

Book Review

Decolonizing Data: Unsettling Conversations about Social Research Methods.
By Jacqueline M. Quinless. University of Toronto Press, 2022. 151 pp.

Reviewed by Sara McPhee-Knowles and Lisa Canary

Jacqueline M. Quinless's recent book, *Decolonizing Data: Unsettling Conversations about Social Research Methods*, is a short, succinct volume that begins with the premise of examining the ways in which research practices contribute to colonization, and illustrates how social research can be part of "two-eyed seeing" (80) that incorporates Western and Indigenous values and world views.

Quinless is a non-Indigenous scholar with extensive experience working with Indigenous communities. The first chapter begins with an anecdote describing her research experiences in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, first as a junior researcher with the federal government where timelines and objectives for her project were strict and clear, but she felt she was not "connected with people in the community in a meaningful way" (3). She contrasts this with a much more recent experience, also in Inuvik, that prioritized building relationships as part of the research process. From here, Quinless introduces the concepts of power, place, and relational responsibility in research design. In the most interesting part of the first chapter, Quinless extensively cites Indigenous scholars in a discussion of Indigenous perspectives of well-being: in contrast to Western perspectives, the Indigenous concept of "the good life" is holistic and focuses on the balance between mental, physical, social, and emotional realms, as well as relation with the land and the water. As the author succinctly notes, "Mino-Bimaadiziwin goes well beyond income and education levels, housing and labour force activity (Newhouse & Fitzmaurice, 2012), which are how the Canadian state defines and measures well-being for Indigenous communities" (11). This contrast between Indigenous perspectives of well-being and deficits-based health indicators emerging from Western research practices is a core theme of the book.

The first chapter introduces the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) and provides a critical examination: the CWB primarily focuses on income, education, housing, and labour force activity, neglecting crucial elements of physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being. In fact, the well-being scores from the CWB

and similar indices that focus on economic factors “reproduce a conceptualization of well-being that represents colonial hegemonic discourse” (14). As an example of self-determination, the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) in British Columbia invested in developing the First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness, a more culturally attuned approach to tracking and measuring well-being changes over time in Indigenous communities.

Chapter Two, “Impacts of Colonization on Indigenous Health and Well-Being,” provides an overview of settler-state policies of assimilation in Canada. This chapter succinctly summarizes the establishment of the reserve system and residential schools, intergenerational trauma, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). A key point from this chapter is that researchers should take a strengths-based approach that builds community capacity in Indigenous communities rather than focus only on deficits and problems that get highlighted in Western data approaches. Although later in the book Quinless highlights that we are in an era of reconciliation, in the second chapter she notes that there has been inadequate progress on the TRC’s Calls to Action, which has unfortunately continued since the book was published in 2022 (Jewell and Mosby 2023).

Chapter Three, “Decolonizing Bodies and a Self-Governing Health System,” emphasizes the need for decolonization in assessing Indigenous health and wellness, and positions the First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness as a key framework for doing so in a holistic way. The author discusses the lack of robust data sets, mistrust of Western research practices, and an insufficient number of research frameworks reflecting Indigenous perspectives of well-being as factors that limit collaboration with Indigenous communities in research. Quinless explores the challenges posed by exploitative social research that pathologizes Indigenous well-being, and the shift to strengths-based approaches to well-being that acknowledge the everyday resistance of incorporating socio-cultural activities like Indigenous crafts, ceremonies, and land-based traditions.

Chapter Four, “Social Capital Theory, Health Indicators and Indigenous Communities,” introduces the theory of social capital and highlights how this concept can be linked to social determinants of health, particularly by incorporating mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being and the well-being of communities. In this chapter, the author emphasizes the need to address systemic colonial structures in future social capital models for Indigenous health. By the end of this chapter, the reader understands that social capital—such as the the cultural and symbolic capital Indigenous people gain from participating in traditional practices—can have a profound effect on health and wellness at the individual and community level. This chapter critiques existing indices of well-being that focus on economic measures and emphasizes how important it is for researchers

to move from a deficits-based approach that focuses on problems in Indigenous communities to strengths-based approaches that are defined by Indigenous communities. Quinless stresses the need for developing frameworks that reflect Indigenous Knowledge Systems to support self-determination, warning against perpetuating colonial pathologization of Indigenous health outcomes.

Chapter Five, “Decolonizing Data and Critical Research Methods,” delves into a detailed discussion of research approaches and considerations, including data sovereignty (e.g., the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession, OCAP®), participatory action research, and ethical approvals for working in communities that go beyond university-based research ethics boards (Quinless cites Castellano (2004), Absolon & Willett (2005), Smith (2012), and Wilson (2008) in this section). There is a thoughtful discussion on the positivist orientation of many data sets and statistical approaches, which are often perceived as neutral but are rooted in colonial world views and values. The latter part of the chapter provides an example of how to use decolonized research, employing a qualitative case-study approach exploring the development of the First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness and a multi-level quantitative analysis applying this perspective to develop social determinants of health. The results of this mixed methods approach clearly shows the importance of engaging in Indigenous practices and cultural activities as a basis of well-being for urban Indigenous people.

The final chapter emphasizes the unique contribution of this book and its main points. Quinless introduces lessons learned, such as Indigenous community involvement in knowledge generation, the TRAC method (Trans-local relationships, Responsibility to partners, Accountability mechanisms, Community time frames) (Quinless and Corntassel, 2018), and braiding two-eyed seeing knowledge systems (Bartlett et al., 2012). The importance of everyday practices of resistance and resurgence, as shown in Chapter Five’s results emphasizing ties to land, culture, and community, and the call for unsettling conversations of everyday research practices as allies and researchers, are noteworthy takeaways.

Overall, we appreciated Quinless’s efforts to give an overview of Indigenous perspectives on wellness and give practical examples, using both quantitative and qualitative data, to show how researchers can apply decolonial approaches. This book is concise and covers a lot of ground in 119 pages of text, backed by extensive sources. The core messages include:

1. The need for health research to incorporate holistic perspectives of individual and community well-being that are rooted in Indigenous world views;
2. The need for measurement tools and frameworks to shift to strengths-based approaches that can build social capital rather than deficit-based approaches that pathologize Indigenous communities; and

3. That if the two preceding needs are not met, continuing to use existing metrics of well-being that are based largely on economic factors exerts structural violence on Indigenous Peoples.

All these points are well-taken, and Quinless's book should spark conversations and change amongst researchers who wish to work with Indigenous communities generally, and on health-related research in particular.

We particularly enjoyed the concluding chapter, and we would like to see future work that includes more practical examples of the TRAC method and how to implement these approaches within hierarchical organizations. For example, how can granting agency reporting requirements be reconciled with community time frames? How can research ethics boards be more responsive to decolonial and participatory research approaches? How can junior scholars, who may lack power within their institutions, advocate for these shifts that may take more time, when they are also on a tenure clock? The final chapter also includes an excellent discussion of positionality and relational allyship, along with braiding Western and Indigenous knowledge systems in culturally responsive research design practices. Further, it would be interesting to see variations of the First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness applied outside of the FNHA and BC context in the future. The FNHA as part of self-determination in governance has some parallels to the newly established Yukon First Nations Education Directorate, and we are curious about the potential application of decolonized research approaches to K–12 education in the Yukon and across the North. The final call to action is for researchers to engage in “unsettling conversations about *what we know* and *how we do* social research [to] open space for forging new relationships that will facilitate positive research relationships between researchers and indigenous peoples, communities, and organizations” (119). This is an important conversation that we hope to continue with our colleagues and see more written about in the near future.

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