

"We have to start sounding the trumpet for things that are working": An interview with Dr. Marlene Brant-Castellano on concrete ways to decolonize research

Karine Gentelet

Département des sciences sociales
Université du Québec en Outaouais
karine.gentelet@uqo.ca

Suzy Basile

École d'études autochtones
Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue
suzy.basile@uqat.ca

Hugo Asselin

École d'études autochtones
Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue
Hugo.Asselin@uqat.ca

Abstract

In 2004, Dr. Marlene Brant-Castellano published a well-received, and now widely cited article entitled "Ethics of Aboriginal research" in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Aboriginal Health*. About a decade after this inspirational publication, we asked her to reflect on (1) the progress made in terms of ethics of research with Aboriginal people; (2) her views on concrete ways to decolonize research; and (3) challenges yet to overcome in terms of ethical conduct of research with Aboriginal people.

Keywords

research; Aboriginal people; decolonization

Introduction

A member of the Bay of Quinte Mohawk Band, Dr. Marlene Brant-Castellano has actively advocated for respectful treatment of Aboriginal knowledge in research for more than 60 years. In the early 1990's, as Co-Director of Research with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), she participated in drafting ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal people that paved the way for later advances in the field. After retiring from Trent University in 1996, she received the IndSpire Award recognizing her outstanding career achievements. She was also named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2005. She remained active, notably as a member of the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, where she was instrumental in drafting Chapter 9 of the second edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans* adopted in 2010 (CIHR et al., 2010), specifically dealing with research involving the First nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

In 2004, Dr. Brant-Castellano published a well-received, and now widely cited article entitled "Ethics of Aboriginal research" in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Aboriginal Health* (Brant-Castellano, 2004). About a decade after this inspirational publication, we asked her to reflect on (1) the progress made in terms of ethics of research with Aboriginal people; (2) her views on concrete ways decolonize research; and (3) challenges yet to overcome in terms of ethical conduct of research with Aboriginal people¹.

¹ The interview was conducted by Karine Gentelet on March 18, 2015. The three questions were sent beforehand to Dr. Brant-Castellano. The interview was transcribed by Véro

How did the ethics of research with Aboriginal people evolve since the publication of your 2004 seminal paper in the *Journal of Aboriginal Health*?

Well it's difficult to make a break and say before or after 2004 because much of the change that I have been involved in and that I commented on in the article was something that had started earlier. It really took a leap forward with the Regional Health Survey in 1997, with great difficulty and a lot of struggle separating itself from general surveys which the First Nations felt had served them very badly. They recruited a small number of First Nations academic researchers, but also settler allies – I'm calling them settlers because it fits better for me than non-Aboriginal –, to produce a credible product. That success in the continuation of the Regional Health Survey – I believe till now – really gave encouragement to other sectors of the Aboriginal research community, saying: "Hey! We can set up our own entities, our own agencies to do things". The First Nations Statistical Institute was one of those.

I'd like to talk about another big change, and that is the updating of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (TCPS 2010). By establishing national guidelines for federally funded research, TCPS 2010 set a standard for ethical research, respect for protocols, which had emerged within the Aboriginal community itself. For example, the Kahnawake Diabetes Prevention Project became a model for other self-directed, self-governing efforts at changing the way research was done. The principle of community engagement central to Chapter 9 of TCPS 2010 changed the nature of the dialog between researchers, their institutions, and communities.

How TCPS 2010 gave legitimacy to community protocols is in saying that these practices, these relationships, this respect for community ways of knowing, community ways of creating knowledge, are necessary to do good research. Another way the TCPS 2010 enriched the ethics of research was by moving beyond seeing research participants as individuals sort of floating in a void, rather recognizing that their welfare is affected by the web of relationships they are enmeshed in, and that their wellbeing in turn affects the wellbeing of their environment. If the ethics of research are founded on the notion of doing no harm, then you can't isolate people from their environment and say: "now you are a participant and that's all that you are". Respecting the welfare and treating people with justice set out as fundamental constructs of TCPS 2010. I think that it's the persistence of Aboriginal people in talking about their particularity, and their community identity as essential to their personal wellbeing, that helped to move that along. And I think that's a positive development. Indigenous people talk about "indigenizing" the institutions that we're involved with. But the assumptions of the settler society – of colonizers – are deeply rooted in the Canadian society, particularly institutions, and there is still lots of colonial thinking and colonizing practice that goes on in research.

What are your views on the best, concrete ways to decolonize research?

I think there is a lot of ambivalence on the part of Indigenous researchers because we are concerned very much about having acquired credentials, acquired standing in the world of "legitimate" knowledge. Some of us have enjoyed tenured academic appointments. But I think that there are people who have transcended that cultural box. I think John Borrows, the legal scholar, is one of those who has an international reputation, having been appointed to the Royal Society as a young man for the quality of his work. He is addressing fundamental questions about law and the philosophy of law taking off from his study of Indigenous law but not

being "contained" by it. John Borrows is a star. Not a First Nation's star, he is a star scholar. I think it does not define us to say that Marlene Castellano is a Mohawk scholar, or a Mohawk researcher. And yet, the focus of my work over the past 60 years has been on the life and times and knowledge and future of First Nations in particular, and Indigenous people generally.

We need a critical mass of Aboriginal researchers who are educated in the ethics of their own traditions and also open to seeing the common ground that they share with other traditions, including settler society. And that, I think, is the genius of Willie Ermine's talk about ethical space², creating a common space that is neither owned by settlers, nor owned by Indigenous people, but is a space that is created for the free exchange of knowledge. He says that Indigenous students who become scholars – who stay in that colonized space – are feeding the colonizing system of knowledge. His way is to step back from that and stay rooted in his community of origin. He very deliberately lives on his home territory, his reserve, with his human relations and his non-human relations and he steps back into the institutional environment by going to the First Nations University. Expanding that ethical space where respectful exchange and sharing can take place is the most concrete way [to decolonize research], but we need to have a critical mass of Indigenous researchers who can reassure each other that they are still being authentic.

Of course, nobody can decolonize somebody else! Colonizing and its impact is something that is internalized, and people can only free themselves from, as Willie [Ermine] says, "being trapped in a colonizing system". There has to be an awareness, on the part of colonizers, of their deeply ingrained assumptions about

² See Ermine (2007) for details.

"Savages". I read a quote recently, I think it was about Australia Aborigines: "If you teach an Aborigine to read and write, you still have an Aborigine who can read and write, instead of someone who can freely use the tools of literacy and creation". The colonizing mentality can now take the form of "I'm here to help". It was evidenced most painfully and dramatically in the responses of the government to bids for self-determination, saying: "we want you to become educated but we do not concede that you can educate yourselves, that you can be in charge of your own education", which was pretty evil. It's something out of another century.

TCPS 2010 talks about the imbalance of power between researchers and participants that has been accepted as "the way things are". What Indigenous people are saying is: "No to an unbalanced relation between helpers and helpees. Being beneficiaries is not what we want. We want to operate in that ethical space where there is a sharing of control". But so often relationships break down when comes time to agree on the rules of engagement in that ethical space, because of the old stances of defensiveness on the part of Indigenous people, and of demands of control on the part of settler institutions.

Research Ethics Boards do not see Chapter 9 [of TCPS 2010] as transparent. That they are still groping with "What does 'engagement' mean? How do we do it?" So it's a learning process, we're making progress. Some institutions are stepping up to try to accelerate the change. SSHRC will officially launch a set of policies that introduce definitions of Indigenous research and principles that should guide the way SSHRC engages with Indigenous research and researchers, and guidelines for reviewing proposals³. These principles will be useful to universities who are preparing people to apply for SSHRC, and to communities who are partnering in Indigenous research proposals and who are supporting Indigenous scholars.

This is just an example of an institution that is stepping up to lead change. Queen's University, after a long period of not being able to sort of "break through" the barrier of engagement with Aboriginal communities, has made remarkable changes. They recently made three appointments, two of them of Indigenous scholars. And offering an Indigenous minor concentration which is seen as just a first step in expanding the space for students – whether Aboriginal or settler – to become better educated in Indigenous matters and knowledge. The First Nations University, which has had organizational difficulties, is nevertheless trying to expand self-determination. So some institutions are stepping up at the same time

³ The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) launched its Aboriginal Research Statement of Principles in June 2015: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/policies-politiques/statements-enonces/Aboriginal_research-recherche_autochtone-eng.aspx.

that government, particularly federal government, seems to be stepping back⁴. Ontario, which has had policies to support universities and colleges to become friendlier to Aboriginal students, is now recognizing that the economic future of Ontario is going to be dependent on the billions of dollars of revenues from resource development in the ring of fire. They're saying: "well, we can't proceed economically without having a different kind of relationship with First Nations who have legitimate claims to these territories". For many years, First Nations were reluctant to engage in relations with provinces because they felt that this would possibly detract from the obligation of the Crown to deal with treaties and land claims, and so on. But this seems to be changing.

What challenges remain in terms of research ethics in Aboriginal contexts (broadly) and for decolonizing research (specifically)?

In the first decade of the [21st] century there was a move to develop stand-alone agencies like the National Aboriginal Health Organization, the First Nations Statistical Institute, and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Although they were agencies set up to exercise self-determination, they were dependent on government funding and so when [the Conservative Party of Canada] became a majority government, we got the sense that they don't really believe that self-determination is a way to benefit not just Indigenous people, but Canadian society as well. The federal government, in 2012, it was like sweeping pieces off the chessboard. There is no longer a table on which these things can be negotiated and moved forward because the First Nations Statistical Institute, which from the First Nations' point of view was doing a better job in collecting health data in order to move policy and services, doesn't exist any longer⁵. I was at a meeting where we talked about the Metis capacity to gather their own statistics in order to illuminate who they are, where they are, what are the gaps in services, what are the avenues for development. Their research funding disappeared in that sweep of 2012 and they are left with fragile local initiatives trying to gather up information and to aggregate it to make a data-based argument for anything. It really was heart-rending to hear how they have no access to research and data that would help them to articulate their case for any kind of policy or movement.

Much of the capacity that has been built in terms of scholarship and research has been in the social sciences and humanities. We have lawyers, we have sociologists, we have people doing community-based research, but we don't have the structural engineers who have also the cultural, regional, spatial skills, and that

⁴ The conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, governing Canada at the time of the interview, was widely criticized for, among other things, its lack of consideration for Aboriginal knowledge, values and needs, as well as its "war on science". See for example Turner (2013), Wotherspoon and Hansen (2013), Gutstein (2014) and Stewart (2016).

⁵ In its March 2012 budget, Canada's federal government announced that it was cutting all funding for the First Nations Statistical Institute (FNSI). For more information, see <http://voices-voix.ca/en/facts/profile/first-nations-statistical-institute>

is a huge deficit. How to increase the supply to the point of critical mass of people with scientific data and structural skills to address problems such as the housing crisis in Attawapiskat that prompted [then Chief] Theresa Spence's hunger strike [in December 2012 and January 2013]?⁶

A colleague of mine at Trent University, Lynne Davis, published a book a couple of years ago on what kind of alliances have worked well between First peoples and other agencies⁷. And certainly the alliance between Amnesty International and the Native Women's Association [of Canada] has been very productive, with the Sisters in Spirit campaign⁸. But we need to get the stories, get the good news out, about alliances between settler society and Indigenous peoples and how they work and what they have achieved. We have to stop talking about deficiencies. We have to start sounding the trumpet for things that are working, for avenues that need only to be enlarged. To talk about not just the gap in hard sciences and engineering and those kinds of skills, but the possibilities. That goes right back to the quality of education at elementary school. If the children have poor quality education and don't become confident in their mathematics skills, they are not going to become the scientists and the engineers of the future. They are going to be blocked. It is strange and it is a contradiction that the readiness of educational institutions to make a pleasant and welcoming space [for Aboriginal people] happens at universities, and yet the quality of training and education at too many elementary schools is still left in the colonial age.

What challenges remain for decolonizing research? As I said, I have been working on this file for 60 years! I regret the sweep that took off the self-governing institutions and agencies in 2012. But I have noticed that when people disappear from an institution, they pop up again somewhere else. For example, Mike DeGagné was the executive director for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation for 18 years and he did a superb job in administering a very effective, efficient multi-million-dollar operation supporting research. He is now president of Nipissing University. One of the things that he did as the executive director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was to offer his employees that the Foundation would pay for their tuition fees: "If you are in accounting and you want to get your accounting credential, sign up and do it! And the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, as your employer, will help you get there." And he said that about three quarters of the 75-or-so employees did take-up the offer for advancing their education and getting

⁶ For more details, see CBC News (January 23, 2013) "Chief Theresa Spence to end hunger strike today": <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/chief-theresa-spence-to-end-hunger-strike-today-1.1341571>

⁷ See Davis (2010) for details.

⁸ Sisters in Spirit was a database on missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. For more information, see: <http://voices-voix.ca/en/facts/profile/sisters-spirit>

credentials. They became contributors to whatever new organization they popped up in after having been wiped clean of their jobs. And that is to me such a positive, heartening thing to have seen, decade after decade, that people, whether they are of settler or of Aboriginal origin, when they become engaged with this human enterprise of making a better country, they don't give up.

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