Appropriate Engagement and Nutrition Education on Reserve: Lessons Learned from the Takla Lake First Nation in Northern BC

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ABSTRACT
Concerns about living conditions on First Nations’ reserves are attracting a great deal of attention from public health practitioners and researchers looking to design and implement measures to improve and promote health. Issues related to geographic isolation, low socioeconomic status, and threats to traditional practices are known to contribute to poor health outcomes, especially amongst Aboriginal youth. Research and educational programs are needed to address these challenges yet even the most state-of-the-art initiatives are destined to fail if they are perceived to be disrespectful of, and insensitive to, local First Nations’ culture and ways of knowing. Inspired by Smith’s call for decolonized methodologies, we develop the concept of appropriate engagement as a framework for working with First Nations. A case study of research and a nutrition program conducted in Takla Landing, British Columbia are presented to offer an outline of appropriate engagement and how it can be used to better inform public health initiatives aimed at improving the dietary practices of First Nations populations.

Public health practitioners and researchers often struggle with developing culturally appropriate practices when working with Aboriginal communities. A common refrain is that many First Nations have little faith in the motivations and efficacy of outsider interventions. This is not surprising, given the long history of “help” that First Nations have received from governments, missionaries, industry and the medical community. Thus, even the most well-intentioned of efforts to promote community development and participatory action is likely to be met with skepticism or indifference, but especially so if these efforts are seen to be initiated with little input from community members themselves.

This paper offers an approach to working with First Nations communities that is inspired and guided by Linda Tuhniwai Smith’s (1999) call to decolonize methodology. Smith’s work is ultimately concerned with articulating an epistemological way forward in the recovery and redevelopment of indigenous knowledge systems as a means of achieving self-determination. That is, hers is a call for a truly indigenous research agenda unfettered by the objectives and institutions of western research. While such a standpoint might suggest that there is no place for “outsiders,” Smith makes clear that this need not be the case so long as “insiders” determine the priorities and the terms of these engagements. As she states, “decolonization … does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith, 1999, p. 39).
With this as a starting point, we present the notion of appropriate engagement as a means by which “outsider”-initiated research can be transformed from research on indigenous communities to work with these communities as one step in the direction of empowering indigenous groups to achieve a decolonized methodology. While the specific form that appropriate engagement might take is ultimately context specific, we expect that it will typically involve first identifying, and then committing to follow protocols set out by the community. It will also entail involving the community in all phases of research, and giving control to the community over decisions about the shape, content and outcomes of these activities. In doing so, a path is cleared to enable the development of relationships of trust between community and outside interests.

The paper draws on the experiences of the first author in working with the Takla Lake First Nation (TLFN) in Northern British Columbia on the social and cultural experiences of food security. Based on these experiences, we discuss the meaning of appropriate engagement to this particular community in building trusting relationships and supporting ongoing community-based projects.

Key Tenets of Appropriate Engagement

It has long been determined that the effects of colonization of First Nations populations in Canada have been detrimental to all areas of their lives (Kelm, 1998). There are accounts of economic and political betrayal, historic epidemics brought by early European settlers (Kelm, 1998), and a long history of inequality and discrimination that have positioned the First Nations population as marginalized from the wider settler society (Harris, 2002). Ongoing colonization has ensured that indigenous perspectives remain on the margins, and academic research remains one area in which this is blatantly clear (Smith, 1999). Methodological approaches to research are created by “outside” researchers with little consideration given to the perspectives of the traditional way of knowing and the importance of incorporating that knowledge into research projects. Academics have a history of conducting research in First Nations communities without local engagement, consultation and collaboration. Further, as Smith (1999) states, “when discussing the scientific foundations of Western research, the indigenous contribution to these foundations is rarely mentioned...The objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science” (pp. 60-61).

A decolonized methodology aims to establish First Nations’ priorities, world views and contributions at the forefront of research. We argue that there is a role for research collaborations involving “outsiders” in clearing a space for “outsiders” to participate in the decolonizing project. But for an “insider/outsider” exchange to be truly an even one, many established western research protocols must be changed to work with rather than on First Nations communities. In this section, we present a brief outline of three key tenets of appropriate engagement based on the first author’s experiences “in the field.” In the first instance, we suggest that the onus is always on those seeking to engage with First Nations to become informed about the culture and history of a community with which they intend to work (i.e., what we have termed cultural competency). Next, we see it as necessary to take seriously the challenge of decolonizing methodologies by acknowledging and respecting First Nations’ knowledge systems as central to the research endeavour. Finally, it has been our experience that appropriate engagement must also begin by recognizing the strengths and resilience of First Nations’ cultures, and thus to make a conscious effort not to employ a deficits approach that underlies work on First Nations.

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency refers to “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989 as cited in Office of Minority Health, 2008). Relationship building and developing trust in a community is a critical component of cultural competency and can lead to long-term successful working relationships. The National Aboriginal Health Organization (2008) recommends that approaches to cultural competence should include: recognizing the historical context that impact current plights; recognizing diversity of populations; and understanding power relations and raising organizational awareness.

Researchers and program providers alike must be aware that there are expected protocols to follow in communities, as well as expected levels of knowledge, skills and attributes (Fraser, 2007; CIHR, 2007). Knowledge of the culture, colonial history, impact of racism and poverty, and social determinants of health are expected (CIHR, 2007). Respect for traditional knowledge is required before any work can begin. A demonstrated commitment to giving back to the community, and maintaining continuity enables a long-term working relationship (Schnarch, 2004). Ethical skills are also important to develop. The ability to communicate accurate information or modify interview or focus group
techniques for a particular audience is required (Willgerodt, 2003; CIHR, 2007). In addition, the willingness to work with Aboriginal Peoples, and acceptance of their specific challenges, are vital to promoting successful engagement (Katz, 1994). Finally, knowledge transfer and capacity building work is reciprocal when researchers and community members have a respectful partnership (Healthy Children & Partnerships, 2004).

First Nations Way of Knowing

There are many obstacles that Aboriginal populations face in maintaining their traditional way of knowing. The ongoing impacts of colonialism are at the root of this challenge. Industrial development, legacies of residential school and other government policies had a devastating effect on First Nations’ knowledge systems. However, through inner strength and resolve, many communities are regaining traditional knowledge and passing it on to future generations.

Academic research has been one means by which colonialism operates. As Smith (1999) states, “research through ‘imperial eyes’ describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings” (p. 56). In order for “outsiders” to avoid reinforcing this colonial project, there must be an explicit recognition of the legitimacy and primacy of First Nations’ knowledge systems when establishing research protocols.

Recognizing Strengths as a Foundation for Healing

A strength-based approach in a First Nations context is based on giving voice to community members and using a research methodology that is based on indigenous knowledge in an environment where power and voice is given reciprocally (Greenwood et al., 2004). This approach empowers people who often report feelings of marginalization or disempowerment (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2003) as a result of “current realities” (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2003, p. 7) such as low socio-economic status, education levels below that of the general population and an increased number of children in care. It is important to keep in mind that while these issues are present in many communities, First Nations people cannot be defined by these challenges. Recognizing community strengths and building capacity at the community level can improve the health of individuals, families and the community as a whole (Pan et al., 2005). A considerable amount of research has been done that fosters this approach (Pan et al., 2005; Dick et al., 2007; Timmons et al., 2007; Maar, 2004), and programs that work with building the capacity in communities tend to be sustainable projects as opposed to projects that are developed and implemented from outside practitioners or researchers (Head, 2007).

Case Study

The community of Takla Landing is located in the northern interior of British Columbia. The Takla Lake people are known in Carrier as the tat’l'ah't'een or “headwaters people.” There are three language groups: Carrier, Sekani, and Gitksan and four clans: bear/wolf, frog, beaver, and caribou. The current population is 170 people living on reserve and a registered number of approximately 750 people. On-reserve numbers suggest that the community is of an average size in the province of British Columbia (Ministry of Native Affairs, 1990).

The lead author has worked in Takla Landing for several years in various research capacities. Many of these projects involved working with the second author who is a respected community member and very knowledgeable in research methodologies.
The following case study is based on the lead author's experiences in conducting project work around issues of health promotion, and subsequent research and nutritional education projects with the Takla Lake First Nation (TLFN) in Northern British Columbia. The following excerpt from the lead author's graduate thesis neatly captures her history of engagement with the TLFN around the issue of food security:

I first became interested in the topic of food security while employed by the First Nations Chiefs’ Health Committee. I travelled throughout Northern British Columbia with a mobile diabetes project as a vision technician, screening patients with Type 2 diabetes. The more remote the community, the higher number of patients we treated with diabetic retinopathy, an eye condition common in advanced diabetics. When I asked people about the prevalence of diabetes in the communities I visited, they suggested that the causes of these high rates of diabetes were linked to access to healthy food. I visited on-reserve stores to see for myself what food was available and was dismayed to see that the majority of food was non-perishable items shipped into the community on a bi-weekly or monthly basis.

When I returned to Prince George, I thought about the broader consequences of food security and began to question whether, and in what ways, the formal health care system was addressing the specific nutritional needs of First Nations on reserves… I realized this topic would be a beneficial research project to the Takla Lake First Nation, who I had worked with over the past three years on a community capacity project (Takla Capacity Initiative Project, 2004). While working on this and subsequent health promotion projects, the community members often asked for research such as this thesis to be conducted due to their concerns about the decreasing availability of traditional foods. Because the community had already identified a need for issues of food security to be researched, and I was comfortable working with the people in Takla Landing, I consulted with the Chief and received approval to begin the present study (Tobin, 2007, pp. 1-2).

In this passage, we see the interplay of geographical contingency, intellectual curiosity, cultural sensitivity, and a genuine commitment to make a positive difference that marks our thinking about appropriate engagement. In the interest of disclosure, the remaining authors of this paper include a member of the TLFN who has worked closely with the lead author on a variety of initiatives (second author), and the lead author’s MA thesis advisor.

Methods
A mixed methods triangulation approach was used in order to understand the human experience and human environment that was studied. This approach also assists in validating findings and ensuring the results are rigorous (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Katz, 1994). Data collection for this project included both primary and secondary data sources, participant observation, and respondent validation. While a western approach to research was the foundation of this study, the authors were guided by Smith’s (1999) discussion on indigenous contribution to research and how western science rarely mentions the legitimacy of a non-western way of knowing. With this statement in mind, the authors paid particular attention to ensuring the voice of the community and individuals was heard throughout the duration of the research project.

Defining the positionality of the first author is therefore critical to provide context to the process and shape of the research highlighted in this case study. As England (1994) states, “we [researchers] are differently positioned subjects with different biographies, we are not dematerialized, disembodied entities” (p. 85). In addition, England (1994) suggests that different personal characteristics allow for certain insights when conducting research. For example, the first author is a white woman from a small fly-in Canadian town which enables her to relate in a number of respects to small northern communities that face issues of isolation, access to goods and services, and socio-economic concerns. However, the first author is clearly considered an outsider to the particular community of Takla Landing and its First Nations culture and experiences of colonization, poverty and social determinants of health. On the other hand, glimpses to the “inside” are made possible due to the trust and rapport developed from previous work, and especially through recent contacts in the community made doing this research, such as through working closely with the paper’s second author, a member of the TLFN.

Negotiating Consent
There is a long history of problems associated with the ethical protocols of research and a generalization that the Aboriginal population are studied by white researchers (Smith, 1999) positioning the Aboriginal individual or community as powerless and the researcher as the authority. Although many steps have been taken in recent years to
members were chosen as participants based on their field notes from the lead author. Community interviews with community members along with collection of personal contact and their experiences of colonial encounters. Therefore, TLFN band office, and information collected from capacity building projects at their Prince George office. Very little has been published about the TLFN, so the majority of data collected relied on statistical profiles from the Government of Canada, government archives, reports written by community members, and oral histories. Other secondary data sources that were relevant to this research included literature and oral histories on the general treatment of First Nations throughout Canada since 1867. Literature on the health of First Nations throughout Canada were collected from sources such as the internet, academic reviews. Participant observation was useful as it portrays people's actions rather than their recollection and allows for spontaneity that would be unlikely in an interview setting (Hay, 2000). Patrick and Middleton (2002) state that an over-reliance on survey/interview methods have the potential to obscure other perspectives, or can bias the evaluation of data collected. By using a range of methods, various perspectives can be incorporated into the research. Ongoing secondary data collection allowed the lead author to fill in any gaps that were present through the collection of primary data. Likewise, primary data collection, by means of key informant interviews and participant observation, filled in gaps in secondary data and added depth to this background information. This triangulation of data therefore validates findings and provides a more complete representation of issues. Data collected was verified by the community leaders prior to the final report being written. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Research Ethics Board at UNBC in 2006.

Data Collection
Secondary data are an important part of this project and were collected from sources such as the internet, academic literature on the health of First Nations throughout Canada and beyond, information provided from employees at the TLFN band office, and information collected from capacity building projects at their Prince George office. Very little has been published about the TLFN, so the majority of data collected relied on statistical profiles from the Government of Canada, government archives, reports written by community members, and oral histories. Other secondary data sources that were relevant to this research included literature and oral histories on the general treatment of the First Nations population throughout Canada since contact and their experiences of colonial encounters. This component of data collection supports a holistic approach to the research.

Primary data were collected from open-ended interviews with community members along with collection of personal field notes from the lead author. Community members were chosen as participants based on their knowledge of traditional foods as well as the importance they attribute to a traditional diet. The lead author initially spoke with a key community contact to establish who the interviewees would be. Patton (2002) defines a key informant as a person who is knowledgeable about the dynamics of the community and who is “useful in helping an observer understand what is happening and why” (p. 321). This information would be almost impossible to obtain as the lead author is an outsider hoping to gain personal information about community members. The TLFN is a matrilineal society in which women are typically the heads of families. For this reason, a majority of women were identified as key interviewees. Because the research focus was in long-term change in diet, long-time residents of Takla Landing were interviewed. Although it would have been informative to interview youth and their parents as well, it was most important to speak with Elders first; they have witnessed colonization of their territory, have lived experiences of how colonial influences directly impacted their lives, and can speak to ongoing changes within the community which result from these contributing factors of change. In addition, Elders have traditionally played key roles as advisors and keepers of the cultural legacy in First Nations communities (Castellano, 2002). For this reason alone it would be unacceptable to speak to the youth prior to consulting with the Elders.

Participant observation was the final source of data collection used that provided information that may not be otherwise available through interviews or literature reviews. Participant observation is useful as it portrays people’s actions rather than their recollection and allows for spontaneity that would be unlikely in an interview setting (Hay, 2000). Patrick and Middleton (2002) state that an over-reliance on survey/interview methods have the potential to obscure other perspectives, or can bias the evaluation of data collected. By using a range of methods, various perspectives can be incorporated into the research. Ongoing secondary data collection allowed the lead author to fill in any gaps that were present through the collection of primary data. Likewise, primary data collection, by means of key informant interviews and participant observation, filled in gaps in secondary data and added depth to this background information. This triangulation of data therefore validates findings and provides a more complete representation of issues. Data collected was verified by the community leaders prior to the final report being written. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Research Ethics Board at UNBC in 2006.
Rules of Engagement

Indigenous contributions to western research are rarely acknowledged and when they are, the legitimacy of the research is questioned (Smith, 1999). This research focused on the importance of engaging the community members in the development stages of the project through to the conclusion and report writing (Simon et al., 2007).

There is no one method to follow when working with First Nations communities but engagement can vary from community to community; region to region. In research conducted with the TLFN, initial contact with Chief and Council is encouraged, followed by a community meeting that provides an overview of local conditions and an opportunity for public input about how the project should be implemented. These meetings will also provide insight into the dynamics of the community and the protocol that is expected of outside researchers or practitioners.

The lead author provides the following account of the initial steps in her thesis research:

My first meeting regarding my food security research was held with Chief and Council, from whom it was essential to gain approval before presenting my ideas to the rest of the community. It was brought to my attention that in the past, ‘outsiders’ have obtained information from band members and have not reported back to them. Once the information leaves the community, there is a feeling of lost ownership unless steps are taken to report back and assist with developing sustainable projects when required. Chief and Council approved my project and gave me permission to hire a community coordinator who would assist me with organizing a community meeting, arranging interviews, translation, report back and next steps.

Obtaining approval from Chief and Council was standard protocol with the TLFN, but what many in the research community find out is that, once approved, a number of critical steps in the research process must be vetted through the Band leadership. For instance, the TLFN community contact reviewed all questions in the interview guide to ensure the questions were culturally appropriate. The Chief also made it clear that recruitment of participants in the study would be coordinated through the community contact. It was also agreed that all preliminary findings and the penultimate draft of the complete thesis would be sent to the Chief and community contact for approval, with the understanding that requested changes were to be accommodated. In essence this arrangement involved the relinquishing of a good deal of control over the thesis research process, not only by the candidate, but also by the thesis adviser and examining committee. In the case of this thesis research, there was full support for this arrangement by the academics involved. In many ways, this empowers the community by emphasizing the essential role they have in project development and delivery and also provides a sense of ownership of that project.

With the terms of band council approval clarified, the lead author describes the early stages of the research:

My first step [with the help of the community contact] was to host a community meeting where I presented my ideas and asked for feedback and for volunteer interviewees. This step was part of an effort to create opportunities for the community to get to know me, to ask questions about the project and to build relationships. The meeting was interactive in that I invited all community members; Elders, adults, youth, and children. Lunch was provided, there were colouring contests for the children, and the feeling of the meeting remained informal. Through participant observation it was apparent that the Elders in the room were highly regarded and rarely would anyone speak before an Elder spoke. The coordinator confirmed that Elders are the knowledge holders of the community and it is appropriate to speak with them before speaking with other community members. After the meeting, we compiled a list of Elders in the community and asked their permission to be interviewed for the food security project. All people who were approached agreed to be interviewed and enjoyed telling their stories of their traditional way of life.

As previously stated, there is a wide variance in ethical research protocols that rarely consider the importance of the “researched” while focusing solely on the validity of the academic researcher (Smith, 1999). There is a long history of research being done “only by white researchers to indigenous peoples” (Smith, 1999, p. 118) positioning indigenous communities as powerless. Although changes in research guidelines have altered this inequality there is still a deeply held perception among Indigenous Peoples that Indigenous Peoples are natural objects of study (Smith, 1999). Recognition of these concepts and awareness of how they are employed in the community help promote successful working relationships and positive project outcomes.
The lead author describes her unease with the process of obtaining consent:

During my interview process, I did ask for signed consent and was never refused. I took extra time to explain why I needed their signed consent and how this research could benefit them, their children and their grandchildren. The reason for their acceptance of my request may be that I had a trusted community member with me which validated the work I was doing, or the fact that I have previously worked in and with the community, which made people more at ease when I requested they sign a consent form.

The initial steps in the thesis research satisfied the ethical requirements of the university, but an understanding of “community protocol” based on the lead author’s previous work with the community, and guidance from the second author as a community liaison were critical.

Although the lead author had a thesis overview established before approaching Chief and Council for approval, the community guided the research. There is a tendency in academic research to seek closure around projects. When engaging in community-based work, however, there is considerable work to be done to give back to the community after the initial project has concluded. For example, at the final meeting for the report-back presentation, the lead author asked the community members what they would like to see next in terms of program development that would promote food security. The result is a culturally appropriate nutrition program for the Nuswadeezulh elementary school on reserve.

There are three components to the program. The first component includes the students keeping a 24-hour food recall journal. They will also interview an Elder in order to collect information on the Elders’ food that was eaten within the last 24 hours. Students will then compare the two diets and discuss similarities and differences. Secondly, community Elders will conduct a cooking session in which a traditional meal will be prepared. Storytelling will be a part of this educational component. Finally, an interactive workshop on nutrition, health and physical exercise will be conducted. This will include taking children out on the land and showing them how to set snares and nets, and clean and preserve their food. During the time the lead author was in the community, many people mentioned that they thought a nutrition program would be of benefit to the parents/guardians and children alike. There have been nutrition programs offered in the school but they have been based on a western model of diet and health. The nutrition program presently being implemented is different in that it has been developed by the community, delivered by community members and will cater specifically to community needs.

The lead author describes her ongoing commitment to the community:

In addition to assisting with the nutrition program, I have offered my time in-kind. That is, if a department needs assistance with proposal writing, document review, establishing a database, or organizing a questionnaire, I am happy to support this work that often develops capacity within the community and/or employs community members. I believe it is critical to be available to ensure my relationship is sustainable with this community. I have made a long-term commitment to Takla Landing and my ability to assist when possible should not be questionable.

It should be emphasized that the level of commitment described here is voluntary, and we would not suggest that researchers, service providers and practitioners be expected to provide ongoing assistance in return for approval to work with First Nations communities. At the same time, “outsiders” wishing to engage in a meaningful way with First Nations should seek ways and means to avoid the “fly in and out” syndrome that has sadly characterized many First Nations’ contacts with researchers and service providers.

**DISCUSSION & CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper represents a series of reflections on appropriate engagement, centred on the experience of the lead author in working with one First Nations community in Northern British Columbia. We have drawn inspiration from Linda Tuhuiwai Smith’s call for decolonizing methodologies in reflecting on lessons learned primarily from research activities, but more recently with the design and delivery of a nutrition education program informed by the lessons of Elders and other members of the community.

The goal of successful research in Aboriginal communities is to develop indigenous methodologies while bridging the gap between outsider contribution and insider participation. Showing respect for the culture, protocols and ways of knowing of First Nations is the basis for any “examination” or “intervention” that outsiders may bring to bear on a community. From this starting point, it becomes possible to recognize and work with the strengths of communities, rather than seeing only problems and shortcomings.
Those who wish to work with Aboriginal communities must consider cultural awareness and competency as a foundation for successful relationship building. The ways in which knowledge is generated has to come from a consideration, first and foremost, of First Nations’ priorities in order to prevent researchers, however well intentioned, from falling into a trap of re-imposing the assumption of western privilege. In other words, appropriate engagement requires first raising consciousness of the uneven relations of power that underlie traditional practices of western research, and second from “outside” researchers relinquishing control over the terms under which research is conducted and reported.

Finally, respect for the Aboriginal ways of knowing is another critical factor in working with First Nations communities. It is therefore vitally important to reject the notion that the means by which appropriate engagement is achieved is in any way a compromise that must be made to ensure the research participation of First Nations. To hold such a view undermines the objective of decolonizing methodology and, needless to say, misses the point of appropriate engagement entirely.

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REFERENCES


### END NOTES

1. The terms First Nation(s), Aboriginal, Indigenous and Native are used interchangeably throughout this paper.