence”.⁶ This is what is important to First Nations. Many Ojibway and Cree people, for example, conceptualize “health” as *pimatiziwin*, which refers to living life in balance, wherein the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person, the community, and the nation are in harmony. A partnership approach to the development of indices would facilitate sharing of knowledge with First Nations concepts revealing First Nations values to measure First Nations lives.

Third, while it may serve to compare each country’s progress in development and to highlight socio-economic disparities, the HDI fails to recognize and capture our distinct reality outside the mainstream. Furthermore, it is sending a message that the mainstream standard is the only standard. University of Alberta professor, Dr. Cora Voyageur, stated that this approach and practice only serve to imply that First Nations are “deficit white people!”⁷

In her book, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage*, Dr. Marie Battiste, Mi’kmaq scholar, commented:

Together mainstreaming and universality create cognitive imperialism, which establishes a dominant group’s knowledge, experience, culture, and language as the universal norm. Colonizers reinforce their culture by making the colonized conform to their expectations. Because Eurocentric colonizers consider themselves to be the ideal model for humanity and carriers of the superior culture, they believe they can assess the competency of others.⁸

When Mr. Beavon was questioned about the possibility of further adapting this index to include culture, he responded that no such dialogue or development would occur with First Nations. This is a curious stance for a Crown Department of a federal government who, as the Supreme Court of Canada stated, has the fiduciary or highest possible trust for First Nations people. Mr. Beavon, however, did state that such cooperation could possibly occur with the proposed First Nations Statistical Institute (FNSI). Legislation for the proposed FNSI ended when Parliament prorogued in the spring of 2004. The doors of the fledgling FNSI office have been closed. First Nations question whether the doors to modifying the HDI to make it more accurate and meaningful are closed as well. This is an indication that First Nations *must develop our own measures* to accurately reflect our experience and situation. Any other approach would be reinforcing and perpetuating the colonial framework.

Emerging Dakota indicators

Tiospaye was identified, in the Dakota project, as an important Dakota value. Some possible indicators of strong *tiospaye* ties are “number of family gatherings held” and “time spent with family and sample activities”. Analysis of these cultural indicators would include understanding *tiospaye*, a concept not fully encapsulated by social science terms of ‘family’ and ‘kinship’.

Revitalizing and reclaiming

Moving Towards Indigenous Research Methodologies

Revitalization of the cultural values of indigenous peoples, as expressed through

our traditional teachings and languages, is a part of many emerging First Nations- and indigenous-developed ethics and protocols. A “protocol” is defined as “a code prescribing strict adherence to correct etiquette and precedence...”⁹ In the indigenous context, a “protocol” alludes to the way in which respect is demonstrated towards a people, including ancestors; Wakan Tanka (Dakota/Lakota/Nakota), or the Great Spirit; the physical environment, including Mother Earth, the plants and animals; and all that is sacred. While indigenous peoples are diverse and numerous, there are many ways in which to conduct research with us, and each way is dependent upon our cultural protocols.

Dakota “Research Methodologies”

One such example is illustrated by the “methodologies” employed in the Dakota Social Policy Development project in southwestern Manitoba. This project engages Canupawakpa and Sioux Valley Dakota Nations in developing culturally-rooted social policy and identifying Dakota quality-of-life indicators by utilizing our own ways of locating and sharing knowledge. Dakota “methodologies” in this project include the prominence of oral history through storytelling, participating in the sweat lodge, community feasts, gifts of tobacco, meeting with *tiospaye* (extended family) representatives, and discussions in the Dakota language. We are turning to the Elders and other community members for Dakota concepts and words that will define each component of this endeavour in a Dakota way, rather than as “methodologies” or “research”. This broad scope of engagement ensures inclusion, cultural appropriateness, and ownership. The use of the traditional language allows us to see through our own eyes what this process of inquiry and learning means to us.

Our traditional language captures emotions, relationships, our spirituality and worldview, which cannot be captured and conveyed in any other language. Sioux Valley Dakota Nation Elder Albert Taylor speaks of the power and significance of the Dakota language in this way: “When my daughter calls me ‘a-te’ instead of ‘father’, that makes me feel good. When you speak the language, you bring people closer together.”¹⁰

Using indigenous methodologies is not necessarily about avoiding or rejecting

Western approaches: it is about awakening to what our own cultural legacy offers us. It is about what Dakota Elder Albert Taylor spoke about – how much closer we feel to what we are doing when we do it our own way, including using our own language.

First Nations-developed Research Ethics and Protocols

While indigenous methodologies are not yet fully integrated into many of the existing First Nations-developed research ethics and protocols, there are clear indications that this is the direction of future developments in this area. These indications come from the fact that First Nations cultural values and respect for these values are the basis for existing ethics and protocols. For instance, the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment (ATFE) has a formal research review process in place.¹¹ The *Protocol For Review Of Environmental And Scientific Research Proposals* is guided by the Mohawk principles of *skennen* (peace), *kariwiio* (good word), and *kasastensera* (strength), which were all given to this nation by the Creator.¹¹ Other concepts, such as respect, equity, empowerment, mutual trust and cooperation, must frame environmental and/or scientific research that takes place within the Mohawk community of Akwesasne.¹¹ If a proposal meets these requirements, an agreement is made, allowing research to be undertaken.¹¹

In order to move beyond the legacy of colonialism and its effects on meaningful research, indigenous methodologies must be utilized in all research involving indigenous peoples and our territories. This means indigenous peoples must be involved throughout the research process, from design to data collection and analysis to dissemination. First Nations in Manitoba, and in the rest of Canada, are working to shape the research agenda and the type of research that takes place with our people and in our communities.

Moving Towards Culturally-rooted Policy

As indigenous research methodologies are employed in policy research, and in research in general, we will begin to see drastically different policies emerge. It was previously mentioned that the Dakota in Manitoba are undertaking this process of

merging indigenous research methodologies and culturally-rooted policy. It is important to note that different generations of First Nations people have made the connection between the imposition of foreign-value-based, colonialist policies and our present poor health status and socio-economic situation. Sioux Valley Dakota Elder Eva McKay stated it this way:

[When] we didn’t have welfare, he [my husband] went out every day, hunting, hunting, hunting, while I stayed home and looked after the children...[then welfare was introduced], the people were ashamed to ask for welfare, one man cried because he had to go on welfare....something has to change, and with that comes traditional teachings. We tried the white man’s way and look where it got us, welfare.¹²

In the summers of 2001-2002, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs conducted a series of workshops with youth in a number of First Nations in Manitoba. The purpose of these workshops was to increase awareness of welfare dependency on reserve and to get youth input into social policy development. The youth stated that culture, including language and tradition, is essential to their growth as independent, self-supporting people.¹³

First Nations are creating opportunities like the Dakota Social Policy Development Project to revitalize our cultures, reclaim our right to be who we are, and to build upon our inherent rights towards our own vision for the future. As different generations of First Nations recognize this and become involved, it is certain that this will continue into the future.

CONCLUSION

Whether researchers choose to utilize indigenous methodologies in upcoming research projects will soon become less and less of a choice, as First Nations increasingly develop our own research ethics and protocols that will apply to all research conducted in our territories and with our people. As First Nations continue to empower ourselves through rejecting colonialism, and embracing and building upon our cultures in policy development, so,