

**Coming Full Circle:
Applying A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview in
Community-based Research**

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~Giving Back~

*We talk of giving back life to our mother earth
But a friend of mine
envisaged an old, frail and toothless woman
Who was so sick, she could receive no more...
I thought it was so true
Then I see our children... so tender... so young but
so strong and full of hope,
I know the only hope lies in our ability
To teach them how to give
Give from the heart, with love from the soul
Only then will mother earth be saved
For this out generation will never be able to do
We... have never learned how to be generous
Society has taught us only
Of how to become maestros in the
Art of unquenchable wanting.*

~Chandra Kirana (Meyer & Moosang (Eds) 1992: 54)

Introduction

The ever-expanding, alarming rate of damage to the planet by humans is disconcerting to say the least. However, aside from political or economic factors, as individuals, how we tread on the earth, depends largely on our personal interpretation of the world from a young age. If we are fortunate to be raised by a community or within a cultural context where principles of respect for all of the earth's inhabitants is fostered, our outlook will more likely embrace approaches to sustainability, environmental safeguards and species protection.

As part of a university field course¹, I had the opportunity to visit the area of Clayoquot Sound situated on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. During explorations of the area and through meetings with a variety of community presenters, I was introduced to a valuable belief system of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations². At the core of their traditional world view, through the telling of origin stories to their young and practice of traditional ways of life, the Nuu-chah-nulth people believe that the "basic character of creation is a unity expressed as *heshook-ish tsawalk...*" meaning everything is one or everything is connected (Atleo 2004:

¹ ES 481A: Community-based Research in Clayoquot Sound. Summer Session 2005. School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria.

² The territory of the Nuu-chah-nulth stretches from Kyuquot to Port Renfrew, along the west coast of Vancouver Island (also referred to Clayoquot Sound) in British Columbia (Clayoquot Alliance for Research, Education and Training 2003). This area has been home to the Nuu-chah-nulth for millennia.

117)³. Used as a guiding principle, the application of this worldview by the Nuu-chah-nulth contributes to a lifestyle that recognizes the need to respect the earth. Furthermore, their understanding that everything is interconnected, aids in bonding a fragile ecosystem with humans by recognizing that everything is one.

After completion of my course field trip to Clayoquot Sound, my interest was sparked to further understand how the principles of *heshook-ish tsawalk* could apply to my own life. Through understanding the interconnectivity of all things, I believe a higher level of appreciation of the earth occurs, which includes recognizing the importance of stewardship and the right for all of the earth's inhabitants to co-exist. One purpose of this paper is to compare my theoretical understanding of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* as a Nuu-chah-nulth concept with my own observations and lived experiences, specifically during the field portion of the course when I felt principles of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* were particularly evident.

Similar to the Nuu-chah-nulth people, my own ancestral links have deep roots to valuing land, not for real estate purposes, but for the sustainability of life and community. Some aspects of my Doukhobor heritage, such as the storytelling, the valuing of ritual, and cultural traditions, equip me with a deep receptivity to the mention of *heeshook-ish tsawalk*. While I feel that applying a view of interconnectivity is important for individual growth and awareness, allowing it space in a broader context could also prove useful. More specifically, I think academic researchers whose work involves communities would benefit by understanding and applying *heeshook-ish tsawalk* as a concept in their work at both theoretical and practical levels. A second objective of this paper is to examine and discuss what it would mean to incorporate *heeshook-ish tsawalk* as a guiding principle within community-based research (CBR) generally, and specifically within the subtype of participatory research.

Demystifying *Heeshook-ish tsawalk*

My process of understanding the concept of *heshook-ish tsawalk* from the Nuu-chah-nulth perspective has led me into much mystification, as well as the 'awe' phenomena. While on some occasions I am convinced that I have begun to grasp the concept, other times I am left feeling bewildered and overwhelmed at a seemingly simple notion. In turn, I am learning that *heshook-ish tsawalk*, is far from a straightforward theory. As Richard Atleo explains in *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (2004), the Nuu-chah-nulth understand and apply the philosophy through origin stories and traditional ways of life and experiences. The indication is "the basic character of creation is a unity expressed as *heshook-ish tsawalk* (everything is one)...[however] this unity of existence does not mean that individuals are denied a separate existence; on the contrary, individualism is a very strong value" (Atleo 2004: 117). Atleo further elaborates by explaining that the concept comes from principles that were "first laid out in the original design of creation... [the belief of] the Creator and creation as one" (Atleo 2004: 117). This theory then, having origins since the beginning of time, explains that while the 'Creator' and what was 'created' is interconnected, individuality or 'biodiversity' (as Atleo refers to these), need be both recognized and celebrated. *Heshook-ish tsawalk* also perceives an ideology that is inclusive of both physical and metaphysical reality (Atleo 2004). This reality is explained further in Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories where both physical and spiritual entities are interconnected. Unlike some other Indigenous myths or legends, Nuu-chah-nulth stories do not only focus on personalities such as characteristics of Son of Raven being greedy or envious. Rather, the focus is on the larger premise of life itself, such as "who owns the light or day...[or]

³ The spelling of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* has many variations. Within the context of this discussion, the term will be grammatically presented in accordance with the spelling preferred by Richard Atleo in "Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview".

did someone transform the original beings into the life forms that are currently described as comprising biodiversity?” (Atleo 2004: 4). While incorporating *heshook-ish tsawalk*, Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories answer these and other questions and “consequently provide an orientation to life and reality that, prior to the onset of colonialism, allowed the Nuu-chah-nulth to manage their lives and communities for millennia” (Atleo 2004: 5).

An example of the values that can be drawn from Nuu-chah-nulth legends is in the story of ‘How Son of Raven Captured the Day’⁴. After many failed attempts of Raven attempting to become Eagle, the main message relates to one not trying to become someone else. Furthermore, emphasis is put on the community at large to help Raven with the task at hand. Within this context, stress is put on a strong work ethic, perseverance, and endurance of all community members. Furthermore, through cooperation of community, the founding, creating, and maintaining of relationships are seen as necessary. Other important values within the story support patience, kindness, a desire for greatness, and the relational value of being helpful to the common good (Atleo 2004). Within Nuu-chah-nulth tradition, the family teaching of being helpful (known as *hupee-ee-aulth*) relates to cooperating with the original design of creation, which depicts ethics of oneness, interrelationality, and interconnectivity (Atleo 2004). What can be extracted from this anecdote, as well as other Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories, is the message of community acting as a whole to meet specific objectives and to complete the tasks at hand.

Relating to the Personal

This mere glimpse into the interpretation of one of many Nuu-chah-nulth stories is intended to better explain the concept of *heshook-ish tsawalk*. From a personal perspective, embracing a model of dualism, i.e., separation of spirit from matter, competition of the strongest from weakest, and/or conquering the world from a human perspective that sees separation from the spiritual and physical world, is not compatible with either my worldview or the process I follow in my day-to-day life. On the contrary, my view is that the natural world is interconnected and interrelated, and that there is less competition and more cooperation between the variety of forces. I see the unified voice of interconnectivity consisting of generosity, compassion, and sacredness as the qualities that weave together society, individuals, community, and relationships.

Although I had already adopted a somewhat similar belief system to *heeshook-ish tsawalk* in my own life, I was first introduced to the concept as a fundamental Nuu-chah-nulth principle on the first day of class in May 2005. The discourse involved a discussion about the relationship between academe and community with respect to conducting research. The concept of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* was emphasized as a guiding principle within the *Standard of Conduct for Research in Northern Barkley and Clayoquot Sound Communities* (CLARET 2003). Studying this document, which outlines to researchers certain guidelines to be observed when undertaking research in the Northern Barkley and Clayoquot Sound region, further advanced my understanding of *heeshook-ish tsawalk*. Within the guidelines, it is recognized that activities need to be conceived and carried out in ways that show “respect for the well-being and interconnectedness of individuals, communities and ecosystems” (CLARET 2003: 4).

Further contextualization of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* occurred during the course field trip. A defining moment was when the group was led by Hesquiaht elder Steve Charleson, facilitator of Hooksum Outdoor Camp, to observe the unusual sight of a sea lion stranded on the beach.

⁴ The stories selected in *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* by Richard Atleo were collected in their original Nuu-chah-nulth language in the home of the authors Grandmother, Margaret Atleo, in 1972. Please refer to the text for the selected volume of origin stories, as well as their interpretation.

While many of the students expressed a desire to rescue or otherwise help the mammal, Steve advised us that this was a phenomena of nature, and that human intervention would ultimately be a violation of those forces that are interacting to either prevent the sea lion from escaping from its resting area on the sand, or assist in its escape. At that moment, I was overcome by strong emotions of sadness and helplessness for this creature; when in fact I needed to remind myself that in due course, the influence of tidal elements would resolve the situation, as opposed to human intervention, manipulation, or control. By recognizing the natural forces at work and the interconnectedness of these, I needed to trust that the necessary outcome regarding the fate of the seal would occur, even if that meant its demise.

Another opportunity arose for me to identify with *heeshook-ish tsawalk* during the frequent walks through the temperate coastal rainforest when I discovered a phenomena previously unknown to me - the lush undergrowth of species diversity, which thrives in old growth forests. In this environment, interdependency of life forms was profound. My experience went beyond the sensory of mere sight and smell, and into the spiritual. For example, the rain that fed the forest, nurtured the entire ecosystem, filled the streams, and allowed for a natural habitat to flourish. These and similar experiences throughout the field course, helped me grasp the concept of *heeshook-ish tsawalk* in a tangible way, granting me deeper familiarity with it.

My thinking and learning style during this 'out of classroom' experience was non-linear, but rather of an expansive and fluid nature, embodying a different kind of respect for time and space. A key characteristic of the field component of the course was the evolution of community whereby the students, educators, and facilitators all became one interconnected community. On one occasion, during time of reflection in my field journal, I began to draw a web. The web titled 'Clayoquot Sound Class Trip 2005' included terms such as:

exhilarating, calming, sacred, appreciating, awakening, community, sharing, unknowns, connection, laughter, tears, quiet, peaceful, giving thanks, Nuu-chah-nulth, Hooksum, ecosystems, nature, amphibians, cedar, water, river, tree, forest floor, biological storehouse, ocean, rain, sun, old growth, wildlife, secondary growth, listening, interconnectivity, one world, *heeshook-ish tsawalk*, logging, damage, bond etc.

A second web included thoughts on participatory research as a specific form of CBR, which was the topic of the course. This web included concepts such as:

adaptive, working together, partnership, understanding, experts, professionals, research, goals, loaded, connection, learning, wants, desires, outcomes, expectation, role of researcher, role of community, hierarchical, participants, problem solving, unity, resolution, listening, interconnectivity, *heeshook-ish tsawalk*, who/what is community, cultural beliefs, dynamic, differences, connection, imposition, time-lines, expectation, resources (lack of or availability to), politics, economics, access, privilege, commonalities etc.

After drafting the web threads, I became more aware of how many experiences and emotions that occurred on the trip were all connected and affected by one another. I also became more aware of how relevant the theme of interconnectivity was to researchers whose work is geographically situated, for example in a place such as Clayoquot Sound. Whether or not the research topic directly involves people living in the region (but especially if it does), it seems that they and the non-human communities that reside there will ultimately be affected in small or

large ways by the research process and outcomes. The *Standard of Conduct for Research* (CLARET 2003) makes sense conceptually – that is, research in Clayoquot Sound ought to be premised on “respect for the well-being and interconnectedness of individuals, communities and ecosystems”. But how is this accomplished in practice, especially by a researcher who comes from elsewhere, i.e., a different place, a different culture, and is driven by a different timeline and set of values? In the next section I explore the idea of incorporating *heeshook-ish tswalk* as a guiding principle within CBR.

***Heeshook-ish tswalk* within Community-based Participatory Research**

CBR can be viewed as an overarching term that encompasses a “spectrum of research that actively engages community members or groups to various degrees, ranging from community participation to community initiation and control of research” (Bannister 2005). One subtype of CBR is “participatory research”, defined as a process, which recognizes a reciprocal educational collaboration between researchers and the community that occurs from the beginning stages of identifying the problem to applying and disseminating results (Green et al. 1997). As a more defined type of CBR, the ultimate goal of participatory research according to the authors is to “link the processes of research, by which data are systematically collected and analyzed, with the purpose of taking action or affecting social change” (Green et al. 1997: 53). Furthermore, the authors discuss that this goal is achieved by involving people within the community who desire to change either health and/or living conditions as well as researchers who recognize the need to further develop this knowledge (Green et al. 1997).

My own understanding can further elaborate these definitions. Before the field experience, my knowledge of CBR and participatory research (while somewhat limited) was to take into consideration the need to carry out all activities with respect, both from the researchers as well as community members. The field component of this course allowed me to directly meet several individuals living in areas in Clayoquot Sound. Exposure and interaction with these people broadened my knowledge by recognizing the intricacies that are involved in CBR. For example, I became aware of stark differences that exist with members of a given community. What I witnessed is that it is easy to take for granted or overlook the diversity and range of opinions within a community. With this in mind, I realize that many challenges exist in finding approaches to resolve different disputes that may arise during research, but may or may not be related to the research itself.

As previously mentioned, Green et al. (1997) note that community members involved in CBR and participatory research should be those who have an interest in changing the health and/or living conditions of a community. Personally, however, I feel that it is not enough to simply involve those who are interested. This approach would encourage or single out certain individuals who are knowledgeable on certain subjects or who have extensive information regarding the community and its needs, but by singling out certain members to participate, it seems that broad based representation would be absent. I realize, however, that it is not always the case that broad based participation is possible for political or practical reasons, and it may not even be desirable in all research projects, for example on topics that require specialist knowledge. Furthermore, because research projects may have limited funding and tight time lines, it is often not within the scope of the project to include all individuals within a community into the process.

Certainly, when research is being conducted in the area, a First Nations perspective is critical, since approximately half of the population of the Clayoquot Sound region is made up of people of First Nations descent (Dobell and Bunton 2001). Due to the fragile ecosystem and old growth forests of Clayoquot Sound, a history of political confrontation has existed between community

members including First Nations and logging companies. On one hand, the logging companies see a huge price tag attached to the existing forests, and on the flip side, many in the community recognize the need to preserve the area both for historical and modern cultural purposes. In *Living on the Edge: Nuu-Chah-Nulth History from an Ahousaht Chief's Perspective*, Chief Earl Maquinna George notes, "still today, material is being taken from us under a variety of disguises and is used against the people" (Maquinna George 2003: 38). According to the author, a study that involved ethnographic work at the behest of a multinational forestry company could in the end, work against his people's treaty negotiations, which he notes, "is no better than the rest of the incomplete story compiled by outsiders" (Maquinna George 2003: 39). He feels that the shortcoming is in part due to documentation by outsiders serving purposes for the orderliness of western culture, which clearly does not represent Nuu-chah-nulth ways of knowledge (Maquinna George 2003). The "orderliness of western culture" that the author is referring to clearly does not take into consideration the ethic of *heshook-ish tsawalk*. If researchers began to more readily grasp this concept, I feel that more projects could end in a win-win. If research more often considered all things as interconnected, perhaps results would be more equally beneficial. The more I grasp the idea of participatory research, the more I see the underlying philosophy as an attempt to be inclusive of interconnectivity. But I still question how well the practice – the research process – attains this ideal.

Some social scientists would consider Paolo Friere, and his work in literacy and empowerment in Chile and Brazil in the 1970's, as the father of participatory research. Friere sees participatory research as the panacea for working with "traditionally disadvantaged people and social movements..." (Green et al. 1997: 55). Key to its popularity, is this application of the participatory research process to under-represented populations. Among its prominent features is the goal of transforming the political and social realities or inequities of a given population (Green et al. 1997). While not always explicitly stated, the application of *heshook-ish tsawalk* into these research processes is naturally occurring to some degree. Community-based participatory research as observed by Bopp and Bopp (1985) and cited by Cree/Metis researcher Verna St. Denis (1992: 57), can "help created a mirror by which a community can see its own eyes, that is, its own wisdom and knowledge". By incorporating this self-growth process of communities into the process of community-based participatory research, the potential of seeing all things interwoven is enabled.

Still there are gaps apparent, especially in cross-cultural research contexts. With reference to First Nations, researchers have, as Maquinna George (2003) observes, used his people as the objects of research to the utmost limits. Thus while CBR and participatory research are well intentioned, their methodologies may fall short of the approach necessary to achieve the goals of empowering marginalized communities and transforming social inequities. Understanding *heshook-ish tsawalk* in a research context involves the awareness that many First Nations people are scarred and deeply impacted by the colonial forces that they had to endure. Overcoming these forms of inequity is not likely even possible through research. While it is essential to encompass in the research process some fundamental values that are held in common with First Nations cultures, such as "developing mutual trust and acceptance..." and "shared responsibilities..." (Green et al. 1997: 59), it is also critical to ensure sensitivity to and compatibility with First Nations belief systems. As Hesquiaht elder Steven Charleson explained to our class, it is not always appropriate in First Nations cultures to ask questions. In other words, the "art of unquenchable wanting" (Kirana 1992: 54) can be taken as a form of disrespect.

In "Citizens, Experts and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge", the author sees participatory research as "geared to fostering individuality and community empowerment,

motivation, and solidarity” (Fischer 2000:181). These constructs however, have more to do with mainstream, social, political, and economic contexts, than with First Nations belief systems of interconnectivity. At the core of the concept *heshook-ish tsawalk* is the understanding and valuing of realities, objects, situations just as they are or just how they exist. For example in my web threads: ecosystem, old growth, rain, ocean (etc.) all offer images of perfection through interconnectedness. The beauty of *heshook-ish tsawalk* then, as was seen in the previously mentioned example of the stranded sea lion, demonstrates the importance of leaving control of a situation to its own destiny within its own capabilities of reaching conclusion. At first glance, this appears to challenge a fundamental tenet of participatory research - the action that is supposed to stem from the research. Should an action-based solution to the sea lion have been initiated, the outcome very likely could have created a dependency, not unlike the experience of First Nations with the onset of colonization. Implementing *heshook-ish tsawalk* in participatory research requires the possibility that action may sometimes constitute informed and respectful inaction.

Perhaps it is the *research* aspect of CBR or participatory research, at least as practiced by university researchers, from which the main challenges stem. Research, as a systematic way of gathering information to answer a question or solve a problem, requires standardized methodologies, measurable indicators of success, and contributions to the wider body of knowledge (i.e., usually measured by publications). Researchers usually seek to control variables in order to define a research question and answer it conclusively. University research tends to adhere to fixed timelines and budgets. Applying *heshook-ish tsawalk* – acknowledging the interconnectivity of all things - raises problems for all of these fundamental elements of research, for example, by increasing the complexity of the system in which research takes place, and adding indeterminate time and budgetary considerations.

Ideally, CBR and participatory projects would occur with an understanding of problem solving at the core, as well as an understanding of interconnectivity, especially within sociopolitical and biophysical realms. Fisher (2000) approaches this notion in proposing that through participatory research individuals could “codify into symbols an integrated picture or story of reality, that in the course of its development, can generate a critical consciousness capable of empowering them to alter their relations to both the physical and the social worlds” (Fischer 2000: 186). In CBR, generally and especially in First Nations communities, research problems must be seen within a broad framework - social, political, cultural and physical - because everything is connected to everything else. While recognized as a necessary component of research, isolating certain aspects of community to focus on these for study, even if participatory approaches are employed, separates the part from the whole. This component of research, then, is only half the challenge of researchers. The other half is assessing and understanding the results of research, including its impacts, within the context of the whole, i.e., within the interconnectedness of the system from which it came.

Conclusion

Heshook-ish Tsawalk, while a seemingly simple concept, requires a level of understanding that much of society has yet to grasp. Applications of this Nuu-chah-nulth worldview in research have the potential to raise the validity and relevance of research processes and outcomes, but applications must occur with a sensitive awareness of the origins and cultural context of the term. However, the historical experiences of First Nations people and marginalization through colonialism present significant challenges in applying *heshook-ish tsawalk* to community-based participatory research, from building the necessary foundations of trust at the onset to acting on the results when research is complete. There must not be an assumption that action-based solutions are the appropriate response to problems. Problem-solving works best when it begins

with the direct experience of the people involved and embraces traditional values such as *heshook-ish tsawalk*. Personal stories, narration, sacred rituals and oral history have a critical role in identifying and empowering community voices, and documenting interconnectivity. Constructing a web maybe a useful tool to illustrate the connections. Web drawing can start by participants representing their own story, determining what symbols to represent that story, and to show where the interconnectedness lies, and where there are broken lines. By these means, people will be granted respect for their own experience as well as contribute to an understanding of their community's needs. CBR, especially among First Nations, involves a complexity of factors, not the least of which is understanding, respecting and being guided by local values in the research process, such as the concept of *heshook-ish tsawalk*.

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