



# **Ethics, Hegemonic Whiteness, and the Contested Imagination of 'Aboriginal Community' in Social Science Research in Canada**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines bureaucratic structures and the interplay of race, place and institutional ethics involved in a process of establishing a multi-cultural research project with Aboriginal peoples in a Canadian urban context. The paper

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<sup>2</sup> The Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective is made up of researchers from the Ki-Low-na Friendship Centre, the Oonkane Friendship Centre, the Vernon First Nation Friendship Centre and UBC. Members include: Wendy Antoine, Marcel Aubin, Lawrence Berg, Molly Brewer, Mike Evans, Stephen Foster, Peter Hutchinson, Donna Kurtz, Sheila Lewis, Carmella Alexis, Cam Martin, Cynthia Mathieson, Buffy Mills, Mary-Anne Murphy, Jessie Nyberg, Colin Reid, Dixon Sookraj, and Edna Terbasket. Duncan Fuller has a more indirect connection to this project, and his participation arose out of a number of discussions about the problematic character of 'participation' in PAR. These discussions led to his contributions as a co-author of this paper.

focuses on the way that one of Canada's national research councils (SSHRC) has attempted to respond positively to contest the marginalization of Aboriginal people in research settings. In revising its research ethics policies to better protect Aboriginal peoples involved in research projects that it funds, SSHRC policy has had the somewhat contradictory effect of further marginalizing urban Aboriginal people. The paper is thus an attempt to illustrate empirically some of the power laden character of the ethics of 'participation'. A key point we wish to illustrate is that especially in Participatory Action Research, the who and the how of participation is never innocent or purely process driven, but rather always already power-full. These power relations have significant implications for the way that we should understand ethics as relational processes in research with Aboriginal and other indigenous peoples.

## Introduction

This paper outlines a critical interrogation of hegemonic social constructions of *aboriginality* and *communities of participation* in social science research in Canada. It draws on our experiences of developing a large Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada. Our interest centres on bureaucratic structures and the interplay of race, place and institutional ethics in a process of establishing a multi-cultural research project with Aboriginal peoples in an urban context. The crux of the paper focuses on the way that one of Canada's national research councils (SSHRC) has attempted to respond positively to contest the marginalization of Aboriginal people in research settings, but their policy has had the somewhat contradictory effect of further marginalizing *urban* Aboriginal people. The paper is thus an attempt to illustrate empirically the power laden character of the ethics of 'participation'. A key point we wish to illustrate is that even (and maybe especially) in PAR framed research, the who and the how of participation is never innocent or purely process driven, but rather always already power-full. These power relations have significant implications for the way that we should understand ethics as relational processes in research with Aboriginal and other indigenous people.

## The Research Context

The Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective brings together researchers from the Ki-Low-na Friendship Centre (Kelowna, Canada), the Oonkakanne Friendship Centre (Penticton, Canada), the University of British Columbia (Kelowna and Vancouver, Canada), and the Vernon First Nation Friendship Centre (Vernon, Canada). The collective is currently engaged in two externally funded PAR projects: 1. understanding the current conditions of social and health service delivery for the urban Aboriginal communities of the Okanagan

Valley<sup>3</sup>; and 2. developing culturally safe health care programs for Aboriginal people in the region.<sup>4</sup> Much of the discussion here focuses on the first project, although the projects are closely interrelated and difficult to disentangle in practice.



**Figure 1.** Vernon First Nations Friendship Centre, Vernon, BC, Canada (photo: L. Berg)

In 1996 some 49.5% of the total Aboriginal population in Canada was living in urban areas (Hanselmann, 2001); by 2001 this figure had grown to just over half (50.6%, calculated from Statistics Canada, 2003). Service and entitlement issues for many urban Aboriginal people are very complicated; access to mainstream Euro-Canadian institutions is impaired by racial and ethnic barriers, yet the provision of services through other mechanisms is impeded by the continuing rural/reservation orientation of many Euro-Canadian and even Aboriginal policy makers. This, combined with the fact that some of the most highly urbanized groups of indigenous people (Métis and Non-Status Indian people) have few entitlements as Aboriginal people anywhere (rural or urban), has left a large hole in the effective provision of social and health services.

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<sup>4</sup> Funded by the Institute for Aboriginal Health, Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

Into this policy-generated vacuum have come institutions based on one of two models. Either First Nations Bands, Tribal Councils<sup>5</sup>, or Métis organizations have developed infrastructure for their own people (which is pragmatically possible only in some contexts), or pan-Aboriginal organizations have been formed to serve the diverse community of Aboriginal people found in many metropolitan centres. Some of these latter organizations focus on particular needs, or particular clientele; some, like the Friendship Centres (Figure 1) that can be found in most Canadian Cities, seek to provide a range of social, health, advocacy, and educational services.

Our PAR program is centred on understanding the challenges facing urban Aboriginal people trying to use mainstream institutions and how and why the Friendship Centres in Penticton, Kelowna, and Vernon have come to mediate service delivery. The partnership between the Friendship Centres and university is the foundation for this engagement. As with most PAR approaches (e.g, see reviews in Pain 2004; Pain and Francis 2003; Kindon, *et al.* 2007; Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2007), control of the research process has been shared, and the majority of the research itself has taken place at and through the Friendship Centres themselves. The active engagement of Elders, working Aboriginal service providers, and members of the community at large is vital to the methodology of the research. It is important to emphasize here that we are not studying the Urban Aboriginal community *per se* — no — we are partnering with the Urban Aboriginal community to study the social and health service delivery systems they face. This is not only a form of PAR, it can also, arguably, be seen as a variety of “White Studies”. We discuss the rationale for this positioning more fully elsewhere (Evans, *et al.* forthcoming), but it is important to note that this was a strategic decision about research ‘ethics’. Indigenous peoples are among the most studied populations in the world, and such studies have rarely been to their benefit (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). We did not want to be reproducing this problematic relationship by focussing our study on Aboriginal people yet again.

Our work with indigenous communities certainly prepared us for many of the ethical issues and problems that arise in the context of research with indigenous peoples (see Tuhiwai Smith 1999; McClean *et al.* 1997; Kindon and Latham 2002). Our experience with poststructuralist frames of reference (see Cameron and Gibson 2005) likewise prepared us for the need to carefully negotiate many issues of identity in this process. We were thus ready for the hard work that is necessary for developing ethical PAR programs with Aboriginal people. What has been a surprise, however, has been one of the sources of difficulty in building a PAR relationship with urban Aboriginal people in the Okanagan Valley, namely the regressive way that ‘community’ has been enacted in the bureaucratic practice of defining communities of participation for a funding agency. We argue that this

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<sup>5</sup> Tribal Councils are groupings of related First Nations Bands.

problem comes about because of the geographically and historically contingent, but nonetheless hegemonic, understandings of what it is to be *Aboriginal* in Canada.

### **Hegemonic Understandings of Aboriginality in Canada**

Unlike many other white settler states, in Canada the term Aboriginal has a specific legal meaning defined in Canada's supreme law, *the Constitution Act, 1982*. Thus, under Canadian law the term 'Aboriginal person' refers to someone of Indian, Inuit or Métis descent<sup>6</sup>. Within the racialised politics of both identity and place in Canada, non-Aboriginal<sup>7</sup> understandings of the term have tended to cohere around a fairly limited range of more or less hegemonic meanings (see, e.g., Canada, 1996; Frideres, 2001; LaPrairie, 1995; Lawrence, 2003; Peters, 1997, 2002). In this regard, Aboriginality and rurality have been closely linked such that urban Aboriginal people have become virtually invisible in much public discourse about Aboriginal issues in Canada (LaPrairie 1995; Peters, 2002). This kind of discursive framing is connected in specific chains of signification such that Aboriginality is linked directly to 'Indian reserves', which in turn are linked to marginalized rural spaces, poverty, lack of services and lack of opportunities. In this way, in hegemonic 'white' thinking, the (ostensible) rural spaces of Aboriginality become spaces of 'problems' too (Fleras and Elliot, 2006).

In the context of our own research, the hegemonic non-Aboriginal imagining of Aboriginality places Indian people on three specific Indian Reserves: Penticton Indian Reserve (Penticton), Westbank Indian Reserve (Kelowna), and Okanagan Indian Reserve (Vernon; see Figure 2).

There are numerous complex social, economic and cultural processes at play in this kind of emplacement, not all of which are easy to identify and describe, let alone understand fully. However, it is clear that one of the key processes at work here is a dialectic of remembering and forgetting, one that is similarly embedded in many other nationalist and colonial projects:

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<sup>6</sup> The term Indian, commonly used at the time the constitution was repatriated, has now been replaced in general use by the term "First Nation" (a practice we follow here). The terms Indian and Non-Status Indian refer to legal statuses under the federal government's *Indian Act*, with non-status Indians being people who identify as Indians, but are not recognised as such for the purposes of the Act (both categories of people are now generally referred to as First Nations people). The term Métis is also somewhat contested, with Métis sometimes being restricted in use to people descended from the Historic Métis Nation of Central and Northwestern North America, and sometimes being used to include Non-Status Indians. All these categories and uses are contested in various times and places.

<sup>7</sup> The terms Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are themselves somewhat problematic. There is no single 'Aboriginal' identity; similarly non-Aboriginal captures a large variety of difference in Canada.

The act of memory is not a simple process of recall, but rather is intimately constituted through processes of narrativisation. In the stories that we tell ourselves, and each other, places, landscapes and events become charged with meaning (Edensor, 1997). They become signifiers of meaning, and props for the performance of meaning. Yet, as with all stories, we are able to speak only because sometimes our stories are silent (Henry and Berg, 2006: 630-31).



**Figure 2.** A hegemonic space of Aboriginality in the North Okanagan, British Columbia, Canada (photo: L. Berg)

Thus, both large and small stories of 'the nation' carry in their silences the brutality of nation-building (Renan, 1990). A defining feature of the imagination of nations has been the ongoing elision of the modernity of their emergence, through the telling of stories of the putative antiquity of their origins (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1983).

In the case of the Okanagan region with its relatively recent colonial history (Harris, 2002), such a dialectic is expressed through efforts to tell stories of the 'long history' of white settlers and their place in the nation, along with two concomitant silences: the first silence elides the brutality of colonial settlement, especially the confiscation of land and subsequent placement of the first inhabitants of British Columbia on reserves (Harris, 2002); the second silence hides the relative recentness of colonial settlement. In this way, white Canadians construct a

story of “European settlers as bearers of civilization, while simultaneously trapping Aboriginal people in the pre-modern” (Razack 2002: 2), thus excluding them from participating in modern life. In this way, non-Aboriginal Canadians are able to ignore urban Aboriginal people, ‘safe’ in the notion that Aboriginal people exist only on reserves.

### **The Changing State Response to Aboriginal People**

In more recent years the Canadian state (at both federal and provincial levels) has engaged in a number of processes designed to identify and redress some of the wrongs that have been visited upon Aboriginal people by structures and processes controlled by members of the dominant white society. The government of British Columbia, for example, after more than 100 years of denying aboriginal rights and title (and after courts made numerous rulings acknowledging the existence of such rights), in 1992 agreed to negotiate such issues in a tripartite Federal-Provincial-First Nation negotiating framework. The government of Canada initiated a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the status of Aboriginal peoples, which identified numerous structural processes that maintain the marginal position of Aboriginal people in Canada (see Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

In this context, there has also been a significant policy shift in the case of federal funding for university research in Canada, such that Aboriginal people now enjoy much greater protections for their participation in university research projects than they were given in the past. The Tri-Council<sup>8</sup> now mandates that Aboriginal people have a significant degree of control over research projects that affect their lives, and each of the three funding councils now have ethics guidelines about process and protocols for involving Aboriginal people in research. Perhaps more importantly, the two Canadian research councils that fund research on social issues: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), in recent years have developed strategic grant programs designed to fund research partnerships with Aboriginal peoples that closely resemble PAR.

In spite of these shifts, it is important to remember that Canadian life remains dominated by hegemonic whiteness (Ray and Peake, 2001). Notwithstanding the continued dominance of white culture (or perhaps *because* of the power of hegemonic whiteness), organizations such as SSHRC have engaged in extensive consultations with Aboriginal communities (summarized in McNaughton

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<sup>8</sup> Tri-Council is the name used for the three major federal research funding agencies: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Natural Science and Engineering Research Council, and Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

and Rock, 2003), which have had significant implications for redefining the ethics of research involving Aboriginal people. In the case of SSHRC, for example, such consultations resulted in the development of two policy approaches to Aboriginal research:

The first approach envisions a set of measures focused on SSHRC's primary mandate — promotion of the knowledge opportunities available through collaborative initiatives such as:

- creation of strong research partnerships with Aboriginal communities (via community organizations);
- supporting research on Aboriginal systems of knowledge; and
- strategic investment in the research capacity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers interested in careers in Aboriginal research.

The second approach envisions a set of measures designed to correct situations in which positive and full development of the research potential represented by Aboriginal researchers and their respective knowledge traditions is impeded:

- lack of career opportunities for Aboriginal scholars;
- lack of respect for Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge traditions;
- lack of research benefits to Aboriginal communities; and
- lack of Aboriginal control over intellectual and cultural property (McNaughton and Rock, 2003: 3-4).

These are important philosophical and epistemological shifts in the state's academic funding regime and its response to Aboriginal peoples, and they have resulted in significant safeguards and ethical protections for Aboriginal people. We do not want to underplay these safeguards, as they have helped to reduce Aboriginal peoples' vulnerability to unethical research, but more importantly, they have helped to make much less uneven the power geometries of 'ethical research' structured within the hegemonic whiteness of both academia and wider Canadian society. What interests us here, however, is not so much the broad sweep of these policy shifts, for surely they must be seen as positive. Instead, we are interested in some of the micro-politics that arise from a *bureaucratic* response to the specificities of relational geographies of research. Thus, in this paper we are interested in the way that one of SSHRC's attempts to respond positively to contest

the marginalization of Aboriginal people in research settings had the somewhat contradictory effect of further marginalizing *urban* Aboriginal people.

### **Paradoxical Spaces of Participation**

As a direct result of its consultation programs, SSHRC developed a pilot strategic research program on Aboriginal Research.<sup>9</sup> Key to effecting SSHRC's policy initiatives discussed above is a two-step evaluation process for applications to the Aboriginal Research funding stream: first, screening by a 'relevance committee'; then, evaluation by an 'adjudication committee'. The first step is of interest here:

The relevance committee comprises a majority of Aboriginal people from First Nation, Métis and Inuit traditions, and includes policy experts and academics. Relying first on a review of the two-page Statement of Relevance that each applicant is required to include as part of the application, this committee ... assesses whether or not strong research partnership agreements, involving both Aboriginal and academic communities, are likely to emerge (through development grants) or are in place (in preparation for research grants). In addition, the committee assesses whether, in planning the research, the applicant has taken care to identify and respect relevant community research protocols.

Again, we see these kinds of outcomes as very positive in that they provide a structural means to encourage ethical respect for Aboriginal people's agency and sovereignty. What concerns us in this paper is the way that such structural approaches might draw upon hegemonic white ideals of Aboriginality and impose these ideals via a bureaucratic rationality upon relational geographies of identity and ethics (McClellan, *et al.*, 1997).

Our own experiences of working through the Aboriginal Research pilot program funding stream at SSHRC reinforced our concerns. The Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective initially applied for an Aboriginal Research Development grant in 2004. The application went to the first stage of the two-stage process, but was rejected by the Relevance Committee at this stage because we had not adequately consulted the Aboriginal 'community'. Whilst this decision by the Relevance Committee meets the standards of Stage One reviews, it fails to address the complexity of how one might define 'community' in the context of undertaking

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<sup>9</sup> The full description of the pilot program on Aboriginal Research can be viewed on SSHRC's website: [http://www.sshrc.ca/web/apply/program\\_descriptions/aboriginal\\_e.asp](http://www.sshrc.ca/web/apply/program_descriptions/aboriginal_e.asp) (last accessed February 22, 2007)

research with urban Aboriginal people. Hegemonic white ideals of Aboriginality suggest that Indian Bands<sup>10</sup> are the only 'true' representatives for Aboriginal people (and perhaps more importantly, that these people always live in remote 'Indian Reserves').

The question of 'community', however, was one that the members of the Collective grappled with, sometimes through intense discussions and debates, and for some time over the process of developing this research project. In simple bureaucratically rational terms, the 'Aboriginal community' is represented by the various First Nations on whose traditional territory we were working: the Okanagan Indian Band, the Westbank First Nation and the Penticton Indian Band.<sup>11</sup> The issue is much more complex, however, given our interest in *urban* Aboriginal health care concerns and the partnership of researchers from the University of British Columbia and the Kelowna, Penticton and Vernon First Nation Friendship Centres. In this instance, the researchers were interested in studying white processes that controlled Aboriginal access to health care in urban settings (rather than Aboriginal health care *per se*). We are thus working not only with local Band members, but also with Aboriginal people from across Canada. Moreover, because of ongoing colonial processes for defining Aboriginal funding regimes, there is always some tension over access to resources on and off-reserve.

As a result of these issues, a decision was made by the Collective specifically to not directly consult the Bands, nor to ask their permission to undertake research. In hindsight, this may not have been the best approach, but at the time the reasons for this decision were at least threefold: 1. Our research was physically located outside the legal territorial jurisdiction of the Bands; 2. Our research participants would be drawn from a much wider 'community' of Aboriginal people than membership of the local Bands, and would include people originating from across Canada; and, 3. The Friendship Centres did not want to be placed in the position of having to ask permission from the local Bands to implement Friendship Centre initiatives in urban settings.

The third reason for avoiding consultations is quite significant, because the requirement to consult with Bands and, effectively, to ask for their 'permission' to

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'Indian Band' is an artefact of the colonization process, whereby groups of Aboriginal people inhabiting particular places were made into 'Bands' and given legal names by Indian Agents or other representatives of the State. Bands became the primary unit for the focus of state policies at the community level. These Bands often equate to kin groups, and sometimes equate to 'tribal' groups, but rarely reflect the complexities of the many different kinds of Aboriginal cultures and societies upon which they were imposed. See Lawrence (2003) for a more detailed discussion of related issues.

<sup>11</sup> All constituent members of the Okanagan Nations Alliance.

undertake research with and for urban Aboriginal people, was seen by the Friendship Centres as a further marginalization of urban Aboriginal people. It is important to remember that almost all federal funds for Aboriginal people are currently directed to Bands, and thus urban Aboriginal people often slip through rather large cracks in service provision. While cooperation between Friendship Centres and other Aboriginal bodies, including Bands is common, having to go to Bands to get permission for the few programs that they currently operate was seen to be untenable. Of course, these politics cannot be disentangled from the wider context of what has been described as an ongoing form of internal colonialism (e.g., Frideres, 2001) affecting the lives of *all* Aboriginal people in Canada.

The likely politico-ethical implications of our decisions were not lost on the Collective, and we have revisited the issue on numerous occasions. In fact, after further consideration, we decided that in spite of the concerns outlined above, it was important to acknowledge the sovereignty of the traditional territory holders, at the very least by informing them of the research and its potential to involve some of their Band members. This process involved implicit and quite complex political positioning by the Collective and the Bands. In this regard, representatives from the Collective met with the Bands to inform them of the research, acknowledge their important role as traditional territory holders, and to acknowledge their sovereignty, but we did not explicitly request permission to undertake the research. At the same time, the Band Councils, even though not asked to provide permission, took it as their right to grant or withhold permission. Fortunately for us, they chose the former.

## Discussion

There are a number of lessons about ethics and participation to be taken from this set of events. First, ‘participant communities’ are relational entities (and they constitute space relationally). Thus, spaces of Aboriginal communities are most often constituted in relation to the dominant (white) social groups in Canadian society — often defined as those places that are *not* where the rest of Canadians live. As Aboriginality is ideologically and discursively constructed to exist outside urban settings, this poses significant problems for defining — within state funding regimes and their requirements for bureaucratically rational outcomes — ‘appropriate’ Aboriginal communities when they exist outside of rural and reserve contexts. This is not insignificant given that a majority of Aboriginal people now live in urban centres in Canada.

Second, participatory geographies are performative (after Butler, 1990), by which we mean that attempts to describe participation often bring it into being in particular ways. In the case of SSHRC’s Aboriginal Research Pilot Program, the requirements to consult with particular Aboriginal ‘communities’, those located on reserve, tended to efface the importance of communities of urban Aboriginal

peoples. This valorization of rural and reserve spaces at the expense of the urban is, of course, highly contingent and could be subject to change relatively quickly. What tends to cement it in place is the power of hegemonic white discourses about Aboriginality and the spaces that Aboriginal people (are supposed to) inhabit. The performativity of participation is constituted within existing power-geometries and the varied positional cartographies of agents, but it also serves to reconstitute those power-geometries (for similar examples, see discussions in Cooke and Kothari 2001). Accordingly, it is safe to argue that participation (re)constitutes its objects and subjects (including the powerful and powerless).

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should acknowledge the very complex nature of the ethics of 'participation' in the context of research with Aboriginal people in Canada. We suspect that the complexities of this issue are such that it can never be settled in the way that would meet with bureaucratic requirements for neat and tidy consultations, with specified 'ethical' outcomes and participatory approvals in place. The kind of ethical relationships that we are slowly developing through the Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective are such that they cannot easily be fixed in place in that way, but instead will continue to operate within the tensions of a highly contingent relationship. Indeed, as Kelly Barclay (2005) has argued elsewhere, it may just be these very tensions — that is, the complex tensions of the *unresolvable* — that actually ensure that justice can exist in this relationship, set as it is within a wider context of white hegemony. In Canada, bureaucratic requirements to consult with Aboriginal people have rarely resulted in ethical partnerships. More often than not, they have resulted in half-hearted consultations engaged in by dominant groups simply to meet the requirement to say that they have consulted with local people. At the same time, however, without the power of such bureaucratic requirements behind them, Aboriginal people might have little power to force researchers to engage in consultations over research participation. Accordingly, when 'easy' answers to requirements to consult cannot be arrived at, there remains an ethical requirement to constantly revisit the relationship. In this way, formerly marginalized people might be able to wield more power in research relationships.

It is these kinds of relational ethics, which cannot be accommodated by bureaucratically rational approaches to participation and consultation, that may offer the best means of accommodating more fluid forms of relational ethics and identity politics. The 'ethics' of working with Aboriginal 'communities' must be worked out in 'responsible geographies' of contingency that are always-already open to rupture and change.

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