

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),¹ with the participation of nearly twenty federal departments and agencies and four national, non-political Aboriginal organizations.² By promoting interaction between researchers, policy-makers and Aboriginal peoples, the conference was intended to: expand our knowledge of the social, economic 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,³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵

The Contents: Volume II

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 two we have grouped chapters under the themes of: economic development; health; gender issues; and crime, victimization, and healing.

Economic development is often contingent on the context in which it takes place. We included a paper by Curtis and Jorgensen that outlines how the United States government transfers funds to Indian tribes and the accountability structures that accompany this funding. They examine self-determination and self-government funding specifically, where significant upfront evidence of accountability capacity is required, but few post-funding reporting requirements are mandated. They argue that this gives tribes a greater flexibility in the use of funds, and ultimately supports the growth of tribal government accountability to tribal citizens. The authors conclude with some policy suggestions for Canada based on the U.S. experience.

The context of development includes the processes that are used to undertake it. Chataway looks at how high levels of social capital (trust) and social cohesion (a capacity to discuss rather than repress debate and ideas) lead to more success in development endeavours. In particular, she notes that development and maintenance of mutually acceptable cultural values, developing working relationships across groups, and the inclusion of community interest groups as part of the process enhances the success of development.

The paper by Fleury is a study of Aboriginal people residing off-reserve in comparison with other groups most at risk of experiencing social exclusion in Canada, such as lone-parent families, people with work limitations and recent immigrants. Fleury found that Aboriginal people in recent years escaped “persistent poverty” more often than other high-risk groups as a result of maintaining relatively strong participation in the labour market, despite experiencing multiple barriers. Her findings are mostly attributable to Aboriginal peoples not registered under the *Indian Act*, and her

research has important policy implications for the off-reserve Aboriginal population.

The health issues facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada are of critical policy importance. Second perhaps only to education are concerns about how to approach health. Lemchuk-Favel and Jock develop an Aboriginal health systems framework for the organization of health services in Aboriginal communities. They highlight the contributions of different First Nations and Aboriginal communities in advancing the development of a model that the authors see as the beginning of a vast improvement in access to health care, with an emphasis on population wellness and general population health status improvements. Of note are the clear policy proposals for how to advance a new health model for Aboriginal communities, which includes capitation funding agreements and supports for integrating what the authors argue are other programmatic aspects of a healthy community: housing, social assistance, justice and employment.

Chandler and Lalonde review some of their work on the high rate of suicide among Aboriginal youth in British Columbia. They begin with a conundrum. Some communities have rates of suicide 800 times the national average while others have had no suicides for over fifteen years. They try to determine what may account for this puzzling difference. The authors cogently articulate the factors that seem connected to “choosing life over death” and draw some evocative conclusions. It is clear that certain factors such as being quick off the mark to achieve some form of self-government through negotiation or litigation for traditional lands seems connected to lower suicide rates, but the authors point out that the true answers, and other factors that combine to create a better world for youth, are buried in the knowledge structures of the communities themselves.

Much talk and investigation has occurred on the subject of social capital and its impact on community well-being. The World Bank, the Policy Research Initiative and university projects such as Western’s First Nations Cohesion Project have looked at the complex concepts involved. All agree that the problems associated with the measurement of social capital are impeding the development of the scientific understanding of the concept. Mignone, Longclaws, O’Neil and Mustard conducted a study whose objectives included both the development of a framework of social capital for First Nations, and more refined culturally appropriate instruments to measure social capital. This rather technical piece is important because it provides some guidance to those wishing to study and understand social capital in Aboriginal communities. The authors note that there are policy implications involved, not the least of which is a warning that the study of social capital demands that the community be integral to, and supportive of, the process. Social capital and policies coming out of social capital studies are seen to impact the health of communities.

Gender issues are often overlooked in the plethora of studies done concerning Aboriginal peoples in Canada. In this volume we present five papers that cover a wide range of issues. The Cornet and Lendor article articulates the legal issues surrounding matrimonial real property issues on-reserve. While the paper is “legally oriented,” it provides an interesting sociohistorical context for understanding future directions for legislation and social/economic policy. Abbott focuses less on legalities and more on the effects of legislation, or lack thereof, pertaining to socioeconomic policy. The links between domestic violence, matrimonial property rights and children are underscored in Abbott’s analysis. The demographic information and other statistics gleaned from the sample provide a picture of the socioeconomic plight of women and children as a result of a lack of matrimonial real property legislation or regulations on reserve. The crux of her work, however, lies in the accounts of participants who address the issues important to them and some of the measures required to ameliorate their current social conditions.

Hull as well as Robitaille, Kouaouci and Guimond provide valuable statistical profiles and insights into Aboriginal single mothers and Registered Indian teenage mothers respectively. Hull takes a descriptive approach presenting easy-to-follow data in tables and figures that are designed to answer questions such as: What is the prevalence of single mothers and single-mother families within the Aboriginal population? What are the educational characteristics of Aboriginal single mothers? Where do Aboriginal single mothers live? Has the prevalence of single mothers been increasing? What are the employment income characteristics of Aboriginal single mothers and their families? Hull finds that Aboriginal women are much more likely to be single parents than other Canadians, and that there are differences among various Aboriginal identity groups that show that it is a mistake to consider all Aboriginal single mothers as having the same needs.

Robitaille, Kouaouci and Guimond look at the fertility of Registered Indians aged 15 to 19 years. They find that the socioeconomic characteristics and conditions of women aged 25 to 29 who had children in their teenage years are lower than those of other women, and demonstrate that Registered Indians aged 15 to 19 have a fertility rate that is five to six times that of non-Aboriginals. Together, these articles have important policy considerations for the typically underrepresented and high-needs groups of Aboriginal single mothers and Registered Indian teenage mothers. Policy and programing needs may include housing, parenting support and education.

Clatworthy’s paper analyzes the serious issue of “unstated paternity,” in which the Registered Indian status of a child can be affected by the father not being named in the birth registration or Indian registration processes. Prior to 1985, children born to Indian women out of wedlock, or without stated paternity, were registered under the *Indian Act* pending a band protest. Under

the 1985 changes to the *Indian Act*, commonly referred to as Bill C-31, a child's Registered Indian status came to be based on that of his or her parents. Where the father's information is not known or made available, the Registered Indian status of the child is based solely on that of the mother. Clatworthy has discovered a high rate of unstated paternity that has a significant impact on national Registered Indian population projections. Clatworthy provides an analysis of contributing factors to the high rate of unstated paternity that have many practical policy implications.

The last section of the Volume II proceedings deals with crime, victimization and healing. We begin with the childhood experiences of Aboriginal offenders. Trevethan and Moore begin by noting that the disproportionate involvement of Aboriginal persons in the criminal justice system has been recognized for some time, but research has been lacking on the impact that childhood experiences have on criminal behaviour. They find that Aboriginal offenders have unstable childhood experiences, including a great deal of involvement in the child welfare system. However, it is unclear whether involvement in the child welfare system is the cause of the instability or the result of it. They draw many interesting policy conclusions, and argue for the importance of offering Aboriginal-specific programs in a correctional setting tailored to the unique developmental experiences of Aboriginal offenders. Programs, they propose, should focus more on the effects of childhood trauma and address issues associated with involvement in the child welfare system.

Corrado, Cohen and Cale look at the resources available to Aboriginal victims of crime in urban settings. High rates of victimization are reported by the team, who found that a large proportion of crimes are never reported to the authorities. They also discovered that large numbers of people who sought services from providers felt that they did not receive the services they needed. Those who did receive services, by and large, found those services to be satisfactory. Corrado et al. propose that better publicity, education (of men in particular) and improvement of screening procedures are necessary if victims are to be helped.

Concerns about high rates of sexual offending within some Aboriginal communities has been expressed for at least the past thirty years, particularly by a number of the leading national Aboriginal women's organizations. Hylton considers the available evidence about Aboriginal sexual offending, analyzes this evidence with respect to the prevalence of sexual offending in Aboriginal communities, considers gaps in available information and priorities for future research. He is quick to note that much of the available information about the prevalence of sexual offending in Aboriginal communities is anecdotal, but is able to pull together available data looking at summary statistics from police, corrections and other sources, case histories, the testimony of community leaders, grant proposals, briefs

prepared by Aboriginal organizations, and community case studies. He argues that the evidence shows substantially higher rates of violence and sexual offending in Aboriginal communities than for Canada as a whole, and calls for “a significant commitment to prevention, recovery and rehabilitation efforts.”

The paper by Ed Buller takes a systematic look at a holistic healing process in the Hollow Water community. He provides some useful guidelines for understanding holistic healing processes, and has undertaken a cost-benefit analysis for investments in these types of programs that deal with sexual offenders. Buller argues that the research has shown that community healing processes have the real potential to use traditional values, culture and spiritual practices to improve treatment for offenders, their victims, families and the community. Most significantly for policy implications, Buller found that the value to governments for the funds invested in community healing processes to be very high.

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.crimpa. 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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