Decolonizing HIV Research Using Arts-Based Methods: What Aboriginal Youth in Canada Had to Say

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BACKGROUND:
Members of Aboriginal communities are overrepresented in Canadian HIV/AIDS statistics, with an infection rate of nearly three times that of non-Aboriginal people. One explanation for the elevated prevalence of HIV/AIDS within Aboriginal communities is that the ongoing systemic colonial oppression faced by indigenous populations propogates conditions of risk. Many of the conventional HIV prevention strategies that focus solely on an individual behaviour, and fail to take these legacies into account, have proven ineffective. Furthermore, historical abuses conducted in the name of science have left many communities wary of researchers. Many Aboriginal youth communities are calling for the creative use of media and technology to assist with cultural preservation and knowledge exchange. Disseminating HIV information in creative ways has been shown to engage and mobilize Aboriginal communities in strategies for prevention in other contexts. This process of reclamation of identity and of history prompts Tuhwai-Smith to expose art as research methods that help to decolonize traditional academic research and discourse.

METHODS:
“Taking Action: Using Arts-Based Approaches to Develop Aboriginal Youth Leadership in HIV Prevention” is a community-based research project examining how Aboriginal youth understand the links between individual HIV risk and structural inequalities (such as colonization). A participatory research design using arts-based approaches (e.g., photography, theatre, painting, hip-hop) was adopted in six Aboriginal communities. Data were collected through the creation of artistic cultural productions during weekend-long workshops, intake surveys and indepth follow-up interviews. Youth were also asked to reflect on the efficacy of these approaches. In total, over 100 youth have participated. Analyses have been conducted collaboratively.

RESULTS:
Youth involved identified that both the process and product of arts-based methods were important.

THE PROCESS OF MAKING ART
Fun
“Because it’s fun and it teaches you stuff and that’s what kids like doing, like, to get active and art kind of stuff.”
Participatory
“Like more group activities, instead of like sitting there and listening because I have trouble with that sometimes.”
Empowering
“Rather than being told what to do... We don’t just worry about it, we get up and do it.”
Builds pride and esteem
“We should play our movie in every reservation in Canada and North America if you can... Basically worldwide or nationally... Because we are natives and we stand strong to our pride.”
Learn about culture
“Because people will be like I wish I could remember my culture and then start like going out with friend and family hunting and stuff and it will cut down on drinking and all that a little bit and then they will be like just yeah.”
Healing / Transformative
“Yes, because it is hard for me knowing that my dad is and I don’t really know how to cope with the fact that he is going to go and even just getting the family mentally prepared for the loss, because I know it is going to be hard when my dad hits the hospital stage.”
Learning skills
“It was the first time I handled camera equipment and I am pretty interested in it.”
Enhances Recall
“You talk so much you don’t really remember, but if you do art you are going to remember it.”
Help talk about hard things:
“Well I think that is the most important starting point to talk about safe sex, so it is a condom and he is smiling and he is like yay! I am a condom, so sex, no HIV, well that’s the point of HIV prevention, so I think that was my favourite and I remember the guy who did the motorcycle one and explaining it, HIV, AIDS, rides you don’t want to take, it is really cool too.”
Different types of art engages different youth:
“Yeah, some people might not like any certain kind of art, like music, and you know, someone may like music a lot but don’t like painting. Somebody likes painting. You can get something for everybody. And I know a lot of kids like art and stuff because it is fun.”

THE PRODUCTS
Pride about art
“Yeah, because everyone is like really proud and happy for us and brought more people together to see it and yeah.”
Communicates and transmits information
“Art is always good because people do respond better to visual things and I know a lot of people don’t like to read, ... when you see an image that just strikes you I’m sure everyone has had this experience and last once it just makes you think about something”
Raises awareness
“Because some people don’t know that’s it’s safe to be around them and it’s okay to do the things you did before with them before you knew they had it. They are the same.”
Conveys emotion
“I think it was a lot of people were generally touched by it. I saw some people crying.”
Product can be something tangible and long lasting
“Maybe just like one day like copy to every town and then they can use [the video] wherever they want to. Like if they want to like professionals, here can use it in their own workshops and if they want like professionals like you guys come in then they can call you guys in and you guys can do some workshop and presentations. Just more education and they can talk a lot about it because the video is a short one.”

BRIDGES & CHALLENGES culture
“I think youth definitely pay attention to art and it is something that can bridge the gap.”

In many ways, both the experience of the process and product are linked:
“Of course! Because everyone is involved with art and music, everyone loves any kind of art, so I really think people like doing it, like making it and people like watching it and getting involved and when like an art show, I really think um getting the message across through art is good because everyone loves art, you know and everyone is going to see it somehow or watch it somehow, so I think it is good, it is a good way to get the message across.”

CONCLUSION:
Our findings support the notion that arts-based approaches to the development of HIV prevention knowledge and Aboriginal youth leadership are working. As an innovative tool that involves youth “where they are at,” it also embeds cultural understandings of health in b/youth, for-youth prevention and policy efforts. Art is “living water” and decolonizing this is how it is, but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) could become. “Decolonizing the research process means creating spaces that are open to diversity. Anti-racist approaches represent one way to assist with decolonizing the research process, moving forward the agenda of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAC).