

# Indigenous Aging: An Anti-Colonial Approach to Research and Practice

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# Acknowledgements

- \* As is respectful to the Indigenous peoples of this lands, we acknowledge the Nations of this land where we stand:
  - \* Anishinaabe
  - \* Dakota
  - \* Muskeko-Ininiw
  - \* Metis
- \* We also acknowledge this land as Treaty One territory

# Why Indigenous Aging?



McLeod's daughter... joined the chiefs and said both her family and the Alexander family have reason to grieve.

"Our family feels a tremendous amount of guilt over how this happened," she said. "It's the disease and not the person who he was."

But she said McLeod could not remain at home in Pine Creek in his condition and with the lack of services.

"If he had stayed in his community, and what happened in the first incident, my mother would have died."

She said her father, who was moved from jail to a hospital for his assessment, still doesn't know what has happened.

Nepinak and Shannacappo said they have been seeking money to provide long-term care for aboriginal elders for years but have made no headway.

# Why Indigenous Aging?

- \* The Indigenous population ages 65+ will double between 2001 and 2017
- \* Very little is known about this group
- \* Wilson et al. (2010) only found 9 peer-reviewed articles on the health of older Indigenous peoples (yrs 1995-2009)
- \* Even less is known about the social aspects of Indigenous aging in Canada

# Epidemiological data

- \* 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (Stats Canada)
- \* 2006 Census (Stats Canada)
- \* 2002/2003 First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey
  
- \* These sources show serious health disparities between older Indigenous people and other Canadians
- \* Indigenous people also have a much higher prevalence of any chronic health condition
- \* More Indigenous people are living longer
- \* increasing call for services to support them in their own communities

So how do we research this  
unknown area?

# Problematizing Eurocentric Approaches

The slide features a solid blue background. At the bottom, there are several overlapping, wavy, light blue lines that create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a stylized horizon or water waves.

# Research Shaped by a Eurocentric Worldview

- \* Most research is embedded in a Eurocentric worldview
- \* Focus on the individual
- \* Breaking the whole into its parts and studying the parts (dependent & independent variables, etc.)
- \* Linear notions of causality
- \* Notion of “objectivity” and how it applies to researcher-researched relationship

# The Academy

- \* Scholarly community building on their own knowledge base
- \* Accountability to a “community” of research peers
- \* Research is “owned” by the researcher
- \* Concepts & frameworks arise from the researcher’s expert knowledge
- \* Internally coherent system with internal checks and balances

# The Problematic Nature of Such an Approach...

- \* Academic research is a closed system
- \* The lives of Indigenous people are studied by concepts foreign to them
- \* There is no accountability to the Indigenous communities being studied
- \* Interpretations of data based on Eurocentric ways of being and knowing strips the data from its context

# The Impact of Colonization

- \* Research that does not account for the impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples runs the risks of pathologizing and blaming them for these harmful effects
- \* Colonial power relations are perpetrated through research, since the people in power get to define the problem, the lenses, and the solutions
- \* Note: This is also true for social work practice!

# Anti-Colonial Framework

# Definitions

- \* Decolonization: Process of removing the harmful impacts of colonization.
- \* Anti-colonialism: Highlights the ongoing colonial processes and works actively against them in a way that is grounded in Indigenous worldviews and practices

# An anti-colonial, decolonizing approach

- \* the researchers remain aware of the Eurocentric belief system maintaining colonial relationships that undermine Indigenous self-determination
- \* researchers work in a decolonizing manner as culturally safe allies to Indigenous peoples

# Self-determining, self-governing research

- \* There is increasing evidence that self-determination, self-governance, and community control in health care and health research are “key forces driving health and healing in Canada’s First Nations and Inuit communities” (Jeffrey et al, 2006)

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- \* E.g., the more areas in which First Nations communities have control, the lower the suicide rates (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008)
  - \* The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) stated that for Indigenous people to have improved health, rather than implementing more “illness care services”, the federal and provincial governments need to “pass the levers of control” to them

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- \* Our project is situated in this conviction that we need to begin understanding the lives and experiences of Indigenous older adults by involving them right from the start

# Indigenous Methodology

- \* holistic epistemology
- \* centres Indigenous knowledge
- \* a reliance on stories and narratives,
- \* emphasis on the experiential
- \* follows Indigenous ethics
- \* respects Indigenous ways of gaining knowledge
- \* must adhere to relational accountability where respect, reciprocity and responsibility are key features
- \* research must benefit Indigenous peoples

# OCAP Ethical Principles

- \* **Ownership:** a First Nations community collectively owns data in the same way that an individual owns their personal information.
- \* **Control:** communities are to be in control of the research and information management processes affecting them.
- \* **Access:** First Nations peoples have the right to access information and data about themselves and their communities no matter where it is held and to make decisions regarding access to their collective information.
- \* **Possession:** First Nations must have custody and stewardship of data.

Establishing a Research Agenda on the Social Aspects of  
Indigenous Aging

# Our Project

# Research Project on Indigenous Aging

- \* Michael Hart, Silvia Straka, Cyndy Baskin are beginning a project to ask Indigenous elders about the research priorities related to aging among their peoples
- \* Winnipeg and Northern Manitoba pilot studies are commencing

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- \* Our project is situated in an
    - \* Indigenous methodology
    - \* anti-colonial framework
    - \* OCAP ethical principles developed by First Nations

# Importance of the project

- \* Services are needed for the growing population of older Indigenous people
- \* The development of policies and services needs to be informed by community voice
- \* The importance of Indigenous self-determination in the development of such policies and services

# Project goal 1

- to identify research priorities with respect to understanding the social aspects of Indigenous aging

# Project goal 2

- \* to root the research agenda in the OCAP principles of anti-colonial research developed by the Assembly of First Nations and to ensure that all such research continues to be driven by the expressed needs of First Nations communities, and

# Project goal 3

- \* to explore the role of non-Indigenous researcher as ally and partner to Indigenous researchers and communities.

# Methods

# Participants as Co-Researchers

- \* We will ask Indigenous Elders to share their wisdom about what research is needed
- \* involves participating in Indigenous ceremonies
- \* Researchers follow cultural protocols (giving of gifts, offerings of tobacco and cloth to Elders)

- \* Each pilot will meet with up to 4 groups of Elders and 10 individual Elders
- \* Sharing circles with Elders' groups
  - \* sacred ceremonial practice used for healing and growth
  - \* Looks like a focus group, but fundamentally different
  - \* They are “acts of sharing all aspects of the individual – heart, mind, body, and spirit” (Lavallee, 2009)

- \* **Conversational method with individuals**
  - \* relies on narrative and storytelling in the context of an informal interview
  - \* Looks like qualitative interviews but fundamentally different in context of Indigenous research paradigm
  - \* E.g., occurs in context of a relationship between the two parties that is active on both sides and has a high degree of reciprocity

# Sharing Circle Questions

- \* The Elders will be asked:
  - \* To share their perspectives on Indigenous aging
  - \* to identify areas where research needs to be done
  - \* to identify Indigenous individuals, groups, and communities who may wish to be part of a national research network interested in pursuing research on Indigenous aging

# Outcomes

- \* Some knowledge about Indigenous older people
- \* A research agenda identified by Indigenous people
- \* The start of a network of Indigenous people interested in working on the research

# Moving forward with the research...

- \* Proposals to national funders with Indigenous partners maintaining control over the process
- \* Publications co-authored by participants
- \* Other forms of dissemination as negotiated with participants (e.g., videos)
- \* Publication on the role of the non-Indigenous researcher as ally

In the absence of such research, how can we do ethical, competent practice with older Indigenous peoples?

# The colonizing role of the professions

- \* All the professions have contributed to the processes of colonization and continue to do so
- \* Far too few professionals are Indigenous because of the immense educational barriers
- \* Our models of practice and our research too often have an approach that focuses on pathology and illness instead of strengths and healing
- \* An anti-colonial, anti-oppressive approach to social work has something to offer all the health professions

# How is it now?

- \* Most social work clients in Manitoba are Indigenous people
- \* Is this also true in the field of aging?



\* <http://aptn.ca/pages/news/2010/10/08/fns-man-with-alzheimers-imprisoned/>

# Manitoba aboriginal leaders join call for inquiry into Alzheimer's death

Scott Edmonds, CP, Apr. 1, 2011

The case of two seniors with Alzheimer's disease and a fatal encounter at a personal care home continues to draw calls for action — this time from Manitoba aboriginal leaders.

Joe McLeod was a retired railway worker who had to leave the Pine Creek First Nation in 2009 and come to Winnipeg with his wife because of his illness.

"He was forced to relocate and fall into a system that unfortunately didn't provide the kind of services that he needed," Pine Creek Chief Derek Nepinak said Friday.



Nepinak says it would be better if there were facilities closer to home for aboriginal people. Pine Creek is in lake country about 110 kilometres north of Dauphin.

"It didn't need to happen... Our communities don't want to be put in the situation where we have to send our elders away... We want to keep [them] in our community and provide them with the services they need so tragedies like this don't need to happen."

# Anti-Oppressive Social Work

- a vision of an egalitarian future
- Values: equity, inclusion, empowerment, and community
- “the personal is political”
- Oppression is the result of the unequal distribution of power and resources
- Need to ‘center’ the knowledges and perspectives of those who have been marginalized and incorporate these perspectives into policy and practice
- articulate the multiple and intersecting bases of oppression
- social work has the potential to either contribute to, or to transform, the oppressive social relations which govern the lives of many people

# Is it even possible?

- \* Many social workers were educated before the current anti-oppressive and anti-colonial approach were being taught
- \* We work in settings strongly shaped by the medical model and the values of other professionals
- \* In our field, we have not often learned how to apply our knowledge base on creating organizational, institutional, and structural change to practice

# How would we start?

- \* By asking the question....
- \* By beginning a dialogue...
- \* By opening our minds to new possibilities for our role in health care...
  
- \* “Social workers are the conscience of the system.”  
Sandra Loewen

Thank you