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Research with Indigenous Girls: A Review

Abstract

This review explores decolonial research methodologies for engaging Indigenous adolescent girls, focusing on mitigating colonial legacies within research practices. Critically examines existing literature and highlights the imperative of centring Indigenous perspectives and knowledge production while decentering Western academic paradigms. This review underscores the importance of collaboration with participants by drawing on examples from participatory and land-based research methods, such as arts-based activities and photovoice. Further, there is the need for research to be reciprocal and beneficial to participants, fostering meaningful relationships and prioritizing authentic engagement. Barriers to participation, including paternalistic consent requirements, challenges in disseminating data, and strategies to address these obstacles are identifiable. While the review focuses on the experiences of Indigenous adolescent girls 13 to 18 years old, it also calls attention to the need for inclusive research practices that engage younger Indigenous children. The review offers insights into decolonial methodologies that prioritize Indigenous knowledge and empower participants, contributing to more ethical and equitable research practices.

Keywords: Decolonial research, Indigenous adolescent girls, Participatory methods, Reciprocal Research

Introduction

This brief review examines research methods that engage Indigenous adolescent girls through a decolonial lens. Embedding decolonial methods into research design aims to mitigate the potential harms of research that perpetuates the ongoing legacies of colonialism. Doing so means decentering the privileges of Western academic knowledge production, ensuring research is beneficial and reciprocal to the participants, removing barriers to participation, and rethinking modes of disseminating data. In writing this, I situate my positionality as a settler and children's studies scholar who attends and works for a Western academic institution. Bearing that in mind, I acknowledge the irony of writing for an academic journal while critiquing such publications as colonial gatekeepers of knowledge. Nevertheless, these reasons are why it is essential to consider ways to conduct

research without perpetuating the harms of colonization.

Can Research be "Decolonized"? Indigenous Perspectives on Research

The term decolonization is contested and debated by scholars yet is increasingly used to describe the remedying of colonial legacies. Tuhiwai Smith (2021) contends that decolonization "is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (p. 43). While Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, "decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools". For them, the term decolonization cannot be thrown around as a substitute for social justice.

As Tuhiwai Smith (2021) notes, research itself is colonial and often harmful to Indigenous people. She argues that Indigenous perspectives towards research are cynical and distrusting due to the imperial and colonial nature. In their roundtable discussions with 100 Indigenous women across Canada, The Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) explored barriers to accessing human rights. The discussions revealed that Indigenous women and girls were critical of research projects, emphasising that "[o]ur community has been researched to death!" (CHRC, 2016, p.40). Tuhiwai Smith found similar sentiments among the Indigenous communities she spoke with. The roundtable participants also felt that research with Indigenous women and girls should be conducted by Indigenous women instead of settlers (CHRC, 2016). Likewise, Hardy et al's. (2020) study with Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ youth revealed the need for direct funding for Indigenous youth-led research. Otherwise, participants feel pressured to have relationships with researchers to pursue projects (Hardy et al., 2020). Therefore, research funding should be directed towards Indigenous communities so they can self-determine research projects.

Decentering Western Academic Knowledge Production

Problematically, Western academia centers on Western knowledge and has the power to decide which knowledge is valid (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). For this reason, all research projects should aim to resist perpetuating the ongoing legacy of colonialism by decentering Western academia as the only legitimate form of knowledge. Participatory research methods aim to combat colonialism by centering the perspectives and knowledge of the participants. A study by Chadwick (2019) with nine Indigenous girls ages 13-18 in British Columbia incorporated arts and land-based methodologies. For example, two participants painted rocks beside a lake while discussing the research topic. Others created art or masks from the land by using "bark, stones, sinew, feathers, hide, and bones" (Chadwick, 2019, p.103). While another participant selected walking and talking on the land. Chadwick describes the methods as "co-created and emergent" since the participants selected the methods and their level of engagement (Chadwick, 2019, p.103).

Shea et al.'s, (2013) study with 13–16-year-old Indigenous girls used photovoice, art collages, interviews, sharing circles, surveys, and social activities to co-create knowledge with participants. They found that photovoice was the most accessible method to the girls due to their familiarity with technology and the ease of taking photos. This method allowed the girls to participate and collaborate with the researchers and each other. Additionally, the girls reported that they enjoyed the collage making and sharing circles more than the interviews.

Benefits and Reciprocity

Extracting knowledge from participants for the benefit of researchers is a perpetuation of colonialism. Research should be reciprocal and beneficial to the participants (Chadwick, 2019; Clark et al., 2010). However, research often benefits researchers more than the participants (Clark et al., 2010; Hardy et al., 2020, Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). In their study Clark et al., (2010) aimed to ensure their study with rural Indigenous youth benefitted the participants by conducting action-based research and outcome focused.

Furthermore, relationship building is an important early component of reciprocal research. In their study, Shea et al., (2013) incorporated a 17-month period of relationship building as the first research phase. They noted this is a lengthy time for relationship building, however, they argue it is essential to community-based participatory research. This

study about health and body image among Indigenous girls ages 13-16 revealed that the participants also emphasized the value of relationship building with other girls during the research (Shea et al., 2013).

Similarly, McHugh and Kowalski (2009) spent 3-4 months of their year-long participatory action research study on relationship building. The principal investigator spent five full days a week actively participating in various aspects of the school day, which they found increased the participant's comfort while also revealing ways to give back to the school to ensure the relationship was reciprocal. They argue that through active collaboration, “researchers can be more confident that research does benefit participants” (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009, p. 126). However, developing relationships with participants increases the risk that participants may experience feelings of hurt or loss when the project is finished. They mitigated this risk with multiple reminders they would not return the following school year (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009).

Barriers to Participation

Barriers to inclusive research impact authenticity by excluding youth participants who cannot obtain parental consent. Clark et al. (2010) found that paternalism engrained in Research Ethics Boards often excludes youth participation by requiring parental consent. Some youth may find obtaining consent risky or impossible (Clark et al., 2010). They argue that cognitive capacity and competence should be evaluated instead of age (Clark et al., 2010). Including marginalized young people can help safeguard the authenticity of research.

Similarly, the youth involved in McHugh and Kowalski’s (2009) study identified the requirement of parental consent as a barrier to participation. One participant explained, "We might want to do something, but if our parents say no and don't sign the stupid little forms, we can't. And why? Because we aren't allowed to make up our own minds" (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009, p. 123). Their perspectives demonstrate how parental consent amplifies the hierarchy in research participation and disempowers the participant (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009)

Dissemination of Research

Disseminating data beyond scholarly journals and research reports can challenge the privileging of Western academic knowledge while increasing the accessibility of knowledge. McHugh and Kowalski (2009) experienced challenges including Indigenous girls in the dissemination of data in a written research report. Despite multiple efforts to include the girls in all aspects of the research, including the written report, many declined to participate in this portion. They aimed to ensure authenticity by including as many direct quotes from participants as possible. Nonetheless, their experience indicates that written reports might not be an ideal form of dissemination, and perhaps alternative methods would have engaged the participants better.

In contrast, Chadwick (2019) curated “a living, walk-through art-ceremonial space” at a three-day gathering where service providers, researchers, policymakers, and community members could witness the participant's action-focused work (p.110-111). Notably, the participants decided how their knowledge and perspectives were shared (Chadwick, 2019) for instance, they chose if their names were shared or kept confidential (Chadwick, 2019). One participant also indicated they did not want to share the audio recording of their voice (Chadwick, 2019). Chadwick (2019) demonstrates an intentional dissemination of data outside of scholarly journals that is meaningful, representative, reaches a wider audience, and decentres academia as gatekeepers of knowledge. Although this study was also published in an academic journal, in doing so, Chadwick demonstrates to fellow researchers how they can incorporate methodologies and data dissemination in ways that challenge the colonial nature of research.

Concluding Thoughts: Where are the Girls?

Undoubtably, there is still work to be done and this brief review is not an exhaustive representation of how to conduct research with Indigenous girls. The above-mentioned studies demonstrate recent efforts to decolonize research with Indigenous teen girls through participatory and land-based methods. The participants in these projects were all youth ranging in ages from 13 to 18 (Clark et al., 2010; Chadwick, 2019; Hardy et al., 2020; McHugh &

Kowalski, 2009; Shea et al., 2013). Notably, the voices of younger girls remain absent bringing to light the need for participatory research that engages younger Indigenous children. Nevertheless, these studies provide concrete examples of decolonial methodologies that recognize Indigenous knowledge production and dissemination. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of empowering participants by removing barriers to participation while ensuring that research is beneficial and reciprocal.

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