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WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CANADA
AND CHILE

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STITCHING TOGETHER AN ARTS-BASED INQUIRY WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CANADA AND CHILE

Cindy Hanson

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Abstract

Community-based research and learning can never be prescribed. The study entitled "Intergenerational Learning in Indigenous Textile Communities of Practice," funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, illustrated this point in many ways. Although it was conceived as community-based research, it was not initially regarded as arts-based; this is what it became. Both the data-gathering and research-mobilization methods were arts-based. The study provided meaningful lessons in informal, Indigenous, and intergenerational learning within textile communities of practice of Indigenous beaders and weavers from Canada and Chile.

Résumé

La recherche et l'apprentissage communautaires ne peuvent jamais être prescrits. L'étude intitulée « L'Apprentissage intergénérationnel au sein des communautés de pratique des textiles autochtones » (« Intergenerational Learning in Indigenous Textile Communities of Practice »), financé par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines au Canada, illustre bien ce point à plusieurs égards. Bien qu'elle soit d'abord conçue comme recherche communautaire, elle n'était pas initialement comprise comme étant axée sur les arts : cette dimension a émergé au cours de son évolution. À la fois la collecte de données et la mobilisation des méthodes de recherche étaient fondées sur les arts. L'étude a fourni des leçons pertinentes pour l'apprentissage informel, autochtone et intergénérationnel au sein des communautés de pratique des textiles autochtones, notamment celles au Canada et au Chili formées de personnes qui travaillent avec les perles et qui font le tissage.

Background

This interdisciplinary study explored informal adult learning and textile production in two Indigenous contexts—one in southern Chile and the other in northern Saskatchewan, Canada. It crossed borders of race, place, time, gender, and epistemological understandings.

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The Indigenous textile artists included beaders from Saskatchewan (Canada) from Métis, Dene, and Cree ancestry and weavers from Chile who self-identified as Mapuche.

One goal of the study was to offer an example of how Indigenous communities supported intergenerational relationships and situated ontologies, and the ways in which study participants compensated or resisted an increasingly globalized economic system. Critical Indigenous methodologies were applied throughout the research process. While the methodologies have been the topic of other articles (Hanson & Fox Griffith, 2016), the research process and reflections on learning about Indigenous community- and arts-based research are the focus here.

Indigenous community-based research requires that I, as the non-Indigenous researcher, insert my social position (Wilson, 2008). My relationship with textile practices dates back to my grandmother, a textile artist, and my rural upbringing, which included 4-H sewing classes. My political, personal, and spiritual learning with Indigenous peoples is similarly decades long and includes teaching Native (Indigenous) studies courses in secondary-school and community-college settings. I was involved with Latin American solidarity movements throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During this time, I developed relationships with Indigenous leaders from throughout the Americas, and in 1993, a Canadian International Development Agency professional award took me to Chile to work with Casa de la Mujer Mapuche, a Mapuche women's organization that assisted Mapuche women to improve and market their woven textiles. I maintained relationships with women from there, and in 2013, I received a grant¹ for this study, allowing me to return to Chile and work with Mapuche weavers from Tirúa and communities around Temuco.

Indigenous and Decolonizing Research Methodologies

Indigenous research methodologies stem from Indigenous worldviews. These methodologies are holistic. According to Battiste and Henderson (2000) and Cajete (2000), Indigenous knowledge includes (1) a relationship with the natural world and ecosystems; (2) interconnected systems involving humans and non-humans; (3) linguistic structures; (4) complex relationships with place and territory; and (5) extended kinships that pass on social traditions and practices intergenerationally. Together, "these characteristics emphasize a metaphysical, holistic, oral/symbolic, relational, traditional, and intergenerational approach to knowledge" (Levac et al., 2018, p. 4).

Decolonizing processes were important for the data collection, analysis, and mobilization. Decolonizing methods challenge dominant models of knowledge and engagement, and instead engage in processes that favour non-Western models (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Accordingly, this study was guided by the oversight of an Elder (Flicker et al., 2015). Indigenous methodologies also included paying attention to power dynamics within university-community relationships. The choice of study methods was therefore critical. The study was built on relational approaches or networks as discussed by Kovach (2009).

Although posters were distributed, recruitment occurred primarily through informal networks, such as community relationships between women, and local community coordinators who knew potential study participants. The first story-circle group took place at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, an Indigenous World Heritage site near Saskatoon,

1 The Insight Development Grant was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Saskatchewan; the second and final meeting took place at White Buffalo Lodge in Saskatoon. A dozen women, including two Indigenous student research assistants, participated in Saskatchewan, and 23 women participated in Chile. Local coordinators assisted with the logistics and research process in Temuco, and the organization Relmu Witral assisted in Tirúa. Local research collaborators for the Chilean study were from Temuco's Universidad de la Frontera. In Canada, two Indigenous academics participated in the study as collaborators, and Indigenous students were hired as research assistants. We anticipated a total of 6 to 10 participants in each country, but a total of 33 women were involved, illustrating the power of relational networking in Indigenous communities. The participants ranged from 24 to 95 years of age. While men were invited to participate, none did.

Art and Artifact as Research Methods

The study used interviews and two story-circle groups inspired by Indigenous research methodologies (Hanson & Fox Griffith, 2016; Lavallée, 2009). A key component of Indigenous research methodologies includes sharing the knowledge generated with the community and paying attention to how the researcher gives back to the community (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In honouring this principle, participants were asked how they wanted to share the knowledge generated. Saskatchewan participants wanted an exhibition; Chile participants wanted a book. These outcomes are discussed later in the lessons from the research.

Story circles use symbol-based learning that privileges oral traditions premised on the reciprocal relationship between the teller and listener (Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009). In Saskatchewan, the design of the methodology resembled a talking circle. An Elder opened and closed the circle. After introductions and establishing an understanding of the intergenerational relationships among the participants, the researcher asked questions such as “who taught you how to bead/weave?” and “were you involved in the hide preparation?” Each participant took their turn speaking.

Art and material artifacts were integrated into the process; story-circle participants were invited to bring examples of their beading, the tools they used for their work, raw materials, photos, or other items that reminded them of stories in textile works. They brought items such as beaded gauntlets, earrings, pieces of fur, and photos. The research team added pieces of fur, beads, scissors, needles, and beaded items. These artifacts were placed in the centre of the circle (see Figure 1).

Participants would point or pick up an item when it was their turn to speak, using the items to explain, detail, or amplify their story. The items became symbolic of experiences integrated into the making of beaded items. For some, the items had spiritual significance and meanings that reflected Indigenous cultural practices and ways of knowing (Lavallée, 2009). In this way, the artifacts themselves played an integral role in sustaining the memories, teachings, and cultural practices implied by their design and creation. As one story-circle participant expressed, “It’s not just a sense of living, it’s a part of making, it’s a piece of art. It expresses how you feel, it expresses what you are doing at the time.” The symbolism then engaged adult learners from three generations who spoke of healing, resilience, and intergenerational knowledge. Trust, equity, and reciprocity developed through adherence to the talking-circle principles, through respect for the symbols within the circle, and by de-centring the researcher position (Lavallée, 2009). During the discussions in Saskatchewan,



Figure 1. Items for Story-Circle. Photo by Dakota Fayont-McLeod, used with permission.

several women beaded, and in Chile, several women spun wool. In both locations food was served, and in Chile the women drank *yerba mate*.

Intergenerational Learning, Stories, and Memory

The symbol-based learning and memory tapped into a profound body of Indigenous knowledge and intergenerational learning and life histories through storytelling (Hanson & Fox Griffith, 2016). According to Kovach (2009), stories serve to “elevate the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the context of relationship” (p. 99). Cajete (2000), speaking about oral traditions, noted that the story becomes both the content and the methodology. Lavallée (2009) used Anishinaabe symbol-based reflection as part of an arts-based research approach that emphasized storytelling and community engagement through creativity, memory, personal narratives, and collective history.

The research methods used were ways to evoke bone or blood memory—that is, memory associated with extended kinship and the transfer of knowledge on teachings and cultural practices from generation to generation (Allen, 1999; Henderson, 2000; Holmes, 2000). According to Lavallée (2009), knowledge can be transferred via spiritual means such

as dreams or visions; “it is believed that thoughts, beliefs, and actions are conveyed from one’s ancestors through the blood” (p. 22). Holmes similarly discussed *kapuna* (Elder’s) or Indigenous Hawaiian knowledge that translates and integrates cosmic knowledge with physical or historical knowledges. She described them as “heart knowledge, blood memory and the voice of the land” (p. 40). Similarly, Little Bear (2009) argued that songs, stories, and ceremonies serve as Indigenous knowledge repositories. That beading or weaving serve such a purpose should therefore be obvious. Knowledge that is embodied, intellectual, and spiritual within this mix clearly marks the learning as outside of dominant Western knowledge systems. In this study, knowledge was co-created as part of an academic inquiry, with government funding, and by non-Indigenous researchers. It was art-making in “the contact zone”—that is, art in “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). Reflections on the tensions within these spaces offered lessons in decolonizing research and intergenerational learning.

Learning from the Research

The stories and data collected from the discussion groups were transcribed from audio-recordings and sorted thematically. Although participants in both locations were encouraged to speak in their Indigenous language, only two Elders did so; others spoke English using Cree or Maputhugun words for emphasis. The participants agreed to sign letters of consent before participation. One person in Saskatchewan preferred an individual interview to a group discussion. Her quotes are recorded as “INT.” The quotes from the story circles are recorded as “FGD.” Pseudonym initials identify participants in Saskatchewan, and participant numbers identify those in Chile.

Learning from Observation and from Sharing

There was acknowledgement that learning textiles is primarily intergenerational. Even when participants stated, “I learned it on my own,” they frequently went on to describe how they learned by observing a family member. Indeed, observation was the most common pedagogy referenced by the participants both in Chile and Saskatchewan. This finding in itself presents challenges for participatory pedagogies to teaching and learning as well as the notion of what counts as experiential learning. Like the beaders in Saskatchewan, the Mapuche participants said they learned by watching and practising until they perfected their craft (see for example, Figure 2). While the women described being supervised, they had no formal classes. As DT said, “One day, my mom handed me a beading needle and told me to start sewing and so I started sewing. I caught on right away because I was watching her sew all that time.” Another participant in Tirúa said, “Just watching my mom that is how you learn, just watching her weave.”

In Chile, the participants noted that intergenerational learning through intergenerational observation is changing; younger generations talked about learning through workshops and continuing education at the university.



Figure 2. Mapuche weaving from a community near Temuco. Photo by C. Hanson.

Identity and Pride

There was a strong desire among the beaders to share the knowledge, especially within the family and the community. Comments about embodied learning, sense of smell, and the power of weaving and beading were made in both locations. Here one participant explains:

As long as I can remember, I've seen beads. Like maybe I was three or four and I seen beads all around the house all the time because my granny was a beader. Both my grannies were beaders. And my mom was a beader and she always had hide all over the house because she said *when you smell hide you're coming home* [emphasis added]. It brought memories back because I remember when I used to go in to my granny's house and I used to like that smell. She made her own hide to make mukluku and gloves for all the family. (PM, FGD)

This was associated with the sense of well-being and pride textile arts brought to the communities of practice.

Beading is being Indian [Indigenous]. It's something to be proud of. And it makes me feel sad that it's not being passed on as much. You know—when you're out there, say you go from a gathering or something and you see people wearing beadwork on their vest or jacket. Wow, they're really dressed up. It's nothing compared to the store-bought. (IC, INT)

The women spoke about beading and/or weaving as one of the greatest memories they have of their mother or grandmother; they often equated this with identity and pride.

Gender and Generations

Like the quote above, gendered roles were linked to identity.

If you didn't know how to do this you weren't much of a woman. You had to learn to do it all, not just the fancy stuff. I had to learn to skin the

moose, and do everything, hang it...put it on a stretcher, take everything off right from square one, put it in the water, smoking it and everything because we did it along with [making] our food. You know, you dried the meat at the same time that you dried the hide. (BDH, FGD1)

Having men involved in beading seemed to be normative. While the Mapuche women did not recall men weaving, they frequently discussed how men assisted in building looms. Hunting the animals and tanning the hides were things women and men often did together.

They [the men] join in with the wives. They take out the flesh and the hair. The heavy part, hey. And the ladies do the smoking of the hide. I know of one guy that does [bead] he's a powwow dancer, so his grandmother showed him how to bead and he was able to bead his own regalia. (IC, INT)

Intergenerational differences were also noted. In Saskatchewan, the various aspects of hide preparation seem to be primarily the skills of older generations; older participants were more likely to speak about the whole process. The older women started their stories by explaining something about the hunt or the tanning of the hides; the younger learners generally spoke only about the act of beading. Sennett (2008) asserted that the learning of crafts was always passed from one generation to another, positing that social learning and norms were acquired in the process. Traditional patterns of learning were disrupted by the violence of Indian residential schools that affected not only the wearing of traditional clothing, but all aspects of intergenerational relationships, from language learning to food preparation.

Weaving was perceived as something a Mapuche woman should know, and the weaving products were made for women and their families (most notably their sons). Several felt that the youth were now more interested in employment outside of the communities. Rural migration and globalization were viewed as having major impacts on younger generations, because when the youth left the community to pursue formal education or employment, intergenerational learning was usually disrupted. In the past, many Mapuche did not continue school because of racism; they stopped wearing *chamal* (traditional dress) to avoid discrimination and bought industrial-made clothing, as it was easier than weaving. Participants noted that a renewal of Indigeneity and interest in Indigenous lives from non-Indigenous communities made it easier to continue textile work.

Mainstream and Indigenous Economics

Discussions about beading and weaving frequently revealed links between beading and living in poverty. In both Canada and Chile, beading and weaving were ways to supplement incomes or to survive:

I'd sew in the wintertime and then in the summertime I'd go work in sugar beets. Because that's how I survived. My children made everything, made a living for me, and my children, because my husband had passed away so I had a lot of little ones to bring up. (CM, FGD, translated from Cree)

I used to look at my mom weaving. Then she would go to the border [with Argentina] to trade for *yerba [mate]*, sugar, flour, and they traded, they [speaks in Maputhugun], she never did it for money. She traded, always; she traded her weaving items for other things not for money. (P1, FGD, Temuco, Chile)

The study participants predominantly spoke about the informal economy of trading. While a traditional form of sharing, trading or bartering could be considered a form of resilience—perhaps unintentionally—to the external pressures of the marketplace. As Robertson and Farrell Racette (2009) and Blady (1995) noted, there is a common thread connecting beading and Indigenous art; it is living, adaptive, and resilient and remains rooted in tradition.

Lessons in Relational Practices and Reciprocity

Lessons in relational practices and reciprocity emerged from the research process. When Levac et al. (2018) synthesized knowledge on intersectionality and Indigenous worldviews, seven guiding principles emerged: "reciprocity, relationality, reflexivity, respect, reverence, responsiveness, and responsibility" (p. 10). While some of these were experienced in nuanced ways throughout the inquiry, two of the guiding principles—relational practices and reciprocity—are considered below.

Relational Practices

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) asserted that contemporary research involving Indigenous peoples and communities must address the "relationship between knowledge and power, between research and emancipation, and between lived reality and imposed ideals about the other" (p. 165). Other Indigenous scholars frequently write about the importance of relationality (Kovach, 2009). Wilson (2008), for example, asserted that for Indigenous people, "a relational way of being [is] at the heart" (p. 80). He described it as collective, community-centred, and built upon interconnections between, and among, humans and the land. The relational networks in the study involved iterative and culturally explicit work with academic collaborators, relational networks, Elders, and community coordinators. The relational networks in families and communities became the path through which participants were recruited and through which issues were resolved. Referring to the community coordinators and deferring to local experience alleviated resistance. In particular, signing consent forms was viewed as suspicious by two Mapuche participants, but the community coordinators' oral explanation reduced apprehensions. On one occasion, an Elder questioned why children could not participate, noting that this was contrary to their cultural ways of operating. It was explained that this was due to university regulations and other ethical considerations; again, the community coordinators' explanation was most easily accepted.

The development of relational networks started well before the study through solidarity, activism, and allying with Indigenous social movements; this helped build trust in communities. The pre-existing relationships were strengthened through the research process, which also deepened understanding of the relationships of the land, the animals, and the ceremonies. The intergenerational nature of beading and weaving, while not considered in the original study design, became significant dimensions through the research process. Relationships were also important in the data-collection methods, where

symbol-based learning and story circles privileged oral tradition (Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009). Curating the art exhibition in Saskatchewan involved driving to distant reserve communities and using relational networks to contact participants by phone. This resulted in opportunities to attend feasts and develop new relationships in Indigenous communities. Allowing the process to be iterative assisted with this.

Reciprocity

As part of engaging in a reciprocal process, participants were asked how they wanted to share the study's results. Although this is consistent with Indigenous methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), it created some dilemmas. The participants in Chile asked for a book; the participants in Saskatchewan wanted an art exhibition.

In Chile, the challenges of writing in an oral culture were evident when the collaborators admitted they could not meet the timelines, although they still wanted to distribute the book to participants. To honour their vision and the funder's deadlines, the process was adapted. Two graduate students were hired to assist in pulling the book *Tejiendo historias entre generaciones/Weaving Stories between Generations Together* (Hanson, Bedgoni, & Fox Griffith, 2015). Adaptability was key to the book's publication and remains a key foundation of building good community–university relationships.

The art exhibition, entitled *Beading Between Generations* (see Figure 3), involved approaching several art and craft galleries. An art gallery in northern Saskatchewan understood the value of this exhibit and offered to host it. Structural and personal challenges included organizing the event and curating the articles. Because participants had no previous connection with the gallery, some expressed discomfort about entering the gallery and putting their goods on display. In addition to exposing the work of the Indigenous women to a wider audience—academic, community-based, collectors, artists, and the public—the art exhibit was a source of pride for the eight women who participated.

The delays in knowledge mobilization illustrated the realities of working with Indigenous populations in remote locations; this contrasted with funders' demands and academic schedules. Rich lessons resulted from sharing the art exhibition and the book (Hanson, Bedgoni, & Fox Griffith, 2015). Although notions of reciprocity in research vary, they clearly deserve attention beyond this study.

Reciprocity and regeneration also occurred unexpectedly at a community level. During the research, a few participants decided to hold their own community/family gathering of beaders and discovered there were beaders in their own family who had not previously shared their work. The sharing and learning from that gathering demonstrated the strength of beading practices and the way it could bring people together. In its own way, this community gathering illustrated how arts-based research that validates the work of people in communities can create cohesiveness and change. As one participant eloquently stated, "It's a powerful thing."

Concluding Thoughts

This article attempts to stitch together this project's background, Indigenous methodologies, and contributions, including lessons in relational practices and reciprocity. In the process of



Figure 3. From exhibit *Beading Between Generations*.

stitching, however, there are often errors, tensions, and evolving pieces. Craftwork² is often described as a work of both head and heart (Sennett, 2008). As Sennett suggested, “To do good work means to be curious about, to investigate and to learn from ambiguity” (p. 48). This has been my attempt to put that idea into action.

While conducting an arts-based inquiry was not the original intent of this study, it emerged through the community-based process, which suggests that community-based researchers stay open and sensitive to including arts-based activities. The research methods, especially the story circles, were key to creating an environment for the women to share their experiences and stories, as was the role of community coordinators in bringing local knowledge. To some degree, this study has brought into question what is defined as arts-based. For these beaders and weavers, textile arts were integrated into the fabric and

2 Distinctions between arts and crafts are contested. Crafts were traditionally passed on between generations in many societies. Crafts are frequently perceived as the practice that sometimes leads to art (Sennett, 2008).

culture of their Indigenous communities. The networks of relationships upon which this study was based point to how relationship building takes time and patience.

Furthermore, these relationships did not *begin* with the research process; rather, they were in place well before this study began. Processes of reciprocity and sharing within the community, between the researcher and the community, and between the researcher and funders were iterative and complicated. They required additional resources, time, and flexibility. What happened after the formal research, such as the local gathering of beadworkers, was an important outcome. Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies led to important learning about intergenerational knowledge sharing and ways of being in the research relationship. Although these ways of being are not unique to non-Indigenous researchers, they do suggest additional queries into the ways that relationality, reciprocity, and regeneration might be experienced in a research process.

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