

Addressing Health Concerns of Indigenous Land Defenders at Fairy Creek

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Sandie Dielissen in the department of Indigenous Studies for INDG 301W D100: Issues in Applied Indigenous Studies Research. The assignment asked students to explore a decolonizing methodology for a contemporary issue involving Indigenous peoples. The paper was a part of a group submission, where students from different academic backgrounds commented on the situation at Fairy Creek using their own disciplinary lens. The paper uses APA citation style.

Addressing Health Concerns of Indigenous Land Defenders at Fairy Creek

Within Canada's settler colonial structure, Indigenous bodies have been mistreated and continue to endure violence today. Mohawk anthropologist and scholar, Audra Simpson (2014) points out in her address titled "The Chief's Two Bodies" that colonizers see Indigenous bodies as a threat to settler sovereignty. This perceived threat is evident today through RCMP violence at the Fairy Creek blockades. The RCMP's violence has damaging effects on Indigenous land defenders, both observable on the body (physical) and unobservable (mental, emotional, and spiritual). Indigenous land defenders have resisted the colonial structure using their physical bodies in performative action, specifically in blockades. However, when these embodied actions are met with force from the settler state, they are often at the cost of physical and mental health. This paper will first address the disproportionate violence that Indigenous land defenders endure in comparison with non-Indigenous land defenders. Secondly, from the perspective of Indigenous land defenders, it will explore how physical and mental health impacts are interrelated. It will emphasize that it is equally important for non-Indigenous land defenders to become aware of health impacts to decolonize

their perspectives and support Indigenous land defenders on site. The final part of this section will make a recommendation for use of Body Map Storytelling (BMST) as a decolonizing methodology and tool for Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek. To prioritize wellbeing and benefit the community at Fairy Creek, BMST will be discussed in terms of the benefits it could provide for the community (Younging, 2018).

Physical Health Impacts

There are two areas of concern regarding the physical health of Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek. First, it is evident that the RCMP relies on increasingly forceful and violent tactics to confront defenders at blockade sites. Kwitsel Tatel of the Stó:lō Nation described her experience at Camp Cloud, while defending against the Trans Mountain Pipeline:

“[The RCMP] extracted us brutally. My right neck, my feet are still sore. The middle part of my back, my shoulder from them not letting me walk through the door, but pulling me and jamming me, pushing and pulling. There were four men on me immediately. Men, manhandling me with their hands ready to pull their guns out...” (Simpson, & Le Billon, 2021, p. 114).

Kwitsel Tatel’s encounter with the RCMP is like many accounts from Indigenous land defenders at blockade sites. The BC Supreme Court also exposed the RCMP’s violence when Justice Douglas Thompson asked officers to “lessen their tactics” at Fairy Creek (Hunter, 2021). Justice Thompson saw little change in the RCMP’s approach, resulting in the recent injunction lift this past September (Hunter, 2021).

A second concern is the disproportionate violence against Indigenous land defenders when compared with non-Indigenous land defenders. An anonymous defender at Fairy Creek reported this difference when explaining that Elizabeth May, former leader of the Green Party, was arrested respectfully, handled gently, and walked back slowly to the police car (Simpson, & Le Billon, 2021). Crystal AJ Smith, Tsimshian and Haisla woman, and land defender at Camp Cloud, commented on this contrast:

“It is here that we see the difference between Indigenous bodies and non-Indigenous bodies. It is here that we see the difference of attitude that the RCMP have. It is a reflection of the attitude that Canada has” (Simpson, & Le Billon, 2021, p. 115).

Land defenders at Fairy Creek have frequently reported and taken video footage of RCMP violence targeted towards Indigenous peoples. Moreover, statistics support disproportionate violence: Between 2007 and 2017, Indigenous

peoples represented one third of RCMP-involved deaths (Mercer et al., 2020, as cited in Stelkia, 2020). Firsthand accounts, recent rulings, and data collection all reveal the negative physical health impacts that Indigenous land defenders endure at high rates because of the RCMP's and settler state's disregard for their wellbeing.

Mental Health Impacts

In addition to physical harm, it is also important to examine mental health impacts on Indigenous land defenders. X^w is x^w čaa (Kati George-Jim), RFS spokesperson, member of the Pacheedaht First Nation, and Indigenous land defender at Fairy Creek, acknowledges the relationship between physical and mental health and introduces a third variable: *"Violence against the land is definitely connected to the violence against Indigenous people. So, until both of those things stop, we won't be able to have a future that we're all looking forward to"* (Baker, 2021, p. 2).

X^w is x^w čaa emphasizes the inextricable connection between what is done to the body, mind, and land. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, (2017) importantly states that this relationship is "housed within Indigenous bodies" and therefore attaches their bodies to the land (p. 42). When applying this framework to the unfolding situation at Fairy Creek, it is evident that health impacts extend far beyond the physical. The following recommended methodology is a holistic approach with the goal of acknowledging the health of the body, mind, and land.

Body Map Storytelling

General Method

When researching the health concerns of Indigenous land defenders, it became evident that the wellbeing of defenders should be prioritized. Therefore, I examined an art-based, decolonizing methodology titled Body Map Storytelling (BMST). With adjustments, review, and discussion among the community at Fairy Creek, it could serve as a helpful healing, research, and advocacy tool (Solomon, 2002). Gastaldo et al. (2012) define body mapping as "the process of creating body-maps using drawing, painting, or other art-based techniques to visually represent aspects of people's lives, their bodies and the world they live in" (p. 5). In the past, BMST has been used in the medical field and with marginalized groups, such as women with HIV/AIDS, youth, and undocumented workers (Gastaldo et al., 2012; Lys, 2018). Participants usually begin by tracing an outline of the "self" on paper and then are asked to make markings, draw, paint or attach

images (Gastaldo et al., 2012). Sometimes, a series of questions from a researcher are given to guide this process. For example, “Where do you feel pain?” or “Where do you feel empowered?”. Afterwards, participants might be asked to provide a brief narrative or “testimonio” about who they are and what they think is important about their body map (Gastaldo et al., 2012, p. 17).

BMST as a Decolonizing Methodology

Sweet & Escalante (2017) used BMST in their study examining gender violence among Mexican women in South America and the United States. Researchers identified a term used by Indigenous women in Latin America, “territorio cuerpo-tierra,” meaning “landscape of bodies-lands” (p. 594). The term erases the Western notion that bodies can be separated from land or contained in “public” and “private” spaces (p. 594). At Fairy Creek, this framework exposes the RCMP’s forcefulness as a perpetuation of the colonial belief that bodies can simply be moved, removed, or separated from the land. Furthermore, the term demonstrates that Indigenous land defenders’ direct action is not just effective in “covering ground” and restricting companies from encroaching but is a reclamation of the inseparable relationship between body, mind, and land. BMST may be advantageous for Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek over other wellbeing initiatives because its decolonizing approach recognizes this relationship and provides space for resistance, transformation, and self-determination.

Resistance and Healing

Through the storytelling process, BMST prioritizes individual healing by placing participants’ voices at the centre, effectively resisting colonial narratives. Dr. Sarah Hunt, in “Violence, Colonialism, and Space: Towards a Decolonizing Dialogue” addresses a question about how certain kinds of violence, like the actions of the RCMP, become “invisible” and “natural” (p. 549). She states that Indigenous peoples’ bodies have become “sites of naturalized violence” and spaces like blockade sites at Fairy Creek have become “spaces of expected violence” (p. 550). Through participant storytelling, BMST resists the colonial narrative of the RCMP’s “natural” violence and centers the experiences of Indigenous land defenders instead. Sweet & Escalante (2017) noted that social constructions of women’s and marginalized bodies do not acknowledge their agency (p. 1830). BMST might provide a space where Indigenous land defenders can be the “protagonist” in their own stories. Rather than focusing on the violent actions of the RCMP, BMST provides the participant with the agency to express whatever

sensations, feelings, and, and stories they want within their own body. The methodology resists what Tuck & Yang (2014) identify as damage-centered research. The purpose is not to convince others that Indigenous land defenders are being harmed (Tuck & Yang, 2014). BMST would instead allow Indigenous land defenders to express experiences outside of typical colonial narratives reported in the news and media.

Transformation and Data Collection

BMST has the potential to be individually transformative, as Indigenous land defenders convert experiences into a visual medium. Sweet & Escalante (2017) also found that the methodology was collectively transformative; it allowed participants to identify and relate to each other's experiences of hurt and empowerment in specific parts of the body. They acknowledged both trauma and strength by sharing bodily experiences. Solomon (2002) suggests that the drawings and paintings on the map alone are data, but interviews and written narratives can provide additional qualitative data when common themes or experiences are gathered. This form of data collection may be a helpful research tool at Fairy Creek to understand the larger, collective experience of Indigenous land defenders. Among collective transformation, Sweet & Escalante (2017) also found that BMST provided a platform for intra-community advocacy and mobilization.

Self-Determination and Community Advocacy

To move away from a Western framework of healing, where the researcher or therapist is the "expert" healer, BMST should be a process led by and for Indigenous peoples. A self-determining methodology would ensure that the consent, process, and sharing of results is conducted in an appropriate and respectful way, considering the protocols at Fairy Creek. Land defending is already in itself a self-determining action. However, a benefit of BMST is that data could be collected within the community, rather than having outsiders conduct research. When participants were in control of the process, BMST was shown to aid in community mobilization and advocacy (Sweet & Escalante, 2017). Although Fairy Creek land defenders are already speaking out about experiences with the RCMP, data from BMST could provide supplementary evidence, not to convince others of the present violence but to expose the RCMP's unjust treatment and to call upon the government to act now. For example, Solomon (2002) notes that publication of body maps in books, on websites, or at events can display participants' health concerns in a concrete and accessible way.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Consent

Before BMST is implemented at Fairy Creek, discussion would need to take place among the community about ethical considerations. First, thorough consent is needed among all members. Consent would abide by protocols specific to the Pacheedaht Nation and community at Fairy Creek. For example, outsiders, including researchers, should state their intentions before entering the camp, including estimated duration of stay and potential benefits of BMST for Indigenous land defenders.

Future Use of Body Maps

As part of the self-determination process, participants would make decisions about use of body maps. They could be securely stored for future reference of Indigenous land defenders, shared with community members, or destroyed completely for confidentiality purposes. If participants decided to share the body maps with a larger population, or with the public, anonymity of participants should also be ensured. Ultimately, Indigenous land defenders would make all decisions about dissemination of results and the extent to which the body maps will be used after the research is completed.

Mental Health Supports

Additionally, counselling and mental health supports should be in place before beginning the process, as BMST can be emotionally demanding and triggering. Participants would have the choice to withdraw at any time. Regardless, a trained and trauma-informed expert should be present to ensure wellbeing of participants. BMST is a continual healing and transformative process. Therefore, mental health supports should continue to be available after research is completed, as participants might continue to reflect on their experiences in the future.

Researcher Influence

Finally, researcher or facilitator influence should be considered throughout. In an Indigenist paradigm, Dr. Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999) states that Indigenous peoples should be in the centre of the research process because they understand the struggles of their own people. This framework would be extremely important to implement in the case of BMST, as an Indigenous facilitator in relationship with the community at Fairy Creek would better understand the past and present experiences of Indigenous land defenders.

Conclusion and Benefits

BMST can be easily adapted and altered to best suit the needs and health concerns of Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek. Inclusion of protocols, ceremonies, and ways of being, doing, and knowing specific to the Pacheedaht Nation should be further explored before implementation. Based on similar results from past use, BMST could benefit Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek in the following ways: (1) Provide a space for healing and humanization by resisting typical colonial narratives, (2) Strengthen understanding of the collective experience of defenders at Fairy creek, and (3) Inform public and non-Indigenous land defenders about health concerns from an Indigenous perspective. Not only does BMST prioritize physical and mental wellbeing of Indigenous land defenders, but it has the potential to create both individual expression and social change (Flicker et al., 2014). As conflicts continue today, BMST may be particularly beneficial to Indigenous land defenders at Fairy Creek for individual healing from violence and for countering the colonial narrative of the RCMP's "expected" violence.

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