



Indigenous Cultural Autonomy: Decolonizing Autonomy to Transform Research Practices

“Decolonization... is not about tweaking the existing colonial system to make it more indigenous-friendly or a little less oppressive.”

— Waziyatawing Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird (2005, pp. 2,4-5)



Boarding schools often took “before and after” photos such as this one to demonstrate the successful cultural assimilation of the children.

Who Is This Fact Sheet For?

The primary audience for this information is indigenous and non-indigenous researchers working with tribal communities, academic institutions, research organizations, and agencies. It is also intended for tribal leaders and members of tribal communities working with non-indigenous researchers.

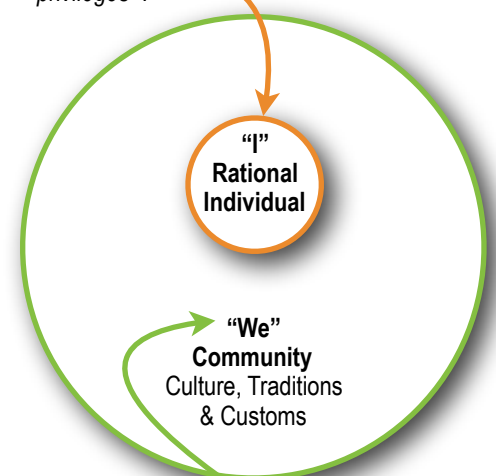
As we move forward collectively to rebuild trust and develop culturally relevant partnerships to improve health outcomes, we must acknowledge that indigenous communities and western science may have different ways of understanding the concept of “autonomy.” We will not succeed in improving the health of indigenous communities without recognizing the ethical consequences of imposing a colonized (western) autonomy on tribal communities who may have a different understanding of collective identity and priorities. Only by openly discussing and being willing to revise what we mean by “autonomy” can we develop healthy, mutually beneficial partnerships based on trust.

Colonized Autonomy – “I” versus “We”

Indigenous populations often build identity around “we” and not “I.” By contrast, western philosophy and science have traditionally been focused on the “rational individual” as the subject of all inquiry. Ethical practices in biomedical research rely on the right of the autonomous individual to give informed consent before participating in any kind of research or clinical trial.

In a cultural context where the collective good is often prioritized over the concerns of any single individual, respect for autonomy requires western scientists to involve the larger community in discussions about the risks and benefits of the research project or intervention. Questions about ownership of data and publications should be addressed to allow the community to define and preserve its own, non-colonized, autonomy throughout the process. Ideally, these conversations start at the very beginning of the project and contribute to the formation of a bi-directional collaboration in which all parties feel respected, heard, and invested in the research.

Colonized Autonomy
privileges “I”



Decolonized Autonomy
privileges “We”

What is Indigenous Cultural Autonomy?

- Acknowledging that autonomy revolves around the values and interests of a community.
- Respecting the meanings attached to the idea of “equality.”
- Recognizing the right of Indigenous nations to define and protect their cultural traditions and customs.
- Recognizing the multilayered relationship between the past, the present, and the future of indigenous communities and how this affects their group identity.

How Do We Decolonize Research?

- Change research practices and policies to reflect indigenous communities' notions of autonomy.
- Create spaces for indigenous communities and western researchers to engage in thoughtful dialogue about traditional knowledge and how it should inform the research process.
- Develop and maintain relationships between indigenous communities and university-based researchers by **ACKNOWLEDGING, PRACTICING** and **RESPECTING** Indigenous Cultural Autonomy.
- Empower indigenous communities through the use of a common language of engagement and consensus building that (re)builds trust.



What Questions Can We Ask?

To move away from a colonized form of research, we ask questions such as:

- *What research do we want done?*
- *Who is it for?*
- *What difference will it make?*
- *Who will carry it out?*
- *How do we want research done?*
- *How will we know it is worthwhile?*
- *Who will own the research?*
- *Who will benefit?*

- L. T. Smith (2000 p. 239)

References:

- Smith, L. T. (2000). Kaupapa Maori research. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voices and vision* (pp. 225-247). Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Waziyatawin, A. W., & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2005). *For Indigenous eyes only: A decolonized handbook*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Montgomery, M. (2012). Finding Ways Forward: Guiding Policy and Practice for Health and Genetic Research with American Indian and Alaska Native Communities. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry* (In Review).

Students at Tulalip Indian School, 1912



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