The Colonial Context of Sweet Blood: The Intersection of Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge, and ‘Participatory’ Research in Alert Bay

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In collaboration with Barb Cranmer and Vera Newman

Gilakas’la
Insights from Two Community Based Participatory Projects (2003-2008)
Rural Aboriginal Maternity Care Project
(2003-2006)
“The marginalization of Aboriginal women through colonial government policy, and the denigration of indigenous reproductive health practices effectively eradicated traditional ways of birthing, and shifted control over childbirth to colonizing medical forces.”

(_RAMCP CIHR Report, 2008, p. 19)
“I am not sure about these questions, they don’t feel like me. How do I use them? Do I have too? Could I just listen?”

“If people would stop and listen, people have lots to say”

“We are so pleased it is our own people doing the research”

“They just come and take our stories away”
Community Based Research: What makes it ‘Participatory’?

“We began in mistrust”
Any aspect of health care, health, well-being and illness for Aboriginal people can only be understood within the context of historical and ongoing colonization (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006)

“When I sing my songs and speak my language, I stand taller and lift my head higher” (Research Participant)
Exploring the Connections among Kwakwaka’wakw, Culture, Tradition, Health and Well-Being in Alert Bay

Project Co-Leaders and Researchers:
- Vera Newman
- Barb Cranmer

Research Collaborators:
- U’mista Cultural Centre
- ‘Namgis Health Centre
- ‘Namgis Chief & Council
“We believe when we are strong in our culture, we are healthy, and well-balanced as a people”
Project Goals

- To understand the relationship between Kwakwaka’wakw culture and health;

- Create strategies and recommendations to enhance the health of the community through the connection to culture
Kwak’ wák’wala
translation for health:
“Being alive well”
“When studying how to go about doing research, it is easy to overlook the realm of common sense, the basic beliefs that not only help people identify research problems that are relevant and worthy, but also accompany them throughout the process” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p.173).
“We have all been colonized and we’ve all suffered the loss of the language, the loss of the culture, the imposition of legislation on our lives, every aspect of our lives… history is really important because it ties right in to who you are and who we are today; that if we understand where we’ve been and where we come from, we’ll know where we are going”
Indigenous Knowledge as Participatory Methodology

The Ten Kwakwaka’wakw Teachings
Indigenous Knowledge as Participatory Methodology

Connecting Culture and Health:

“...for me culture is [being] an aboriginal woman; as a ‘Namgis woman, culture is the songs and the dance and the language and the food and our rights and to be healthy is to be strong and proud in my culture, it’s all connected you know”
Distress/duress may lead directly to sweetening of blood (Rock, 2005);

Nutritional stress (a key impact of colonialism) increases the chance of blood sweetening;

Prevention: The capacity to be equipped – personally, socially and materially – to exert influence over one’s own future (Schnarch, 2004)

“Poverty has no power”

“Just look at the Shop-Rite shelves”

“Knowing who we are makes us stronger”
The Colonial Context of Sweet Blood

- Historical & ongoing colonial relations: a major determinant of health;
- Explanatory models: privileges measurable attributes of individual bodies (Rose, 1985);
- Participants’ experiences of health care pose considerable barriers to care.

“poverty of the soul”
Connecting Indigenous Knowledge, Research Ethics & Participatory Methodologies in Aboriginal Communities

What does this mean in each moment of research?

Thank you