

# Introduction

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In November 2002, the first Aboriginal Policy Research Conference was held in Ottawa. The conference was co-hosted by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and the University of Western Ontario (UWO),<sup>1</sup> with the participation of nearly twenty federal departments and agencies and four national, non-political Aboriginal organizations.<sup>2</sup> By promoting interaction between researchers, policy-makers and Aboriginal peoples, the conference was intended to: expand our knowledge of the social, economics and demographic determinants of Aboriginal well-being; identify and facilitate the means by which this knowledge may be translated into effective policies; and allow outstanding policy needs to shape the research agenda within government, academia and Aboriginal communities.

The 2002 Aboriginal Policy Research Conference was the largest of its kind ever held in Canada, with about seven hundred policy-makers, researchers/scientists/academics, and Aboriginal community leaders coming together to examine and discuss cutting-edge research on Aboriginal issues. The main portion of the conference spanned several days with over fifty workshops. In addition to and separate from the conference itself, several federal departments and agencies independently organized pre- and post-conference meetings and events related to Aboriginal research in order to capitalize on the confluence of participants. For example, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council held its first major consultation on Aboriginal research the day after the conference ended.

## The Impetus

The idea for holding a national conference dedicated to Aboriginal issues grew from simple frustration. While there are many large conferences held in Canada every year, Aboriginal issues are often an afterthought or sub-theme at the best of times. More frequently, however, Aboriginal issues are as marginalized as the people themselves and are either forgotten from the planning agenda or are begrudgingly given the odd token workshop at these other national fora. While Aboriginal peoples only account for about 3 percent of the Canadian population, issues pertaining to them occupy a

disproportionate amount of public discourse. In fact, in any given year, the Aboriginal policy agenda accounts for anywhere from 10 to 30 percent of Parliament's time, and litigation cases pertaining to Aboriginal issues have no rival in terms of the dollar amount in contingent liability that is at risk to the Crown. Given these and other policy needs—such as the dire socio-economic conditions in which many Aboriginal peoples live—it seems almost bizarre that there are so few opportunities to promote evidence-based decision making and timely, high-quality research on Aboriginal issues. Hence, the 2002 Aboriginal Policy Research Conference (APRC) was born and these proceedings are one of several by-products of that event.

In order to address the shortcomings of other conferences, the APRC was designed and dedicated to cross-cutting Aboriginal policy research, and covering issues of interest to all Aboriginal peoples regardless of status, membership, or place of residence. Second, the conference was designed to be national in scope, bringing together stakeholders from across Canada in a forum for discussion on a variety of issues related to Aboriginal policy research. Finally, in designing the conference, we sought specifically to promote structured dialogue among researchers, policy-makers and Aboriginal community representatives.

## Conference Goals

The specific goals of the Aboriginal Policy Research Conference were four-fold and reflect the holistic perspective that figures so prominently in Aboriginal cultures.

First, it was designed to bring together a wide body of policy research that had recently been conducted on Aboriginal issues. Although the need for Aboriginal research is widely recognized, it has not received the level of priority and co-ordination that it deserves. Bringing together a diverse array of researchers allows promising theories and methods to be shared and advanced. Moreover, by engaging policy-makers and Aboriginal peoples as active participants, rather than as passive spectators, research gaps can be more easily identified, and researchers more easily apprised of how to make their work more policy-relevant. In addition, the conference promoted the establishment of networks among the various stakeholders in Aboriginal research. It was hoped that these relationships would provide continuous feedback, ensuring that policy needs continued to direct research agendas long after the conference had ended.

Second, dissatisfaction has been voiced with respect to the “victimization” model within which Aboriginal issues are often framed; that is, in the past, researchers have overwhelmingly addressed “problems” relating to Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The APRC attempted to foster a

paradigm shift away from this victimization model, affording equal attention to those studies that examine the positive aspects of Aboriginal realities.

Third, rather than addressing different research areas—such as social, economic and health—in isolation from one another, we attempted to integrate them at the conference so as to better understand and appreciate their interrelationships with respect to Aboriginal quality of life.

Finally, this conference was designed to ensure that gender-based issues were prominent. In addition to integrating gender-based issues within the many topics of the conference, specific sessions were designed to address issues of particular importance to policies affecting Aboriginal women.

## Structure, Themes and Partnership

The conference was structured to reflect the emphasis on policy relevance. In order to achieve this goal, a general call for papers was not done—which is the standard practice at most academic conferences—because we did not want to encourage or showcase curiosity-driven research that might have little or no policy relevance. Instead, the various conference partners (i.e., federal departments and Aboriginal organizations) were asked to organize workshops based on research that they had initiated, or were familiar with, which had policy relevance for them. In the end, conference sessions were organized under the following themes: quality of life (with sub-themes of socioeconomic well-being, social and psychological well-being, health, justice, and education); Aboriginal culture and Indigenous knowledge; the Aboriginal population (i.e., definitions and demography); governance and community management; and economic development.

Not only was subject matter arranged into a policy-relevant framework, but workshops were organized to facilitate a dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and Aboriginal peoples themselves. Specifically, the discussants engaged for each of the fifty workshops usually included both a policy-maker and a member of an Aboriginal community or organization so that each could identify how the body of research in question did or did not serve practical policy or program needs.

Response to the APRC was tremendous, with better than anticipated attendance and numerous requests to make the APRC a regular event. Significantly, this was done without any single department or agency having to shoulder an extraordinary financial burden. The partnership model was essential to the success of the APRC, not only by making the conference financially feasible, but also by creating a community of shared interests in Aboriginal policy research. This sense of collective ownership among the partners was reflected in the effort directed by all stakeholders towards

taking advantage of partnership opportunities and ensuring the highest quality of research presented.

## **Research, Policy and Evidence-Based Decisions: The Research-Policy Nexus**

The APRC was centred on promoting evidence-based policy making. In part, the conference was designed to deal with the communication challenge that faces social scientists, both inside and outside of government, policy-makers, and the Aboriginal community. Could we bring these different communities of interest together to develop better understandings of the problems and processes that create the poor socioeconomic conditions facing Aboriginal people in Canada? Could we develop the cooperative relations that would foster evidence-based policy making, thereby making improvements in these conditions? Policy-makers and researchers, both those in and out of government, too often live and work in isolation from each other. This means that the prerequisite linkages between research and policy are not always present. This linkage is something we call the research-policy nexus.

The APRC was first and foremost a vehicle for knowledge dissemination. With a “captive” audience of many senior federal policy-makers,<sup>3</sup> the APRC was able to enhance dialogue between researchers and decision-makers, and, ultimately, promote evidence-based decision making. More broadly, the conference succeeded in helping to raise the profile of Aboriginal policy research issues, including research gaps, promoting horizontality and enhancing dialogue with Aboriginal peoples.

The research-policy nexus is built on the foundation of dialogue and discourse between those making policy and those discovering and interpreting the evidence that should underscore it. When superior quality research is produced and used in making policy, this structure is complete. Moreover, in order to produce superior quality research, there is much to be gained when researchers, both in and out of government, work in cooperation on problems and issues together. Beyond just disseminating the results of research, the APRC was also about the discussion and sharing of research agendas, facilitating data access and assisting in analysis through mutual critique and review.

We feel strongly that the highest quality research must be produced, and, in turn, that research must be communicated to policy-makers for consideration in formulating agendas for the future. If you wish to make policy on more than ideological and subjective grounds, then you need to help produce and use high-caliber research. It is simply not enough to delve superficially into issues, or be driven by political agendas that have little grounding in current reality. It is not entirely unfair to say that, too often,

policy has roots in the anecdotal understandings of those that make it, or it is informed by the constraints that political parties, ideologies, or day-to-day exigencies dictate. This is a fact of life, and while we can recognize it, we need not be totally constrained by it.

This may seem, to some, like a call to have “objective science” rule our policy-making world. We know that it is an error to fall into the “technocratic wish” that appeals to objective measures to resolve all contentious issues. Science, and the research findings that flow from scientific work, is not entirely objective. Many scientists have argued that science cannot be value-free or thoroughly objective. Connie Ozawa (1991), in opposition to what she calls the logical positivist empiricist paradigm, argues that science can never reach its goal of objectivity, but she concedes that scientifically wise decisions are better than uninformed decisions. Research has many components and each of the components is differentially affected by, and susceptible to, ideological and political determination and conditioning. The *process* of scientific inquiry can often be more objective than the *choice of the target*. The *question* that one asks is more ideologically conditioned than the methods one employs to research an *answer* to that question.

Scientific work may often be composed of subjective choices that are debated among scientists themselves and, at times, the norms are just the brokered agreement. Objective truth is historically contingent. We are of the firm opinion that we must start with a clear view of today’s reality, however flawed by the era in which we live or the level of understanding that we have. This will at least create a foundation and scientific record for future researchers to build upon.

## Outlook for the Future

Aboriginal policy research is still far from reaching a renaissance in Canada, yet it has come a long way from the first major study of Aboriginal conditions that was conducted only forty years ago by a team of non-Aboriginal academics (Hawthorne 1966, 1967). We are now seeing the first generation of Aboriginal researchers and academics entering the enterprise of science, some of whom will embrace established epistemologies, while others will challenge them. The competition for ideas has begun, and non-Aboriginal scientists no longer have a monopoly on the scientific method(s). Yet just as Aboriginal peoples have entered the domain of science, so too have they entered the realm of policy. Many of the bureaucrats who now make policies affecting Aboriginal peoples are themselves Aboriginal. At the same time, new Aboriginal institutions, with their own research mandates, continue to evolve. At the time of this writing, legislation (i.e., Bill C-19) is being considered by Parliament for the creation of a First Nations Statistical Institute (FNSI). If FNSI becomes a major player with respect to creating,

maintaining and disseminating community or national data, what relationship will it develop with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers?

The dualistic fallacy of them versus us, or Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal, is much more complicated. Many different groups have vested interests in conducting research and in the production of knowledge and its dissemination. Some battle lines have already been drawn over a wide variety of controversial issues pertaining to Aboriginal research. For example, can the research enterprise co-exist with the principles of “ownership, control, access, and possession” (OCAP)? Are different ethical standards required for doing research on Aboriginal issues (e.g., do community rights take precedence over the rights of individual consent)? Many of these issues are both emotionally and politically charged, which sometimes makes the exercise of Aboriginal research akin to walking through a landmine field. These issues, and the passion that they evoke, render Aboriginal research a fascinating and exciting field of endeavour. More importantly, these issues make a conference such as the APRC an important forum where ideas and beliefs can be openly discussed and debated.

Just as actors are important to a play, so too is the script or the content. One of the major impediments to Aboriginal research is the dearth of data. It is somewhat ironic that we often hear the sentiment expressed by Aboriginal peoples that “they are researched to death.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, the simple reality is that there is very little relevant data pertaining to Aboriginal peoples. In order to address some of these data deficiencies, the federal government accepted one of the recommendations emanating from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) to conduct an Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) in 2001 (the first one having been conducted in 1991). While Statistics Canada only started releasing some of the initial statistical findings from the most recent APS in the fall of 2003, access to this data by researchers will be paramount to improving our understanding of Aboriginal conditions. However, gaining access to any of the data holdings maintained by Statistics Canada is always a challenge—for both researchers within and outside of government—whether one is doing research on Aboriginal issues or in any other field. Nevertheless, with the 2001 APS having been completed, there is a virtual goldmine of information that researchers may be able to capitalize on in order to move the yardstick forward. Hopefully, some of this research can be presented at the next APRC.

## The Proceedings

Our set of research and policy discussions presented here are simply an attempt to bring forward some of the vast quantity of first-class research presented at the conference. These proceedings are then part of our process of building the research-policy nexus. This two-volume set is but a portion of the contributions made at the conference. Other significant research presented at the conference appears in the recent publication *Aboriginal Conditions: Research as a Foundation for Public Policy* (White, Maxim, and Beavon 2003). All the research published in this latter book was presented for discussion at the conference, but none of these papers appear in this volume. There was also the publication of *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, which was produced by the Policy Research Initiative (Newhouse and Peters 2003). Over half of the research articles in this latter book were presented at the conference, and again they do not appear here. It was our desire to publish only those contributions that were of good quality and did not have any, or only limited, exposure in other venues.<sup>5</sup>

## The Contents: Volume I

The two-volume set of selected proceedings are divided into themes. Our purpose was to group research into sets of ideas where the reader might find the content complementary. In volume one we begin with some contextual research. We present a paper by John Leslie on the policy agenda of Aboriginal peoples from World War II to the Trudeau White Paper of 1969. Leslie demonstrates that for a generation after World War II, Canada's Indian leaders articulated a policy agenda that called for increased "self-government" on reserves, enhanced social welfare services, improved medical care, economic development opportunities and restructured education. He argues that Indian leaders consistently sought recognition of their treaties, Aboriginal rights and the settlement of land claims, while policy-makers selectively supported elements of the Indian agenda that promoted social, economic and political integration. The White Paper, according to Leslie, brought an end to this innovative dialogue, and it was not until the judicial activism of the high courts over the past three decades that Aboriginal rights were again brought to the forefront of the policy agenda.

Miller's historical piece draws lessons from a recent landmark Aboriginal rights case, the Supreme Court of Canada *R. v. Marshall* case, and the Nisga'a's modern treaty negotiation process. Through these examples Miller demonstrates the importance of scholarly historical research in the modern judicial and policy processes. These two pieces by historians yield valuable insights into the evolution of the Aboriginal rights agenda and specific legal relations, as well as the important role that archival and general

historical research has for understanding the current situation today with respect to both Aboriginal rights and the development of Aboriginal policy.

Part two of the book focuses on issues of demography and well-being. We begin with Cooke, Beavon and McHardy's work in applying the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) to First Nations in Canada. This important study aims to see if the HDI, which ranks Canada at or near the top of the well-being scale for the world, is useful in examining the well-being of Registered Indians. They analyze the gap in well-being over time between the Registered Indian and general Canadian populations, and point to continuing disparities despite some progress having been made in closing the gap. The different scores of on-reserve and off-reserve Registered Indian populations, as well as Registered Indian men and women, are also explored.

Gyimah, White and Maxim look at the relative income disparities of elderly Aboriginal peoples. This often overlooked area of investigation yields interesting results. They argue that while there are real disparities in the amount of income between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal elderly, there are also important differences in the sources of that income given the late participation of Registered Indians in the Canadian Pension Plan, and their lower earned incomes during contribution periods. Policy proposals around enhancing the involvement and benefits of Aboriginal people in the Old Age Security-Guaranteed Income Supplement are made.

Lorna Jantzen examines another Aboriginal group sometimes overlooked in demographic trends analysis. Jantzen notes that while we know that most Métis people live in the Census Metropolitan Areas of Canada, we know little about the circumstances of their well-being. She analyzes the issue of who is Métis, and the research difficulties associated with various definitions of Métis that are used in socioeconomic analysis. By unravelling this issue and arguing for use of a broader definition of Métis to understand better where residential overlap occurs, she has helped pave the way for others to explore important socioeconomic issues of Métis well-being in urban areas.

Cohen and Corrado look at a severely underresearched area, that of housing discrimination. They found that a high level of housing discrimination was reported by Aboriginal people in their sample drawn from Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba, typically from 10 to 25 percent depending on the type of discrimination. Some of the most common forms of housing discrimination include being denied a rental application, being denied a place to live due to Aboriginal descent, being denied a place to live because of the respondent's primary sources of income, or being told that a suite was "just rented" after being told the suite was available for viewing. Clearly the data collected indicates a need for a serious policy discussion on this issue.



Part three of this book deals with the very topical issue of education. As White, Maxim and Spence point out, this is a central preoccupation of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal policy-makers. Educational achievement is lower in the Aboriginal population, particularly for First Nations. The problems are less pronounced at the lower grades, but by secondary school we see high drop-out rates, students that are not age/grade appropriate and graduation rates that are too low in comparison with the rest of Canadian society. The post-secondary achievements are reviewed by Jeremy Hull. He notes that the extent of participation and completion of post-secondary education has been rapidly increasing. At the same time, the relative levels of both are still lagging behind the general population. He notes the many characteristics and trends, and draws some policy implications—particularly with regards to labour market outcomes.

Eric Howe's study of Saskatchewan Indian lifetime income points to the real financial gain that is attached to increased educational achievement. He measures the increased return to those people who complete high school, get a trades certificate, or obtain a university degree. The differences are quite dramatic. For example, an Aboriginal female can expect to earn close to one million dollars in her lifetime with a university degree whereas a woman who does not complete high school will earn less than \$90,000 cumulatively.

The central question is how to keep Aboriginal children in school. Heather Morin tackles this question in her paper on student performance data and student success issues. She echoes White et al. (in this volume) when she looks at the lag Aboriginal students experience in British Columbia, but also points to the improvements that are being made. Some initiatives designed to overcome these problems are illustrated, such as Aboriginal education committees, hiring Aboriginal support workers, and specialized agreements with school boards to enhance Aboriginal education.

Vermaeten, Norris and Buchmeier look at data problems and begin the complex task of developing ways to follow cohorts of students through the system. They rightly note that simple cross-sectional comparisons are of value, but tracing students through their schooling will yield greater insights. We have, at present, serious data deficiencies, such that we cannot clearly track those who leave school and determine where they go. Some students can be shown as withdrawing but may actually have left a band school to enter a provincial school. Such problems need to be overcome if we are to make strides in the measurement and tracking of students in order to support future policy development in this area.

All of the education papers share common themes. They all point to the importance of better measurement of Aboriginal student educational achievement, of finding ways to diagnose the problems, and of developing policies that will result in improved educational outcomes and more

profound benefits from investing in Aboriginal education. These benefits will enrich not only individuals and First Nation communities, but will also provide more systemic benefits for the entire country.

## **Preparation for 2005**

The question on many conference participant's lips following the 2002 APRC was naturally—when will the next one be held? Given the success of the first one, it is clear that there is an appetite for another. Currently plans are underway to make the APRC a triennial event, with the next one planned for the fall of 2005. In doing so, we will apply lessons learned from the 2002 APRC and seek once again to maximize the involvement of stakeholders in the planning process. Information on the upcoming APRC will be posted on the website: [www.ssc.uwo.ca/sociology/aprc.cmpa](http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/sociology/aprc.cmpa). We look forward to seeing you there.

Megwe'etch.

## Endnotes

1. More specifically, the conference was organized by the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate, INAC and the First Nations Cohesion Project, Department of Sociology, UWO. Dan Beavon and Jerry White acted as conference co-chairs from their respective organizations.
2. The major federal partners included: Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Canada Economic Development (Quebec), Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Correctional Services Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, Industry Canada, Justice Canada, Privy Council Office (including the Policy Research Initiative), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Status of Women Canada. Other federal sponsors included: Canadian International Development Agency, Canadian Heritage, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Health Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada, Statistics Canada, Transport Canada, and Veterans Affairs Canada. The four national Aboriginal organizations included: the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the National Association of Friendship Centres, the National Aboriginal Health Organization, and the Indian Taxation Advisory Board.
3. While there are many Canadian cities with larger Aboriginal populations, in terms of both proportions and absolute numbers, Ottawa was selected as the most logical conference site because it would have otherwise been difficult to engage the participation of such a large number of senior federal policy-makers. In many ways, the conference was about educating and exposing this group to the vast array of research that has been done on Aboriginal issues.
4. Undoubtedly, one of the major roots of this sentiment is due to the manner in which Statistics Canada conducts the Census. The vast majority of Canadians fill in the Census form themselves. In fact, there are two basic types of Census forms—the 2A and the 2B. The 2A form is a relatively short questionnaire, whereas the 2B is a much longer questionnaire that is sent to one in five Canadian households. In First Nation communities, however, Aboriginal peoples do not fill in their own Census forms. Instead, a Census enumerator conducts an oral interview in order to elicit the required information. More importantly, only the longer 2B Census form is used in First Nation communities (technically, this form is known as the 2D). This cycle of obtrusive surveying is done every five years.
5. We also had many space restrictions. There were many excellent papers that did not easily fit into a specific category, some that overlapped with others, and some that were simply too long to be manageable. There is no real or implied criticism of any of the papers left out of this two-volume set.

## References

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