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## Older Indigenous people, Elders, and planning in Canada: a call for thoughtful engagement

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# Older Indigenous people, health, and planning in Canada: Considering ethical space

By Sarah E. Nelson

## Summary

Planning scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize the necessity to follow the lead of Indigenous communities, rather than arbitrarily impose government policies and planning processes. The disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older populations have underlined the urgency of protecting the health of Canada's seniors, including older Indigenous community members. The latter – including Elders – hold knowledge and experiences that are fundamental to the resurgence of Indigenous communities and need to be taken into account when developing age-friendly community plans. The concept of ethical space provides a useful framework for planners to build relationships with older Indigenous community members, while improving equity in decision making and strengthening community well-being.

## Sommaire

Les spécialistes et les praticiens de l'urbanisme reconnaissent de plus en plus la nécessité de suivre l'exemple des communautés autochtones, plutôt que d'imposer arbitrairement les politiques et les processus d'urbanisme du gouvernement. Les répercussions disproportionnées de la pandémie de COVID-19 sur les populations âgées ont souligné l'urgence de protéger la santé des aînés du Canada, y compris les membres âgés des communautés autochtones. Ces derniers - y compris les Aînés - détiennent des connaissances et des expériences qui sont fondamentales pour la résurgence des communautés autochtones et doivent être prises en compte lors de l'élaboration de plans communautaires adaptés aux aînés. Le concept d'espace éthique offre aux urbanistes un cadre utile pour établir des relations avec les membres plus âgés des communautés autochtones, tout en améliorant l'équité dans la prise de décision et en renforçant le bien-être de la communauté.

## Protecting the health of older Indigenous people

The spread of COVID-19, a disease to which older populations and those with underlying health problems are most vulnerable, has brought tragedy to many families and has highlighted severe structural problems in Canada related to the ways that older people live and are cared for. Throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in many Indigenous communities have expressed fear of losing older members and in many cases imposed strict border closures, to "protect our Elders."<sup>1</sup> Immunization efforts have focused on protecting Indigenous communities across the country. Indigenous scholars and leaders emphasize that Elders and other older community members have pivotal roles in Indigenous communities and demonstrate a unique approach to aging – one that balances the vulnerability of advancing age with the acknowledgement of the depth of knowledge that older people carry. Protecting the health of older Indigenous people is a responsibility that falls to all Canadians. We are all impacted, Indigenous or not, by ongoing systems of colonialism, and movement towards reconciliation requires resistance to colonial systems. An important part of this resistance is to acknowledge and reinstitute Indigenous



A community gathering place and conference centre run by the Lheidli T'Enneh First Nation in Prince George, BC. (Source: Sarah Nelson)

jurisdiction over traditional territories – a goal for which, in Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous planners alike are well positioned to take the lead. This brief article invites planners, in particular those who do not identify as Indigenous, to consider the principles of ethical space in approaching relationships with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous land in Canada. Ethical space will be explained in more detail below.

The proportion of Indigenous people over the age of 65 in Canada is increasing. Older Indigenous people as a demographic group are not only becoming increasingly significant in numbers but are also important to the continuity and resurgence of Indigenous communities.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous scholars and leaders point out that Elders are teachers, knowledge holders, healers, language speakers, and leaders in their communities. Many older Indigenous community members who are not formally-recognized Elders also contribute to inter-generational teaching, pass knowledge down within families, and volunteer in various capacities for the good of the community.<sup>3</sup>

#### Indigenous peoples and planning

Practitioners and researchers in land-use planning and policy are increasingly

recognizing the importance of building relationships with Indigenous communities. While non-Indigenous people and governments in Canada have become more aware of their responsibilities towards Indigenous communities and the land since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) report in 2015, Indigenous communities have long recognized the traumas of settler-colonialism and are working actively to heal from past and ongoing violence that the TRC brought to the public eye. Many Indigenous community members come from generations still impacted by the effects of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, as well as other effects of ongoing colonial dispossession. Indigenous approaches to community and land-based planning have been central to Indigenous assertions of rights and responsibilities towards land, which have resulted in significant advances in the recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights in the Constitution of Canada as well as in the courts. Such rights and responsibilities form important starting points for relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada – relationships which can ease the impacts

of colonialism on all Canadians and move society as a whole towards truth and reconciliation.

Indigenous rights and responsibilities towards land are fundamental to planning in Canada, a country in which many rural and urban areas are either governed by treaty or land claim agreements with Indigenous peoples, or else form a part of unceded Indigenous land, where jurisdiction has never been transferred away from Indigenous communities. It therefore makes sense, in planning contexts across Canada, to consider the planning practices of Indigenous communities themselves. Planning consultant and scholar Leela Viswanathan writes, "rather than subsuming Indigenous planning fully into policy-related and legal jurisdictions... I propose that Indigenous-led community planning and state-based planning are parallel spaces and practices, driven and supported by different governance structures and world views."<sup>4</sup> Indigenous planning processes stem from Indigenous knowledges and structures.

#### What is ethical space, and how can planners engage with it?

When it comes to planning for aging populations, or wherever Indigenous

communities are affected, older Indigenous people's knowledge and experiences deserve to be valued and understood. Given the increasing recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples in long- and short-term planning, as well as the ongoing resurgence of Indigenous communities' governance and relationships with land, Indigenous people, including older people and Elders, must have the power to make decisions related to communities and land. This requires the development and maintenance of good relationships among all parties involved. The concept of "ethical space" can provide a framework to guide relationship-building between non-Indigenous planners and Indigenous communities, including older people.

Initially theorized by Cree scholar Willie Ermine,<sup>5</sup> ethical space outlines a set of principles that can be adapted to fit a particular geographical and community context. Such principles, as they apply to non-Indigenous people (including planners) include:

- Centring Indigenous perspectives in discussion and decision-making;
- Actively resisting colonial models of engagement or governance;
- Creating space for Indigenous community control and governance of decision-making processes that involve Indigenous communities;
- Engaging in active and ongoing self-reflection regarding unconscious tendencies to reinforce colonial systems that marginalize Indigenous perspectives and needs.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of ethical space is to provide guidance, in settings where Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge are often sidelined or excluded from decision-making, in order to ensure that each person involved in a specific decision or project has their particular world view respected and incorporated into the process of the group. Ethical space can be understood:

As a venue for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to meaningfully interact with one another in mutual respect of our distinct worldviews and knowledge systems, in order to collaborate, co-create solutions, and achieve common ground.<sup>7</sup>



A feather that the author learned how to paint with a group of Elders in Prince George. (Source: Sarah Nelson)

Ethical space has been adopted as a way of bridging gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing in many areas closely related to planning, such as collaborations between federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments in the governance and stewardship of land and resources. In addressing Canada's commitments to protecting biodiversity, for example, an "Indigenous Circle of Experts" was convened as part of the Pathway to Canada Target 1 group on biodiversity and conservation. The Indigenous Circle of Experts guided federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners through the process of developing relationships based on ethical space. This included following the lead of Cree and Algonquin Elders in enacting ceremonies solidifying commitments to working together, and maintaining balanced relationships between Indigenous ways of

knowing and the processes of the non-Indigenous governments involved.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to understanding aging and the needs of older Indigenous people in planning, ethical space offers the potential to avoid imposing culturally-specific views or stereotypes of aging on older people from diverse Indigenous communities, instead allowing space for diverse and unique understandings of aging processes and the roles of older people. Creating ethical spaces in planning for older Indigenous people can also open up spaces in which the needs of the full diversity of older people in Canada – Indigenous and not – can be better understood.

#### **Older Indigenous people and planning: what does the research say?**

Specific to older Indigenous people and planning, some work has focused on older

Indigenous people's perceptions of age-friendly communities planning. Studies carried out related to the *Older Adult Plan* in Ottawa, Ontario and the *Age-Friendly Action Plan* and *Healthy Aging in the North Action Plan* in Prince George, British Columbia, found that age-friendly community planning in these locations failed to take the impacts of colonialism and the responsibilities of Indigenous Elders into account.<sup>9</sup> Even though, in the case of Prince George, the city's plan indicated the intent to partner with the Lheidli T'Enneh – the First Nation on whose unceded territory the city is built – to address issues for older Indigenous people, the plan failed to demonstrate how this partnership would unfold and in what ways the needs of older Indigenous people would be taken into account in this and future plans. It also did not recognize the ways in which older Indigenous community members contribute to the well-being of their communities, or the impacts of racism and colonialism. In the case of Ottawa, study participants described feeling most supported in particular health care settings that were Indigenous-led, such as the Wabano Health Centre. The ability of Indigenous-led health organizations to provide culturally-safe and ethical spaces for Indigenous clients, including older people, has been highlighted in other research as well.<sup>10</sup> The authors of the Ottawa study propose that age-friendly planning needs to take the impacts of colonialism into account in order to meet the needs of older Indigenous people. As mentioned above, the impacts of colonialism extend to all people, not only Indigenous people, as colonialism is intimately linked with multiple systems of oppression that function on multiple levels. Therefore, attending to colonialism in age-friendly city planning can benefit all older populations in Canada. An approach to partnership based on ethical space in developing age-friendly community plans can offer a more in-depth understanding of the relationships and responsibilities of all parties involved.

Links between colonialism and Indigenous people's well-being have been well established over many decades of research in Canada. Today, it is becoming clear to a larger share of the population of Canada, that in order to improve the relationships among Indigenous communities and

federal, provincial, territorial, or municipal-level planning, the negative impacts of colonialism on Indigenous community structures must be addressed. The pivotal roles that Indigenous Elders and other older Indigenous community members play in many Indigenous nations can be central to building these relationships. Planners engaging with older populations should make use of available resources to educate themselves about local Indigenous communities.<sup>11</sup> Then, guided by processes based on ethical space, relationships may be developed that take into account both the impacts of colonialism and the roles and experiences of older Indigenous people with respect to aging and health.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dan Taekema, "Protect Our Elders': Six Nations Building Barricades to Block Outsiders Amid COVID-19," *CBC News*, March 27 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/six-nations-barricades-covid-19-1.5512752>.
- <sup>2</sup> Wendy Hulko et al., "Views of First Nation Elders on Memory Loss and Memory Care in Later Life," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 25 (2010): 317-342. DOI 10.1007/s10823-010-9123-9.
- <sup>3</sup> S.E. Nelson and M. W. Rosenberg, "Age-Friendly Cities and Older Indigenous People: An Exploratory Study in Prince George, Canada." *Canadian Journal on Aging* (forthcoming).
- <sup>4</sup> Leela Viswanathan, "All Our Relations: A future for planning," *Plan Canada* 59, no. 1 (2019): 215.

- <sup>5</sup> Willie Ermine, "The Ethical Space of Engagement," *Indigenous Law Journal* 6, no. 1 (2007).
- <sup>6</sup> Adapted from F. Brunger et al., "Animating the Concept of Ethical Space: The Labrador Aboriginal Health Research Committee Ethics Workshop," *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 10, no.1 (2014): 3-15.
- <sup>7</sup> Government of Canada, "One With Nature: A Renewed Approach to Land and Freshwater Conservation in Canada," (Ottawa, ON, 2018), 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Indigenous Circle of Experts, "We Rise Together: Achieving Pathway to Canada Target 1 Through the Creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the Spirit and Practice of Reconciliation," (Ottawa, ON, 2018).
- <sup>9</sup> Lauren A. Brooks-Cleator, Audrey R. Giles, and Martha Flaherty, "Community-Level Factors That Contribute to First Nations and Inuit Older Adults Feeling Supported to Age Well in a Canadian City," *Journal of Aging Studies* 48 (2019): 50-59; Nelson & Rosenberg, "Age-Friendly Cities and Older Indigenous People."
- <sup>10</sup> D. L. M. Kurtz, et al., and the Okanagan Urban Aboriginal Health Research Collective, "Silencing of voice: an act of structural violence," *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 4, no. 1 (2008): 53-63; and S. Nelson and K. Wilson, "Understanding Barriers to Health Care Access Through Cultural Safety and Ethical Space: Indigenous People's Experiences in Prince George, Canada," *Social Science & Medicine* 218 (2018): 21-27.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, resources on Indigenous territories at <https://native-land.ca/>; Indigenous jurisdiction and policy analysis at <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/>; Indigenous peoples' health and health data at <http://www.welllivinghouse.com/what-we-do/> or <https://www.nccih.ca/en/>; and Indigenous governance over information at <https://fnigc.ca/>.

#### Further Reading

Barry, Janice and McNeil/Cassidy, Joelle. "Indigenous rights and planning: From recognition to meaningful coexistence?" *Plan Canada* 59, no. 1 (2019): 52.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action" (Winnipeg, MB, 2015). ■

