

Communication for Public Decision-Making in a Negative Historical Context: Building Intercultural Relationships in the British Columbia Treaty Process

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Encouraging involvement in local, regional and national communities in order to develop a healthy democracy is a laudable goal for society. However, culturally marginalized groups that have been historically excluded from such participation, and who utilize communication patterns that differ from the dominant culture, cannot take all the responsibility for becoming engaged. The aboriginal peoples of North America are one such marginalized cultural group. Utilizing data from the current British Columbia treaty process, this study posits communication structures, attitudes, and behaviors that dominant culture groups must adopt in order to build positive long-term relationships for public engagement with historically marginalized cultural groups.

Keywords: Canada; Native American; First Nation; Community Development; Civic Participation

When everything was clear and put on the table, everyone walked away a winner—but you had to be at that table. (Chief Gibby Jacob, Chief of Squamish Nation, The New Relationship Conference)¹

Being “at the table” is an elusive concept for marginalized cultural groups in the context of North American public decision-making. Participation of Native American/First Nation communities in societal decisions (as in the case of the

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Squamish Nation noted above) is only one example of where marginalized community members have not been listened to, or their concerns acted upon.²

With the principles of a democratic society in mind, all citizens need to be involved in making decisions for the public good. Cultural ways of being, as well as histories of negative interactions, act as barriers that hold people back from participating in public decision-making. The manner in which people feel comfortable communicating, coupled with perceptions of whether or not anyone is paying attention, is something that governments, agencies, and community groups need to investigate and change. Additionally, while differences in communication values, expectations, and language can make public participation difficult, power inequalities and negative historical relationships are even harder to overcome.

In the current article I begin by explaining public decision-making as a site for the construction of social understanding and shared meaning. I give examples that demonstrate how dominant culture communication practices create barriers to full participation from some community members. Subsequently, I posit the importance of concentrating on the relational dimensions of group communication dynamics as a necessary focus in creating space for participation from members of marginalized cultural groups. Finally, in order to better delineate the parameters for building communication relationships in intercultural settings of public decision-making in North America, I address the following research question:

RQ: What communicative elements enhance relationship building for the purpose of increasing participation of non-dominant co-culture members in intercultural public dialogue?

Communication in Public Decision-Making

Public Decision-Making as Construction of Meaning

This research was based in the perspective that communication is a social process of constructing common meanings, and engaging in interaction processes that create social order (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995; Pearce & Cronen, 1980). This social construction of meaning serves to produce and maintain parameters within which human action takes place. The actions that humans choose are mediated by existing societal systems of written and unwritten rules, by historical contexts, and by the cultural backgrounds of those engaged in communication.

The need for human interaction and the constant possibility of change in meanings, demonstrates that communication, including that which takes place in a public decision-making process, is not mechanistic and predictable. Humans are active in desiring to, and participating in, improving the conditions of their lives. Ultimately, each individual makes a choice about whether or not to participate. This choice is often constrained by the use of cultural communication norms that are different from what is culturally acceptable for an individual (Hofstede, 1997; Lustig & Cassotta, 1992; Oetzel, 1998). Cultures differ on whether, and in what manner, individuals are encouraged or discouraged from speaking in a public context.

Meaning is constituted through interactions with others, but is mediated by participants' reactions as influenced by the social process of communication and by the individual backgrounds of the participants (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995; Poole, 1983). People are in a continual, active process of redefining societal structures based on differences in such things as beliefs, values, and communication norms. This process of redefinition is contained within the relational contexts of those people (LaFever, 2004a). Relational contexts that include power inequalities and negative historical relationships are a part of the constraining societal systems that block the ability for marginalized cultural groups to engage in a reconstruction of meaning during public decision-making.

Communicative Barriers to Participation in Public Decision-Making

Groups and communities in North America are often made up of people that come from a widely varying set of societal systems, historical contexts, and cultural backgrounds. Under these circumstances the ability to communicate effectively is problematic, and a greater effort is needed to come to a common understanding (Berger, 1986; Brislin, 1986). Communication systems of the dominant culture support those who already hold power within that culture (Cohen, 1996; Kothari, 2001) and act to oppress those who utilize other communication norms (Freiré, 1970; LaFever, 2004b). Those who hold power are comfortable with and know how to use the existing systems.

For example, a generalized comparison between First Nation (the term used in Canada to refer to the aboriginal peoples of North America) and European communication norms, beliefs, and value systems for decision-making is demonstrated in the use of a contest model (Karlberg, 2004) in Eurocentric systems of democracy, or the use of consensus models (Johansen & Grinde, 2003; McFarlane, 2000; Ross, 2006) that have been traditionally utilized in First Nation governance. In an adversarial, or contest model, citizens are expected to speak out for their personal opinions, to be competitive in having their needs met, and when one side "wins," to live with the decision until a specified time when there is a new contest. In a consensus model, First Nation members traditionally looked to those who can represent the people's interests as a whole (McFarlane, 2000; Ross, 2006). Emphasis was placed on recognizing the value of different skills for different situations and on spreading around roles and responsibilities based on demonstrated abilities.

While the current study only involved a First Nation context as the research site, this research can have far-reaching significance for other local, regional, national, and international efforts investigating participation in public decision-making dynamics. For example, although each British Columbia (BC) First Nation experience is unique in relation to any other BC First Nation, to First Nations in the rest of Canada, and to that of Native Americans in the United States, the lessons learned are applicable in each of those settings. They are all marginalized cultural groups that desire to be active in improving the conditions of their lives and to overcome a history of dominance and oppression.

In order to highlight the communicative processes that lead to a tangible decision outcome (i.e. a treaty) as the central focus of the present study, I utilize the term public decision-making throughout this article.

Intercultural Communication for Public Decision-Making

Within the conceptualization of public decision-making that I utilize in the present research, existing communication literature primarily examines conflict and negotiation within homogenous cultural groups (Broome, 1995a; Cornell & Kalt, 1992; Davis & Reid, 1999; Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2004), and from the perspective of group facilitation skills (Broome, 1995b; Gonzales, 1999; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). In recent years there has been some effort to investigate decision-making dialogue in intercultural contexts (Bell & Kahane, 2005; LeBaron, 2003; Pearce, 1995; Spano, 2001; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Walker, 2004) including within Native American health and planning contexts (Chávez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2003; Feit & Beaulieu, 2001; Forester, 1985). However, only a limited amount of research literature investigates the need for culturally diverse North American communities to work actively to increase the involvement of marginalized members in public decision-making (Freedman, 2007; Rahder, 1999; Spano, 2001).

A major problem in the current literature on participation for social and economic development is in the utilization of various conceptual terms. Of particular interest for the current study is the use of the term relationship. Relationship is rarely defined (Saunders, 1999) but is used liberally in conjunction with community, diversity, participation, and many other terms relevant to contact and interactions among people (Novek, 2002). Interpersonal communication literature conceptualizes relationship at the dyadic level (Acitelli, 2002; Sigman, 1995) but the term remains problematic at the group level (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999; Lannamann, 1995; LeBaron & Pillay, 2006). In group-process literature, relationship is most often defined through the use of relational dimension continuums (i.e. supportive–unsupportive) that are inconsistent and under theorized (Gibb, 1961; Keyton, 1999; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

In addition to problems with terminology, communication theories often assume participation as a finite, time-limited action that starts and ends with the interaction during the making of a particular decision (Morris, 2003). However, relationship, in its simplest terms, is something that goes beyond a single interaction (Sigman, 1995). Therefore, communication theories need to investigate participation in culturally diverse communities holistically, with relationships that contain a prior history, a current context, and a future in flux. Relationship in the context of the current paper then is defined as the quality and quantity of individual and group connections, both social and procedural, that occur before, during, and after the public dialogue event. The present research utilizes this definition of relationship to investigate the dimensions of communicative practice in creating space for participation of BC First Nations in dialogue with the governments of BC and Canada.

The British Columbia Treaty Process as a Research Site

The limitations of the current paper do not allow for a full exploration of the circumstances under which it was recently mandated for the Province of British Columbia, Canada, to enter into treaty negotiations with First Nations residing within that jurisdiction. Simply put, negotiating treaties with the aboriginal peoples of BC was an obligation, mandated in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 by the British monarchy (Harris, 2002) that had been avoided by both the Canadian and the BC governments until a series of Supreme Court of Canada decisions between 1973 and 1990. These decisions provided First Nations with the legal backing to pursue aboriginal title and rights (British Columbia Treaty Commission [BCTC], 2003, 2004; Woolford, 2005).

The BC treaty process has at its core the recognition of the importance of building new, long-term relationships between cultural communities and, therefore, is an appropriate site for investigating the topic of communicative practices that build long-term intercultural relationships in a public dialogue setting. The current BC treaty process began in 1990 when Canada, BC, and First Nations established the BC Claims Task Force (BCTC, 2003). The entire process currently involves 58 First Nations at 48 different negotiation tables (BCTC, 2007a). The key recommendation of the BC Claims Task Force was that the treaty process should be directed at establishing a new relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding (BCTC, 2003). The BC treaty process recognizes positive relationship building as a key to the treaty negotiation process. Therefore, the communicative processes should reflect a concern for relationship building.

In July of 2007, after 16 years of negotiation, the first treaty was ratified through the treaty process that is the subject of this research (BCTC, 2007a; Campbell, 2007). While some 48 negotiations are still underway, with seven having reached stage five (agreement-in-principle) of the six-stage process, I suggest that this can be considered a successful communicative process and therefore a valuable site from which to draw lessons about intercultural public dialogue.

Relationship Building and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a particular way of looking at communicative processes that recognizes cultural background as an influence in the way that individuals relate to and construct their social worlds. Diverse experiences and ways of communicating increase the effort that is needed to come to communal decisions when more than one cultural group is involved. Until recent years research that identified “relational dimensions” of communication in groups was overwhelmingly based on Eurocentric experiences (Bantz, 1993; Oetzel, 1995).

Overall, relational communication literature can be categorized into a triad of relevant communicative elements: first, communication structures, herein defined as rules and resources that guide interactions; second, communication attitudes, defined as a predisposition to view particular communication situations and behaviors in a

favorable, neutral, or unfavorable way; and third, communication behaviors, defined as the use of particular communicative actions.

Communication structures that have been posited as being culturally sensitive include the following: choosing a cooperative conflict resolution style (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001); allowing time for extended discussions (Oetzel, Meares, & Fukumoto, 2003); and creating interpersonal contact time outside of formal meetings (Oetzel & Bolton-Oetzel, 1997). Specific attitudes posited to be essential for effective communication across cultures include mindfulness, or being consciously aware of the possibility of differences (Gudykunst, 1998; Oetzel et al., 2003), and attention to harmony (Dong & Day, 2004; Miike, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Behaviors that are recommended to attend to relationships in intercultural groups are those that actively seek ways to encourage people to have a turn speaking, and those that allow participants to talk about cultural differences (Oetzel et al., 2003). Getting cultural differences in communication styles out into the open by talking about them allows for people to recognize their own assumptions and become more mindful.

The above noted structures, attitudes, and behaviors assume a dialogue already in place; not one where a marginalized cultural group is reticent to participate in dialogue with the dominant culture. Given the negative historical context of relations between First Nation and non-First Nation governments these are not adequate. In the present research, communication structures, attitudes, and behaviors that focus on building a relationship for long-term public dialogue and decision-making were identified utilizing data compiled from publicly accessible sources in the BC treaty process.

Methodology

The present study was designed using a qualitative method, grounded theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative research methods such as grounded theory are useful for developing concepts from the actual social experiences of humans (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Hoch, 1996; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) within a particular dialogic site such as the treaty process. The ability to identify processes within a particular context help to specify the conditions under which the same behavior can be expected to occur (Hartley, 1994). A grounded theory qualitative methodology is particularly helpful when investigating situations and communication phenomenon that have not yet been adequately theorized (Charmaz, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These parameters are a good fit for investigating relational communication dimensions as they apply to intercultural public dialogue between First Nation (aboriginal Canadians) and non-First Nation (the governments of BC and Canada) communities.

Researcher Impact on Meaning

I have never lived the experiences of First Nation people. My own interest in the subject of public decision-making, and the inclusion of marginalized peoples in that

process, came about as a result of working as a facilitator for community consultations in BC. Although there was often a mandate to include marginalized cultural groups (i.e. First Nations, South Asian) in these consultative processes, it rarely happened.

All of us, myself included, who have exploited the benefits of being part of white privilege (McIntosh, 1989), have a responsibility to change ourselves and change the societal systems that we engage in. This research and ultimately my role were about identifying what that means. It was about listening and hearing what First Nations people have been telling us we need to do. It was my role to try to make sense of what was already being said and to turn that into a real life, concrete, list of practical actions that would work to build a long-term sustainable relationship between communities, that is not based on an attitude of superiority and inferiority, or of exploiter and exploited.

Working Towards an Indigenous Articulation of Meaning

During the process of this research I decided that it was appropriate to utilize only the categories represented in the First Nation data set to construct the final analysis. I felt this was essential to create more of an indigenous articulation of research findings (Smith, 1999). An indigenous articulation is one that privileges the worldviews and perceptions of First Nation persons over the perceptions of historically privileged colonizers and oppressors of First Nation peoples (Deloria, 1991; Ross, 2006).

Research Data Sources

In the present research, I explored relational communication through an analysis of three data sources. The first was transcripts from four dialogue sessions sponsored by the BCTC (Centre for Dialogue, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).³ Participants in the dialogue sessions included First Nation negotiators, provincial negotiators, First Nation staff, as well as a number of municipal government and corporate representatives who are involved in what are considered by them to be successful relationship building with First Nations for partnering in economic development initiatives. The dialogue transcripts provided the real life narratives of individuals (Charmaz, 2002; Rawlins & Holl, 1987; Stamp & Banski, 1992) and were authorized for publication on the website by the participants of the sessions.

Observations of two public access Main Table negotiation sessions provided insight into the same communication structures, attitudes, and behaviors that were being investigated. Such things as use of space, speaking order, who said what and how it is said, added to the depth of the analysis of the negotiation process and relevant relational constructs. The two observation opportunities were conducted within one treaty negotiation process, that of the Ktunaxa Nation Council.⁴ Each First Nation has its particular context for negotiation. Therefore, no one Nation is representative of any other. However, leaders and negotiators from the Ktunaxa Nation Council were participants in three of the dialogue forums mentioned above. The opportunity

to observe Main Table discussions offered a connection between the dialogue forums and the observable experiences of First Nation members.

An analysis of documentation artifacts that were available to the public added to knowledge about how a relationship is built between the parties. Documentation included official publications of the BCTC, the BC government, the Canadian government, and First Nations, including the Ktunaxa Nation. I gathered documents that were publicly accessible at the office of the Ktunaxa Nation Treaty office in Cranbrook, BC, at the BCTC offices in Vancouver, BC, at the Main Table negotiation sessions and through Internet searches.

Verification of Findings

In order to verify the accuracy of this articulation, I utilized First Nation contacts that were willing to check the findings (Johnstone, 2000). Ultimately two Ktunaxa Nation negotiation participants made extensive comments. One respondent was the assistant negotiator and the other was part of the legal advisement team. Several changes resulted. For example, while respondents verified that the internal work of First Nations was of primary importance, they indicated that my conclusion that local and regional issues needed to be dealt with prior to signing of a treaty was inaccurate. They urged that while local and regional governments were implicated in day-to-day activities (post-treaty), that local processes could be worked out later based on treaty outcomes.

Grounded Theory Development

Grounded theory involves four phases of data sorting: open coding, axial coding, process analysis, and selective coding. After completing both open and axial coding, all of the collected data had been categorized as to who made it (First Nation or non-First Nation) whether it was enhancing or inhibiting and whether it was a communication structure, attitude, or behavior. The subsequent process analysis phase resulted in identification of an array of relationships, each of which had its own communication structures, attitudes, and behaviors. I configured these relationships into three major types:

1. Internal First Nation relationships;
2. Government-to-government relationships;
3. Community and business relationships.

The delineation of these three categories was based on the ability to develop a conception of situational variables that were distinct in their connection to particular sets of communication structures, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, the processes that are internal to a First Nation community in their attempts to engage and persist in treaty negotiation are very different from those that First Nation

negotiators participate in when they are at the treaty table with provincial and federal negotiators.

Findings and Analysis

Internal First Nation Communication

Internal First Nation relationships are focused on creating a context and vision within the First Nation as a whole, in the relationship of the First Nation negotiators to the members, and in relation to whole community involvement in the treaty process. First Nations feel that the internal work they do is of primary importance in overcoming the negative historical context. The communication structures that are internal to the First Nation are critical. For example, as one First Nation member explains what happens when there is no communication structure that allows negotiators to hear the “dissenting voices of First Nation families or individuals . . . those people do not feel that their interests are being represented . . . those are the people who could potentially challenge any arrangements that are concluded” (Member, Treaty Group; DS#3).⁵ Member support must be considered throughout the process, not just when it comes time to vote on a final treaty proposal.

Another communication structure concern is about leadership within the First Nation. Most traditional systems of governance have been decimated by colonialism, and First Nations are trying to reconstitute them without enough knowledge. One tribal council member notes, “some members feel excluded from the leadership selection process . . . [we are] revising this process so that all members are included . . . the eventual result may be a happier balance of traditional and contemporary systems” (Tribal Council Member, DS#3). If the structures are not built so that every person feels they are part of the selection process they will not be supportive. “Every member” means those of all ages, from infant to elder. No person is too young or too old to be involved.

Given that communication structures need to involve all community members there is an extensive discussion around the inclusion of youth in the treaty process during the fourth dialogue session. One example of involving youth was “having First Nation students serve as interns in the treaty office” and by “establish[ing] a youth committee and organiz[ing] the youth around the treaty in order to be better informed . . . each of the chiefs acted as their council” (Treaty Society Chief Negotiator, DS#4). These are structures that are put into place specifically to involve age groups that may have difficulty attending, who need the support of their age peers, and who are often forgotten in community consultations.

While the communication structures for First Nations need to center around full involvement of the community, attitudes are about thinking long term. Having an internal common vision and keeping it at the forefront of everyone’s mind is one way of expressing this. For example, as a (non-First Nation) lawyer for the Nisga’a Nation (DS#2) relates,

what the Nisga'a did—certainly in my presence all those years—was to treat every single one of those meetings as an opportunity to put forward and explain their vision of what the treaty would be. They had that vision long before I came on the scene and it remained constant throughout. They were able to articulate it in their words at each and every one of the meetings and it always started with . . . a just and equitable settlement for the long outstanding land question.⁶

This attitude towards focusing on the long term is far-reaching. This is demonstrated by the Ktunaxa Nation Chief (DS#3) when she states, “We consider it very important to talk about nation building and it is our position . . . that an individual band is not a First Nation. . . . We are working towards nation building for all—eventually including [bands] in Montana and Idaho.”⁷ Having a vision that goes beyond possible immediate benefits of having a treaty is important in the communication and negotiation process.

The third area, communication behaviors that enhance internal First Nation relationship building, takes many forms. One area is how the community members perceive the behaviors of their negotiators. They want to see negotiators obtaining real benefits. As one participant stated early in the first dialogue session, “the need for the parties to achieve tangible benefits . . . in order to sustain support for continued participation” (Commissioner, BCTC, DS#1). One example of a tangible result spoken about by a Tsawwassen Nation participant was in being able to build a new longhouse, a traditional community meeting place that they “had been almost 50 years without” because longhouses, a traditional way of living communally, were banned (Denhaz, 1994; Land facing the sea, 2004).⁸ When their own negotiators make sure that there are tangible results that are supported by the community it enhances communication in the treaty process.

Another example of a tangible benefit as well as a specific communication behavior was expressed during one of the Main Table sessions at which I was an observer. The agenda material utilized the First Nation language to express all place names in the territory—names that had previously been the oppressor's names (such as St. Mary's). The greeting at the session included a narrative about the pronunciation, use, and meaning of the place name where the meeting was being held [?aqam]. Identifying places by the First Nation name reinforces for the community their claim to the territory. Use of place names in this way also connects to the relationship building between First Nation and non-First Nation negotiators (and their governments), the area explored next.

Government-To-Government

In the context of First Nation treaty negotiations, government entities fulfill the role of providing the vital interpersonal links that act to create connections to other communities locally, regionally, provincially, and nationally. First Nations negotiate as government-to-government entities. In this context all of the negotiators are both assisted and constrained by the internal systems of their own government that they

have to consider, include, and be accountable to. One First Nation Chief Negotiator (DS#2) notes,

we are definitely closer to the politicians than the negotiators from either Canada or British Columbia . . . we hear it, we know it . . . however, by the time we get back to the negotiating table, that communication from the political level has not found its way down to the negotiating level.

Changes in political party in power and the bureaucratic nature of governments are constant hurdles.

The uniqueness of this particular treaty process creates its own set of problems. There are no previous experiences that can help to provide, in the words of one treaty group member (DS#3), a “to-do list of what First Nations and public governments need to do.” Also, in speaking about dispute resolution another elaborates that, “We don’t have the parallel situation (to trade unions) here in the aboriginal community . . . it is about unequal power relationships . . . and how to balance that in an effective negotiation process” (Grand Chief, First Nation Summit; DS#1). First Nation governments are politically in a subordinate power position that must be overcome to truly negotiate a treaty.

One central piece of the BC treaty process that is an equalizing and culturally sensitive communication structure is a six-stage process that proceeds at the pace that is appropriate for each individual set of negotiations. The use of the six-stage process as a framework is seen as enhancing because it “provides a fundamentally sound and flexible framework for advancing treaty negotiations” (Commissioner, BCTC; DS#1). Working through the six stages allows each First Nation to see progress as they move from stage to stage, and provides for a consistency in deliberations throughout the process and across the province.

As the BCTC Commissioner also indicates, the framework contributes to continuity of the people at the table and the ability to “defer resolution of some issues” to a later stage when they encounter obstacles in an early stage. The framework is loose enough to allow for differences at individual tables while at the same time having similarities enough to track what is going on with other First Nations. As noted earlier, 16 years into the process there are negotiations spread throughout all phases, all making progress at different speeds.

A cooperative approach is identified as an important communication structure between governments. An example of cooperation includes all of the parties having agreed on the common goal at the outset, leading to movement forward not being “based on agreement but rather as a result of a common goal to work towards the establishment of a treaty” as one First Nation Chief puts it (DS#4). One of the common themes is about acknowledging a need to work with each other, as the following quotes show,

At the end of the day, we realized neither of us could afford to communicate through hearsay and suspicion. We needed each other . . . so we met directly and created a model protocol to ensure good, harmonious relations that have proved beneficial to both sides. (Member, Indian Taxation Advisory Board, DS#4)

Negotiations are about that end goal and not about positions held by each party.

An example of how this cooperative structure was manifested could be seen in the Main Table sessions that I attended. Three long tables, one for each of the negotiating parties, were set up at the head of the room in an upside-down U configuration. The negotiation team that sat at the “head” table acted as the facilitator for the session. This position was rotated through the three teams. The facilitation role included moving from one point on the agenda to the next and ensuring that each team had time to speak on each item. There was no directing or “policing” of the discussion by the facilitating team. The Canada head negotiator was the facilitator in the first session I attended and the Ktunaxa assistant negotiator facilitated in the second session.

However, in my observations at the second Ktunaxa Nation Main Table session there was a piece of the structure that worked against this principle of cooperative approach. Local and regional governments are not a part of the negotiation but there are sometimes non-First Nation liaisons, as there was in this particular session. This regional area representative sat at the table of the BC negotiators even though this person had no role in the discussions that day. This had the effect of aligning the regional liaison with the BC government, putting this person in a potentially negative position with the First Nation when the BC negotiator made a statement that clearly upset and irritated the First Nation head negotiator.⁹

This particular incident also highlights that the way that negotiators speak with each other is identified as an important communication behavior. There is recognition, as stated by a First Nation Councilor (DS#4), “The language and the process have changed significantly over the past ten years. Then, things were more aggressive and frustrating.” This has changed to an environment where more careful attention is paid to words that are used. In the first Main Table session that I observed, as mentioned, the Canada negotiating team was acting in a facilitation position. In this position, the head negotiator for Canada ended up taking on a mediation role as well and used words that were meant to calm and sooth during several exchanges between the First Nation and the Province. At one point he indicated that he “recognized [the Provincial negotiator’s] time concerns” and that “both [the First Nation and Provincial negotiator] had indicated that they were in touch with counsel,” a use of language that allowed the discussion to move on. He later supported the First Nation Chief Negotiator saying to the whole group that her “comment was very appropriate.” A conscious effort to use language that is nonaggressive or confrontational helps to build a positive relationship.

Demonstrations of sincerity are also identified in the context of local government relationships. As one First Nation Chief (DS#4) relays, “There has also been discussion and offerings, by the regional district and the city, to assist us in building our own capacity. . . . We enjoy very open communications with the city and the regional district both at the political and staff levels.” Not only do leaders have to actively let each other know what they are doing, the staff must also do the same on a continual basis. As a member of the same First Nation above notes, sincerity is demonstrated by being, “consistently at the table for even the most boring and

mundane working groups” and assisting in many things “far and above what is expected” (First Nation Member, DS#4). First Nations want to see and hear expressions of the long-term nature of their government-to-government relationship.

Connecting with Communities and Businesses

The third type of relationships are about connections that facilitate meaningful involvement in business, education, health care, and a long list of other societal institutions at the local level where First Nations people still experience exclusion and attitudes of paternalism. The main difference in the findings with these relationships is the concentration on structures that need to be put into place to demonstrate community member sincerity in overcoming attitudes and actions that convey racism.

While there is some public interest in paying attention to what is going on in treaty negotiations there is very little and largely ineffectual communication structures to get the nonaboriginal public on board in building a new relationship with First Nations. Past practices of isolation and racism have made a lack of knowledge the standard. One First Nation Chief Negotiator (DS#4) points to this problem in developing local government relationships when talking about a meeting that they hosted, relaying that,

We as the . . . Treaty Society invited over 100 people from all of the regional districts and the municipalities within our territory. Mike Harcourt (former Premier of BC) was present and gave an excellent presentation [about First Nation legal rights]. During this meeting it became clear that many of the municipal leaders did not have full knowledge of Aboriginal issues or Aboriginal history with respect to who owns the land.

This lack of knowledge makes the job of working together more difficult and affects all types of local relationships.¹⁰

To go along with this, an inhibiting behavior is that “the large degree of racism” that is an underlying issue is “never mentioned . . . in a significant way” (Grand Chief, First Nation Summit; DS#1). First Nations want to see the existence and manifestations of racism addressed at a senior level in order for the underlying premise of the relationship to change. One particular common type of behavior that inhibits communication is in making statements that indicate an attitude of “the past should be the past.” First Nation data indicates that not confronting the historical context is detrimental to building new relationships.

For example, a First Nation Councilor (DS#4) says, “I think the bottom line is ‘truth’ when it comes to relationship building between First Nations and their respective local government within their traditional territory; and truth plays a key part but it can also be very painful.” He goes on to say that there is a need to see that non-native community members make every effort to “go back and try to understand and feel the pain of what had happened in history . . . to understand where First Nations are coming from before [local governments and First Nations] can move forward together and build good, sound relationships.” When there is no tangible

demonstration of a behavior to show recognition of the negative relationship of the past, an essential piece for making connections is missing.

Main Table negotiations are the most accessible way for the general public to be able to see the negotiators, listen to conversations, and hear about the issues. However, the general public does not attend. At one Main Table I attended, there were about 30 non-First Nation people observing and taking the opportunity to talk to each other and to negotiators during breaks and lunch. All but myself were connected to municipal and regional governments in the territory or worked as consultants or contractors investigating legal issues related to the negotiation. The chief provincial negotiator, who also worked at three other tables, commented that it was the most observers she had ever seen at any Main Table session.

On the other hand, one public structure that has been developed and instituted is the Community-to-Community Forum program (C2C, 2007). This is a program that provides provincial government funding to local governments and adjacent First Nation who want to build stronger working relationships. The most important aspect is seen as being face-to-face meetings of community leaders. Structures that provide a way to learn about each other through interpersonal contact enhance relationship building.

Finally, media systems cannot be ignored as another source of communication inhibiting behaviors. One First Nation Chief Negotiator (DS#2) explained that they “constantly read in the media about things being ‘given’ to First Nations and that, in itself, is of a great deal of concern from a First Nation’s perspective.” To counteract this, one First Nation member (DS#4) notes that his community uses “the media, the local . . . newspaper, the local TV channel and participate in radio interviews to publicize activities.” The focus is on making sure that there is positive press about the First Nation. Active use of dominant culture media helps to change public perceptions of the issues around treaty settlement. First Nations feel that it is really up to their own efforts to “setting the history straight . . . and . . . taking a positive step forward,” through the use of “printed materials, interaction with the media, [and] public meetings” (Task Force Member, First Nation Summit; DS#2). By doing this, First Nations have more control of how history and images are portrayed, and for creating a new basis of understanding on which to build a relationship with the public around treaty negotiations.

Discussion

While grounded theory should fit the particular context from which it was developed, and make sense to participants in that context, it should also be abstract enough to allow some generalizability to other similar contexts (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). From the data outlined I draw five lessons learned for enhancing communication between dominant and marginalized cultural groups in order to increase participation in public dialogue and decision-making. Dominant culture groups that wish to engage in public decision-making with marginalized cultural groups cannot pick and choose from among these lessons if they truly desire to increase the participation of marginalized group members. All of these lessons must be implemented.

The first lesson supports LaFever's (2004b) assertion that building relationships is a key element for increasing inclusion in public dialogue. The present research adds to this notion by positing three specific types of relationships to consider: internal First Nation, government-to-government, and community and business. Of these three types internal First Nation relationships must be considered first, leading to the following statement:

- I. When the internal communication process needs of the marginalized community are considered by dominant culture groups prior to consideration of their own needs, participation across cultures is enhanced.

Given the pervasive nature of power imbalances between the dominant culture and a marginalized group that utilizes a different set of communication tools and skills, the marginalized group needs to have some internal strength in order to have their voice heard. When the needs of the marginalized group are considered first, confrontational and adversarial styles of communication will most likely need to be discarded and replaced by consensus and harmony models.

The findings of this study demonstrate that efforts to build new positive relationships can be enhanced through specific communication structures, communication attitudes, and communication behaviors that are manifest in the dialogue situation. As a result of these findings, statements II, III, and IV deal with each of these communicative categories.

- II. Communication structures must focus on overcoming power inequalities by ensuring the availability of adequate resources to marginalized cultural groups.

Communication structures that were posited earlier as being culturally sensitive (choosing a cooperative conflict resolution style: Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; allowing time for extended discussions: Oetzel et al., 2003; and creating interpersonal contact time outside of formal meetings: Oetzel & Bolton-Oetzel, 1997) are supported in the present research. However, if planners or policy makers are truly concerned with having full community participation in development decision-making, adequate resources must be made available to community members who are disadvantaged in their ability to participate in the process. Whether these resources are by way of providing adequate time for engagement, providing transportation and childcare, or through providing monetary resources to bring people together, they must be considered and included.

Internal processes of the community must be considered as carefully as the process of bringing communities together. It may be necessary to incorporate distinctly different processes within the marginalized community before their ideas and suggestions can be listened to and heard within the dominant culture community. Providing a separate process also allows for a sufficient number of culturally sensitive options to be generated prior to being faced with options that are generated only from a dominant culture perspective.

- III. Communication attitudes must be supportive of collaborative, nonhierarchical approaches and long-term commitments to relationship building.

Mindfulness (Gudykunst, 1998; Oetzel et al., 2003) and attention to harmony (Dong & Day, 2004; Miike, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999) have been shown to be valid attitudinal constructs for communicative competence in intercultural situations. However, a more specific approach to viewing intercultural public dialogue is needed. Particular positive attitudes toward utilizing collaborative approaches, and being committed to long-term relationship development are essential.

Attitudes, because they are a predisposition to view particular communication situations in a positive, neutral, or negative way, are generally treated as being difficult to change. In the case of treaty negotiation as well as other situations of intercultural public dialogue, an effort can be made to find negotiators and staff who already have attitudes that support instituting collaborative rather than adversarial communication norms, and who are supportive of thinking beyond their own lifetime.

- IV. Communication behaviors must provide tangible demonstrations of sincerity in both words and deeds in order to build long-term relationships.

In the past, a narrow range of communicative behaviors have been recommended to attend to relationships in intercultural groups. These include such things as actively seeking ways to encourage people to have a turn speaking, and to talk about cultural differences (Oetzel et al., 2003). Given that marginalized cultural groups often face daily exclusion from taken-for-granted institutions of the dominant society (and experience broken trust as in the case of First Nations), it is essential that dominant culture members provide tangible, public acts of sincerity when asking for marginalized community input into planning processes. One such example of an act of sincerity for many First Nation communities has been in receiving approval from the province to develop local school curriculum specific to individual First Nations, as a replacement for what is usually found in a standardized social studies or history textbook.

It is the true showing of openness, recognition, reciprocity, and sincerity that will provide the basis for a long-term relationship that will survive contentious public dialogue events. Dealing with racism is one particular area where the demonstration of sincerity cannot be trivialized. Therefore, statement V is added:

- V. Racism, and the nature of negative historical relationships, must be openly and publicly dealt with at the beginning of the dialogue process.

There is no doubt that racism has been identified as being a negative contextual factor when engaging in public planning with marginalized cultural groups (Bell & Kahane, 2005; Forester, 2000; Healy, 2003). One of the most difficult things about racism is that people do not want to openly discuss it, and dominant culture members often think that it can be skipped over by “letting the past be the past.”

Racism and negative history does not disappear when it is ignored. It is merely hidden and tensions build up. Creating a communication structure that is sensitive to both the issues and to people will assist the process of dialogue to continue beyond any particular decision that needs to be made in a community.

Many organizations exist that have developed structures for openly discussing racism. For example, the Ktunaxa Nation themselves have offered workshops for the purpose of stereotype busting (LaFever, 2004b). Workshop participants were required to identify their own, widely held, stereotypes about First Nation people (e.g., drunken, lazy, living off the government) and then educated through personal stories and historical facts that broke those stereotypes apart. The East Kootenay Organization for Human Dignity and Equality (EKOHDE) (2006), which offers a racism incident response team, also works within the Ktunaxa Nation territory. If citizens are sincere in wishing to get rid of racism they can deal with it openly and honestly when they feel safe in doing so.

Conclusion: A Tool for Assessing Communication Readiness

The findings of this study can be utilized by dominant culture agencies and organizations for relationship building with First Nations and with other marginalized communities as well. The statements above provide a communication assessment tool for community development. Because there are a number of possible configurations for relationships that connect marginalized cultural communities to dominant culture communities, the first step is to identify what these relationships are so that the unique communication needs for each one can also be specified. If dominant culture communities and planners are serious about the desire to include marginalized community members in public decision-making it is their responsibility to change communication systems to be conducive to such participation.

Limitations

As with any research there are limitations to the present study that must be taken into consideration. The most important limitation in the present research is the lack of first-hand participant perceptions. Other than the verification comments that I was able to obtain from treaty process participants, I was unable to incorporate first-hand perceptions of treaty negotiation communication. Each First Nation borrows money from both the British Columbia and the Canadian governments in order to finance the efforts needed to participate in treaty negotiation. This resource allocation structure for First Nations involved in treaty negotiation creates a barrier for participants to utilize their time for anything that is not directly related to their negotiation activities. Members of the Ktunaxa Nation Council discussed and expressed an interest in the present research but were unable to provide interviews for this reason. While I feel that the data sources that I was able to utilize were accurate and representative of the treaty process, they cannot fully take the place of first-hand personal narratives and the ability to ask probing questions.

Future Research Directions

This study provides a model for future research in intercultural public dialogue and public decision-making. Each time this framework and model is utilized to undertake an assessment of a public dialogue situation or to conduct an action research project, valuable knowledge and experience will be added to the information presented here. It is my hope that any individual or group that is sincerely interested in increasing the inclusion of marginalized cultural group members in public dialogue will utilize this information to both validate and to expand on the concepts.

I urge municipal and regional districts throughout British Columbia to look to this model as they develop expanded relationships with the First Nations in whose territory they reside and work. These government bodies are at the front lines of treaty implementation and will be in great need of a more complete model than now exists for government-to-government relationships in British Columbia. In addition, there is no reason to believe that the framework that is posited in this study will not apply in all types of communities. I urge anyone who is working on increasing the dialogue between groups experiencing cultural conflict to investigate this model as a source of ideas and processes.

Notes

- [1] See Kozuback (2006).
- [2] The term First Nation, while not a term that has been adopted in reference to all peoples of pre-conquest heritage in North America, will be utilized throughout this research in support of the concept that Native peoples in North America existed as sovereign nations prior to the arrival of European colonizers and other foreign interests.
- [3] Based on BCTC parameters for permission to utilize dialogue session transcripts as data sources for the present research, all direct quotes from dialogue session participants or Main Table participants are designated by role of the participant along with the designated number of the dialogue session (DS#). All quotes that are taken from artifact publications are listed in the references section and cited accordingly. Additionally all quotes are from First Nation sources unless otherwise designated (i.e. provincial negotiator, federal negotiator, etc.).
- [4] The Ktunaxa Nation Council is located in the most south-eastern corner of British Columbia and is a First Nation group whose citizens, according to the Ktunaxa Nation website “originate from the Ktunaxa or Kootenai culture . . . the Nation also contains descendants of the Kinbasket family, a small group of Shuswap (Secwepemc) people who journeyed east from Shuswap territory in the mid-1800s into Ktunaxa territory looking for a permanent home. Ktunaxa leadership allowed the Shuswap Kinbasket people to stay in Ktunaxa territory where they eventually settled in the Invermere area and became members of the Ktunaxa Nation” (Ktunaxa Nation, 2005).
- [5] In March 2007 the Lheidli T’enneh First Nation rejected the treaty Final Agreement that had been signed by the three negotiating parties in October of 2006. A probe into the reasons for the rejection by the community (BCTC, 2007b) indicated that there was an inadequate process for ensuring that all First Nation members felt involved and/or adequately informed about all the ramifications of the treaty agreement.
- [6] The Nisga’a First Nation was the first modern-day treaty to be signed in British Columbia. It was finalized by ratification in the Canadian parliament on April 13, 2000, after 110 years of efforts by the Nisga’a Nation to have land claim grievances redressed. The Nisga’a treaty was

- signed under a process established prior to the current treaty process (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2004).
- [7] Crossing either provincial or international borders is constricted by dominant culture interests.
- [8] The members of the Tsawwassen First Nation ratified the first treaty made under the six-stage process on July 25, 2007 (Baird, 2007).
- [9] The BC negotiator made a comment to the effect that the Ktunaxa Nation was not unique in having to consider issues around the existence of National Parks within their territory. The Canada negotiator, because National Parks are a federal issue, took the opportunity to explain that the Ktunaxa are in fact unique given the particular class of the National Parks within their territory. The inability to understand and acknowledge the uniqueness of each First Nation by non-First Nation people is an extension of colonialist attitudes.
- [10] In 2007 a public opinion survey was administered by a research group from the University of British Columbia (Harshaw, Sheppard, Kovak, & Maness, 2007) for Canadian Forest Products regarding public opinions about forest use in the Radium Forest District (Ktunaxa Nation territory). Attitudes towards the rights of First Nations in forestry decisions were primarily negative and, as evidenced in the written comments, were also based on an overall ignorance of those rights.

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