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for Determinants of Health

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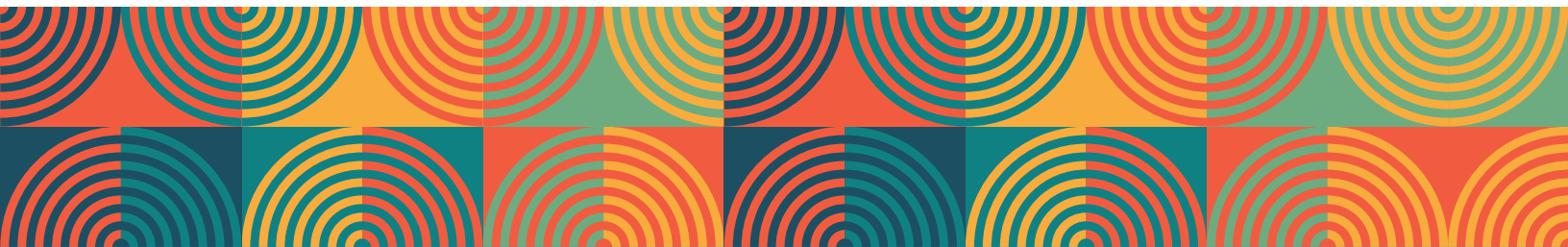
Mind the Disruption

PODCAST EPISODE TRANSCRIPT & COMPANION DOCUMENT

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 6

Disrupting Colonialism for Two-Spirit Health

Episode released on:
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Mind the Disruption is a podcast about people who refuse to accept things as they are. It's about people pushing for better health for all. It's about people like us who have a deep desire to build a healthier, more just world.

The first season of Mind the Disruption focuses on Cultivating Creative Discontent: what it means to look around, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then take bold action despite the resistance we might face.

This episode companion document, available in English and French, provides a new way to engage with the podcast. It includes a written transcript of [Episode 6](#) as well as highlighted powerful quotes and related resources to prompt further reflection and exploration.

HOST



BERNICE YANFUL

Bernice Yanful is a Knowledge Translation Specialist with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH). Bernice is also a PhD candidate studying the intersections between school food and food security, and she has worked as a public health nurse in Ontario.



PODCAST GUESTS



HARLAN PRUDEN

Harlan Pruden (pronouns — anything said mindfully and respectfully) is Nehiyô/First Nations Cree and works with and for the Two-Spirit community locally, nationally and internationally. Harlan is a co-founder of the Two-Spirit Dry Lab and the Indigenous Knowledge Translation Lead at Chee Mamuk, an Indigenous health program at the BC Centre for Disease Control. Harlan is also the Managing Editor of TwoSpiritJournal.com and an advisory member for the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Gender and Health.

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Harlan Pruden is Nehiyô/First Nations Cree and our final guest on Season 1 of Mind the Disruption. Harlan is Two-Spirit and a dedicated disruptor of settler colonialism, homophobia and transphobia, with the goal of creating better tomorrows with and for Two-Spirit communities. Among the many hats he wears, Harlan is the co-founder of the Two-Spirit Dry Lab, a quantitative research group, and the Indigenous Knowledge Translation Lead at Chee Mamuk, an Indigenous health program at the BC Centre for Disease Control. Listen to or read this episode to learn about how Harlan found his purpose of creating affirming spaces for Two-Spirit people, and to explore how we as public health professionals can support decolonization in public health programs, policies, research and systems from a place of humility.

BERNICE YANFUL (NCCDH)

Hi. Welcome to Mind the Disruption. I'm Bernice Yanful. I'm a PhD student and public health practitioner working to move knowledge into action for better health for everyone.

On this podcast, I chat with community organizers, public health professionals, academics and more who have a key thing in common: they're disruptors. They're people who refuse to accept things as they are. Passionate about health for all and are pursuing it with a tenacity, a courage and a deep conviction that a better world is possible.

In Season 1, we're talking about creative discontent. What it means to look around us, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then taking bold action despite the resistance we might face.

In each episode, we hear from a disruptor who has done just that in different areas: work, food, Whiteness, migration and much more. And we hear their personal journeys.

Wherever we find ourselves — in research, policy or practice — how do break from the status quo and move forward with boldness?

REBECCA CHEFF (NCCDH)

This podcast is made and brought to you by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. We support the public health field to move knowledge into action to reduce health inequities in Canada.

We're hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We're funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and we are one of six National Collaborating Centres for Public Health working across the country. The views expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of our funder or host.

We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

HARLAN PRUDEN

My entire being was affirmed: my Indigeneity, my gender, my sexuality. And I was in a community, and I was just like, “What?” And I remember I was like, “This is what I want to work for.”

BERNICE (NARRATION)

That was our disruptor for today’s episode, Harlan Pruden. Harlan is Nehiyô/First Nations Cree. Harlan is Two-Spirit and uses any pronouns said respectfully and mindfully. He works with and for the Two-Spirit community locally, nationally and internationally for better tomorrows. Harlan leads with love to disrupt colonialism, anti-Indigenous racism, homophobia and transphobia.

When Harlan isn’t globe-trotting to deliver mind-blowing presentations about decolonizing research and sharing Two-Spirit teachings, he lives and works in Vancouver. He is the Indigenous Knowledge Translation Lead at [Chee Mamuk](#), an Indigenous health program at the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control.

He’s also the co-founder of the [Two-Spirit Dry Lab](#), Turtle Island’s first research group that focuses exclusively on Two-Spirit people, communities and experiences, seeking to disrupt the status quo in public health research in many ways.

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control’s language guide [2020] defines Two-Spirit as:

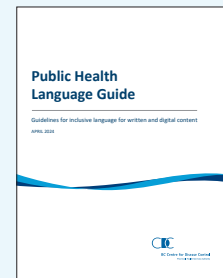
individuals who embody diverse (or non-normative) sexualities, genders, and gender expressions and/ or roles and who are Indigenous to Turtle Island. Two-Spirit is not one specific or homogenous identity, rather a community organizing tool, in other words, a way to identify these individuals who may vary in appearance, language, and community roles from nation to nation.

This episode is special for two reasons. First, it’s the Season 1 finale of *Mind the Disruption*. And second, you’ll hear from Harlan for the whole episode. This is because Harlan is both a disruptor and a leader in public health.

In this episode, I speak with Harlan about his personal journey to create better tomorrows for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous communities. We’ll hear about Harlan’s work at Chee Mamuk and the Two-Spirit Dry Lab, and we’ll explore how settler colonialism has suppressed other understandings of gender and sexuality. Finally, we’ll uncover actions that public health can take to support Two-Spirit communities and their health.

Public health language guide: Guidelines for inclusive language for written and digital content

BC Centre for Disease Control. [2024].



This practical guide from the BC Centre for Disease Control provides guiding principles and best practices for the public health field to communicate in an inclusive and non-stigmatizing way. Particularly relevant to this episode, the guide explores sex, gender, sexual identities, pronouns and gender-inclusive language (pp. 18–25).

The 2020 language guide referred to in the podcast has been replaced by this 2024 version, which contains a revised framing of Two-Spirit (p. 19). It explains that Two-Spirit is “an umbrella term used by Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island to refer to the distinct sexual, gender, and spiritual roles that existed in many Indigenous communities prior to colonization and continue to exist today,” and that “Two-Spirit should only be used by Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island.”

BERNICE

I was hoping that you can start off by inviting me into a little bit of your story. I would just love to learn more about you, where you come from and your interest in these areas that we're going to talk a little bit more about.

HARLAN

Perfect. Well, greetings. My government name is Harlan Pruden. And my Indian name — and I do use the word 'I' and you can ask me why I use the 'I-word' — is Wakan Nom Mani. It's actually in Sioux. I was doing some Two-Spirit work on the Rosebud Reservation, and they honoured me with the name Wakan Nom Mani. Wakan being spirit. Good spirit, bad spirit, neutral spirits. I can do good just as well as I can do bad, or I can suck up a lot of space, which I hope I don't do, and do nothing. So that part of my name is a responsibility of how do I want to show up. And so I try to show up with good words, good actions and good thoughts. And when I fall short of that intention — you know, a mistake is only a mistake if we don't learn from it, and so every misstep is a learning opportunity. Nom is two in Sioux and Mani is a sacred journey.

And so I was going to get that translated into Cree. I am First Nations Cree. My mother was a member of the Beaver Lake Indian Reserve, and when she married my father, her band registration went to Saddle Lake. So I'm a member of the Saddle Lake Indian Reserve, Whitefish Lake Band, Treaty Number 28, Treaty 6 Territory.

BERNICE

When you were growing up, did you imagine yourself doing what you're doing now?

HARLAN

No!

BERNICE

What did you imagine?

HARLAN

Well, growing up, and again I will talk on a very deeply personal level, when I was growing up on my mother's reservation, and this was in the 70s, and I think Wab Kinew in his book *The reason you walk*, there's this beautiful saying that they didn't like the word Indian because Indian always had an adjective like dirty Indian, stupid Indian, drunk Indian. Growing up, I knew my place in society, and the society was rife with anti-Indigenous racism. Like I was really, really aware. And so there was the immense amount of shame, internalized shame, that I experienced as an Indigenous person growing up.

And then I was a "little sissy boy." And the experience around homophobia and transphobia, you know, I was merely trying to survive. And then I fell into a bottle and started drinking. I started drinking when I was 12.

BERNICE

Wow.

HARLAN

And just 3 months prior to my 21st birthday is when I decided to seek help from a peer-based recovery support service. And that's when I started my healing journey. I really didn't have any dreams, like I was trying to just cope with life, and coping with life was by drinking and avoiding life because it was harsh. Like I'm speaking to a person of colour, I'm sure you can know exactly the harshness of growing up within a very racist society.

BERNICE

Yeah, absolutely. And so after you got sober at 20, did you start to imagine how the next phase of your life might look like at that point?

HARLAN

No, it took me about a year. I sobered up in gay AA in Edmonton, Alberta, the Texas of the North is how I like to say it. It took me about a year to get my feet back on the ground, like I was nutty and looking for connection.

And so I began that inquiry. I began joining the queer — well, it wasn't called queer at that point, it was the gay movement within Alberta — because I didn't have really anything to lose or anything, so I was marching on the streets and organizing.

And I remember, I was a radio host at one point for GALOC (Gays and Lesbians On Campus) and it was called Gay Wire, and I remember all of my peers all had pseudonyms, right? And they were like, "What's your name?" And I was like, "Just Harlan." So that was my name. Just Harlan. And so I began always being out.

And then in the late 90s, I read this book that detailed about the gender diversity that existed in many traditional pre-contact Native communities. And I was just like, "What? Why didn't anyone tell me about this?" And then that sent me on this trajectory of like, "Who am I? And who am I as a Cree person? And what are my words within my language? And what was this gender diversity? And how come I didn't have these teachings?" And so I just started gathering stories and gathering songs.

And then in 2000, I went to my first Two-Spirit gathering. I had moved to New York, and I didn't realize how much I was counting. Anytime I walked into a room, I would always assess, like how many people of colour, like assessing whether or not this was a safe space, how many women—

BERNICE

Yeah, I do that too.

HARLAN

Yeah, counting, you're always counting.

And I remember I went to my first Two-Spirit gathering. I got there on Thursday and it was late Saturday afternoon, and I was walking from the main hall back to the cabins, and I stopped and I was like, "Shikes, I have not counted once." Because my entire being was affirmed: my Indigeneity, my gender, my sexuality. And

I was in a community, and I was just like, "What?" And I remember I was like, "This is what I want to work for."

My purpose is to create other spaces and where people — who they are, they show up in their fullness and they don't have to count. And how do we work to create those safe calling-in spaces for our Two-Spirit relatives?

"my entire being was affirmed: my Indigeneity, my gender, my sexuality. And I was in a community, and I was just like, "What?" And I remember I was like, "This is what I want to work for.""

HARLAN PRUDEN

BERNICE

Can you tell me a little bit about what Two-Spirit means to you?

HARLAN

Sure. So prior to contact, many nations across Turtle Island, we had more than two genders, right? And so normally when I introduce myself, I introduce myself in my own language. And not only do I say I'm First Nations Cree, nehiyô, but I also say that I am Two-Spirit, neha Ayahkwêw.

Some nations, it's been documented, they had two genders. Some nations had three, some had four, some nations had 12 different genders. And so a part of the work is the decolonizing of sex, sexuality, as well as gender. For Two-Spirit organizing, there's an internal component in which we come together and we try to learn our distinct histories that are nation-specific.

The other thing that I forgot to tell you about: the definition of what Two-Spirit is. My understanding, Two-Spirit is an English word, and it's also what we



would say is pan-Indian or it is transnational. And although it's often listed alongside other identities — and you can see like the acronym of 2S/LGBTQI, and it can go on and on — it's not an identity. Like when I came out as gay, I was like, "What is gay? What is the gay community?" And then I started like fleshing out all of that. That's an identity, right?

Where for Two-Spirit, it is a way for us to organize and to identify those individuals who are Indigenous to Turtle Island and are sexuality diverse or gender diverse. But then it becomes a nation-specific conversation.

For me, Ayahkwêw is the identity: Who is Ayahkwêw? What is Ayahkwêw? And what is my role and purpose as Ayahkwêw for my Cree people?

Two-Spirit is a placeholder. It is a community-organizing tool or strategy, but it's not an identity.

And so early on is for us to get people who are Indigenous and sexual- and gender-diverse folks, get them together and get them so that we can begin that conversation so that they can learn their own stories that are nation-specific.

And then it's also the advocacy work of working within the broader non-Indigenous queer or LGBT movement, of saying, "We must decolonize your movement and create space for Indigenous people." And that work is mainly to take on the systemic racism that exists within non-Indigenous LGBT movement.

And then it's also working with Indigenous communities to address homophobia and transphobia that exist as a result of the colonization process.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Harlan speaks about the importance of decolonizing our understandings of gender and sexuality. Settler colonialism has suppressed other understandings related to gender and sexuality. Forms of systemic oppression, such as transphobia and homophobia embedded in our present-day policies, social norms and institutions, intersect with anti-Indigenous racism and colonial violence to disproportionately harm Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous communities.

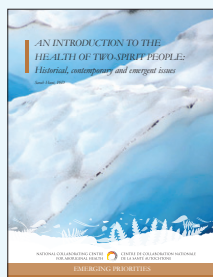
As public health practitioners, we must actively work to dismantle homophobia and transphobia. This is part of our health equity and health justice work.

An introduction to the health of Two-Spirit people: Historical, contemporary and emergent issues

Hunt S. [2016].

"The well-being of Two-Spirit people should be of concern to anyone working to build the capacity of communities to achieve health equity for all, truly bringing meaning to the teaching 'all my relations'" (p. 4).

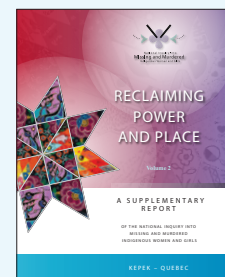
This 2016 report, written by Dr. Sarah Hunt and published by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, summarizes research evidence and community considerations about the social and structural determinants of health for Two-Spirit people. It is a foundational introduction for all public health practitioners engaged in health equity work.



Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. [2019].

The final report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls documents the truths of over 2,380 family members, survivors, experts and Knowledge Keepers. It delivers 231 Calls for Justice to address the root causes of violence against First Nations, Inuit and Métis women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people in Canada. These include Calls for Justice aimed at health and wellness service providers, Calls for Justice that all Canadians are encouraged to act on, and 2SLGBTQIA-specific Calls for Justice.



Across Canada, transphobia and homophobia lead to discrimination, violence and harassment against LGBTQ+ people. For example, through exclusion and violence in schools, discrimination and erasure in health care systems, and discrimination in the job market and housing.

These forms of oppression are structural determinants of health that have negative material and health impacts on the health and well-being of Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous peoples and LGBTQ+ people more broadly.

Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls documents the violence and rights violations of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people, and has specific calls to justice for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous people.

For listeners who might be hearing about these terms for the first time, here are some ideas that may be helpful as starting places:

- First, for non-Indigenous listeners, we can start by understanding that the term Two-Spirit is an organizing tool for Indigenous Two-Spirit peoples, and it can mean different things for different people. A word of caution: in the same way that you wouldn't ask a colleague invasive questions about their sexual preferences, you should know that you are not entitled to probe an individual on what Two-Spirit means for them.
- Secondly, we can contribute to a culture that does not assume someone's gender identity. For example, by including our own pronouns and asking others what their pronouns are.

To learn more about terms relating to gender and sexuality, please check out the [British Columbia Centre for Disease Control language guide](#) in our episode notes.

Let's jump back to Harlan's journey. In the late 90s, Harlan was exploring who he was as a Cree and Two-Spirit person. He began organizing with the Two-Spirit community, and by the year 2000, he had left Alberta and moved to New York, where he worked to create spaces that affirmed Two-Spirit people and their authenticities. Next, we'll hear a story about the ways in which Harlan would challenge the status quo.

HARLAN

I always felt like less than because the other Two-Spirit leaders, they often make fun of me because I don't sing, I don't carry a drum and I don't pray publicly. And so I always felt like ... I didn't feel Indian enough.

And I remember I was going to a sweat lodge and I asked Blake, the lodge keeper, offered them tobacco, and I was like, "Blake, can you teach me to sing a song so that I can be a good Indian?" And he was like, "Okay, that's not going to be easy." And I was like, "Okay."

And then I went into the sweat lodge. And in the sweat lodge, we bring in rocks. And for us within our ontology, my Cree, they're called Nimosôm, our/my grandfathers. In our way, rocks are our oldest living being. And so when we bring the rocks into the lodge, we sing them in. And when we're sitting in the lodge between the rounds and we want to take a sip of water, we offer a sip of water to our grandfathers, our oldest elders, because they eat first, they drink first, right? And I remember before taking a drink of the water, I offered a little water to our grandfathers. And I was like, "Huh, why the rocks are our oldest and our most wisest and they dispense the medicine within their ceremony is because rocks are not trying to be water."

BERNICE

I love that.

HARLAN

Rocks are solid in who they are, like metaphorically, but also they are solid in who they are. They're not trying to be air, they're not trying to be fire. They're solid in who they are.

And when I emerged out of the lodge, I was like, "I don't need to sing. I just must double down, and my song, my stories, is policy, policy work and advocating and working for better tomorrows." And I went back to Blake, and I offered him more tobacco, and I was like, "I don't need to sing." And he was like, "Are you sure?"

BERNICE

He's like, "I'm ready to teach!"

HARLAN

And "I want to teach, and that's my gift, right?"

And so it was like finding out through ceremony who I am and doubling down and just learning from the wisdom of our grandfathers — Nimosôms. And so the dependence and the prioritization of policy and programmatic work is where my songs are, my stories and what I dispense.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Harlan would go on to share his gifts in programmatic and policy spaces, running political campaigns and legislative offices before working at New York State's economic agency, where he advanced economic justice.

At the same time, Harlan formed the NorthEast Two-Spirit Society, which is a community organization that supports the Two-Spirit community of New York by holding cultural events, engaging in policy, and developing trainings and curriculums.

All the while he continued with Two-Spirit activism, which at the time was focused on advocating for Two-Spirit health policy and HIV services from the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the U.S.

HARLAN

And that led me all the way up to being appointed by President Obama to the U.S. Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS [PACHA]. So by day, economic development. By night, health policy.

Because what PACHA did was we provided advice and recommendations to the Secretary of Health and Human Services as well as the White House on the implementation of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy.

This is key because it was a seminal turning point within my activism. Prior to my appointment to PACHA, I was an advocate. I'd be like, "Uh, this is no good. Uh, you can do better. Uh." It's just like lobbing rocks, right?

And then when I got appointed to PACHA, I was like, "Uh, this is bad." But I was like, "Who's going to catch that rock? Oh yeah, me!" What is the advice? What are the recommendations? What are the policy and the programmatic things that we need to address the challenges and the myriads of challenges that are impacting the Indigenous community?

And then, rather than always being problematic-based, I stepped into how do we move to solution and to solution-based conversations as well as work. And so I'm always thinking like, "Problem? Yes, that's a part of it—"

BERNICE

You don't stop there.

HARLAN

It is like, "What's the solution? How do we work to mitigate that? What do we do to address the problem?" And for myself, it is from a policy and a programmatic recommendation or space in which I'm like, "This is how we do it, this is how we can move forward."

BERNICE (NARRATION)

In 2018, after the Trump administration came into office, Harlan reports being happily fired via FedEx from the U.S. Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. It was news that Harlan embraced, knowing from his Cree teachings that another path would open. He relocated to Vancouver, where he has since started a PhD program in the Department of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University.

He also co-founded the Two-Spirit Dry Lab and works as an Indigenous Knowledge Translation Lead at the BCCDC [Chee Mamuk program](#), which I wanted to learn more about:

Chee Mamuk is an Indigenous program that provides innovative and culturally appropriate training, educational resources and wise practice models in STIs, hepatitis and HIV.

BERNICE

And can you tell me a little bit more about your work as the Indigenous KT Lead? What does that involve?

HARLAN

We have this long-standing program called Around the Kitchen Table where we gather teams of women from community and we have very highly stylized and formulaic lesson plans. And so we would teach them how to facilitate what goes into organizing, and then we would give them various topical facilitation guides with a little bit of seed money to go back into community and to host and hold conversations within community. So literally around kitchen tables, they'd be talking about the ABCs of hepatitis, HIV and other STBIs, or sexually transmitted blood-borne infections.

But then the women were also saying, "We want things on healthy relationships." So we developed trainings around that. They wanted stuff on Two-Spirit, and so we developed a facilitation guide on Two-Spirit. And so it was just doing that.

We also have a men's program. It's a similar sort of program, different topics because we're talking about Indigenous men's health. We got the men together, and the men were like, "We don't want to sit around and talk about HIV." We're like, "Oh, what do you want to talk about?" And they're like, "We want to learn about the land, and we want to learn from the land." And so we brought in an outside consultant to talk about land-based learning, like shelter building, trail making, trail marking, compass navigation, right? And as soon as we got the men out on the land, they were like, "All right, what's this HIV stuff?"

I developed a training looking at prostate health and testicular health. And so the training that I did was, as the men came in circle, I had walnuts sat on everyone's chair. And then I also had like baggies with hard boiled eggs, in Ziploc baggies. And so I went in, I was like, "How do you say urinate?" Like drain the snake, water the tires, you know? In some Indigenous languages, like 'cha-hah, to throw water. And so it was all fun.

And I was like, "Oh, what is the urinary track?" And so we went through the urinary track, you know, it passes through the prostate. "What's the prostate?" A walnut-sized gland, as all the guys are playing with the walnut. And then, "Why should the prostate matter? How do you screen for it? What are the indicators?" And it's all done like within about six slides.

"we're just meeting the community where the community is and making the information accessible."

HARLAN PRUDEN

And then the men going back into community, and they ran that training themselves. Just like the women talk about HIV, the men are now talking about prostate health. And we had one team that went back, and they went to the health department and were like, “We’re going to run this training, but we want no women in the room.” And 40 men showed up. And then the men were like, “We want more conversations, like people are going on about hypertension, like what is hypertension?” And so then the health department and us, we worked with developing the conversation of what is hypertension.

I think we’re just meeting the community where the community is and making the information accessible. And so then they have a point of reference, but then they can take that knowledge back into community.

BERNICE

And it sounds like you started from the land-based teaching and then you were able to move into some of those other conversations according to the community’s interests and needs.

HARLAN

And we also take an Indigenous approach to what do we want to work on. We have an informal network of people within our program and communities, and we’re like “What’s the chatter? What’s going on in the community? What do you need help with?”

And so we take the direction from community of where do we lean into and what do we translate, rather than taking that top-down whatever, what the guidance is, and then we translate that. Well, we can do that. But if the community’s not asking for that, well, it’s not a good use of our resources.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Harlan went on to co-found the Two-Spirit Dry Lab with Travis Salway, a research group that disrupts the status quo in public health research in many ways.

BERNICE

And it seems like another path that’s opened up for you is the Two-Spirit Dry Lab. Can you tell me a little bit about that and the work that you do with that Lab?

HARLAN

The Two-Spirit Dry Lab is Turtle Island’s first-ever research group that solely focuses on Indigenous people’s communities and experiences. We are a multidisciplinary or a transdisciplinary collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epidemiologists, knowledge translation leads, sociologists, researchers, but also just community members.

We centre Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing. And, in our best effort, we try to use Indigenous methodologies and approaches to doing the work.

We pull strongly on the Mi’kmaq Elder Marshall’s teaching of Two-Eyed Seeing. Two-Eyed Seeing is, from one eye, there are some good things that the colonizers have brought. I sit here in a very comfy, non-scratchy cotton-polyester-based shirt. And so what are some of those good — like we can’t throw the baby out with the bath water — there are some good things, right? But there are also some amazing, and the other eye, there are also some amazing things from an Indigenous perspective. And what we do is we take a Two-Eyed Seeing approach and we put the two ideas and the two knowledge systems into play with one another.

Now, because we’re Two-Spirit, we take a slight spin on that. We do a Two-Spirit-Eyed Seeing. And a part of our Indigenous methodologies, our approaches, all of our meeting and work is done in a circle so it’s collaborative, non-hierarchical, and we also use consensus decision-making processes. And what we do is we’re trying to figure out how Two-Spirit is a facilitator for accessing health and wellness information for Indigenous gender- and/or sexual-diverse peoples, communities and experiences. That’s all we’re trying to do is trying to figure that out, quantitatively.

When I met with Travis Salway from SFU, who's also my supervisor, I was like, "Travis, I want to do research, but I don't want to do research that's deficit-based approached. I don't want to stand in front of my Indigenous community and say, 'Hey, Indigenous community, you're going to get HIV greater than the White people. You're going to have less education.'"

And that's called testing the null hypothesis, where we assume two groups are the same and so we can do a compare and contrast. I would say almost any policy and/or research paper, the null hypothesis is at play. It's a core tenant of epidemiology as well as in public health.

The null hypothesis, how it works is you have a broader dataset that's often White-dominated. You extract the subpop, in our case, Indigenous and/or Two-Spirit people. And because we assume the two groups are the same, we can do a compare and contrast. But because the health system and many of the systems have been set up for White people by White people, they're always going to have better outcomes. They're always going to be the control, and they're always going to be the comparator, and we're always going to be in a less-than position.

If you look at one of our surveillance reports, it says that, in that year, Indigenous women are 20 times greater impacted by HIV than White women. That's what it says, right? Okay, is that a fair comparison? Like, I was born an Indian, I'm going to die an Indian, I'm never going to be White, so why should I be compared to White people? And so in that respect, I would argue that the null hypothesis is White supremacy. Because they're always going to be the control. And then for us as Indigenous people, it becomes a site of colonization.

"I would argue that the null hypothesis is White supremacy"

HARLAN PRUDEN

Like what do we do to close that gap? Do we make the White women have the same rates of HIV as Native women? Implicit within that is that we just have to make the Native women more like the White women.

And so for the Two-Spirit Dry Lab, we often work with national data sets, we extract our subpopulation, and we do intragroup comparison where we become the control.

So how does that look in the research? We did this [paper](#) in 2019, right before the pandemic, of looking at the drivers of sexual health knowledge. And what we did was we compared the respondents, the Indigenous respondents of those that identified as gay/bi and those that used the word Two-Spirit. And we found significant differences between the drivers of sexual health knowledges between those two populations. And then we were like, "Does geography have a place?" And so we compared the responses between those Indigenous responses that lived in rural and remote and urban settings. And again, we found significant differences.

Do you see how that's a fundamentally different conversation?

BERNICE

Absolutely. Absolutely.

HARLAN

Rather than the null hypothesis?

BERNICE

Yeah.

HARLAN

And so for the Lab, we're always trying to come up with cool ways or better ways to tell the story quantitatively.

And also, we are a lab of reconciliation because about 45% of our Lab members are non-Indigenous. And so we're like, "Let's get in good relations. Like bring your

quantitative analysis, park the null hypothesis at the door. But quant is good, bring that. But also let's put it in relation to our Indigenous ways of knowing and being."

We get in good relations with one another. But then that relationship also reverberates out to our community partners. And so once again, when we meet with a community partner, we're like, "What are your needs? What do you need help with?" And what we do is provide the research, the quantitative research to them so that they can fulfill and increase their capacity or they can further their work with and for Two-Spirit community members.

So you can kind of see these interlocking circles or these connecting circles, but it's all around relationships and being in good relations with one another.

We're a lab of love—

BERNICE

Oh, I love that.

HARLAN

And using research as a vehicle to express that love because we are using the research as an opportunity or a vehicle of being in good relations with one another.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

So far, we've learned that Harlan has had a dynamic journey in Two-Spirit activism and public health. From being happily fired by ex-President Trump to fighting colonization with the power of love, policy change and inferential statistics. Up next, I explore what happens when the going gets tough.

HARLAN

I think that for overcoming challenges and disrupting the ordinary, there are some key things that have really helped me with that work or that inquiry.

One is to know my creation story, right? And so in my Cree creation story, which is told through song and it's sung for 4 days and 5 nights, one song. And in that creation story, it tells me where I come from, who am I, and what are my sacred teachings, what are my values, what are my ethics?

For me, it's wisdom — to cherish all knowledge.

Love — that I may know peace.

Respect — to honour all of creation. And that includes everyone, even our colonizers. It's to honour all.

Courage — and this is one of my hardest teachings — is to face a foe with integrity. Like sometimes I just want to grind them into sawdust, but I have six other values that I have to throw at them.

Honesty — rigorous honesty with self and others. Because if I'm not honest with myself, I can't be honest and honest with others, how do you build community?

Humility — to know myself as a sacred part of creation and that I am no better than anything.

And truth — that I know all these things.

And although there's no hierarchy, I must keep all seven values at play at once. And so it's kind of like ... it's difficult.

The other thing is to know who my people are. And you've heard my people are my Two-Spirit people. My people are my Indigenous people. And when I answered that, it provided me a rooting, a grounding, humility, accountability, respect, transparency, but a lived and embodied truth or medicine.

The creator doesn't make mistakes, or our great mystery or the undefinable doesn't make mistakes.

What is our purpose? What are my gift and/or gifts? What are my medicine and/or medicines to dispense? Like why am I here? You've already heard why I'm here. And the answer to that question, I have all of the motivation to guide all of my actions.

Always ask yourself “Why?” Just because something has been done in the past doesn’t exempt it from questioning, or that it must be done that way. Like settler colonialism, like homophobia, transphobia.

The answer of this “why” question also carries a great responsibility. If no one is saying what you’re thinking — and I’ve been in many, many spaces like that — I’ve always taken a deep breath, sat tall, squared my shoulders, held my head high, threw my hand up, and I spoke my truth, and I found my voice.

***“Always ask yourself “Why?”
Just because something has
been done in the past doesn’t
exempt it from questioning, or
that it must be done that way.
Like settler colonialism, like
homophobia, transphobia.”***

HARLAN PRUDEN

BERNICE

I love that.

HARLAN

And in finding my voice, it was rooted in my purpose, my gift or my medicines. I was not speaking for myself — I am, but I was also speaking for my people, and it was supported by my creation stories, my values and my ethics.

And so I think that’s a part of the work and of this deep reflection of like, “Who are you?” And then being comfortable with who you are. And then “Who claims you and who do you claim?”

BERNICE

I love that you said that because I think it goes back to the illustration you gave at the beginning of our conversation, when you were talking about the rocks aren’t trying to be fire or not trying to be water. So for you, you bring certain gifts in terms of that policy space whereas other people might bring other gifts. So knowing who you are, what you have to offer, then it really helps you make sure you’re focusing on that and using that to serve your community.

At the beginning when we first started speaking, you said that you are invested in helping to create better tomorrows for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous peoples. Can you talk a little bit about that and how public health, the field of public health, can support those efforts?

HARLAN

Well, I think just really on a basic level, if you look at our knowledge translation products in that the community can see themselves within the information. Do Two-Spirit people see themselves within the health messaging? Do they see themselves within our public health response? Are they going to listen to our public health response? That’s how we work — to provide information to communities so that they can make better decisions is I think what we want to do, right?

But the only way that we’re going to do that is making sure that the information is (1) culturally relevant, (2) culturally specific and (3) timely.

***“Do Two-Spirit people see
themselves within the health
messaging? Do they see
themselves within our public
health response?”***

HARLAN PRUDEN

BERNICE

Can you tell me a little bit about the culturally specific component that you're speaking to?

HARLAN

Well, if you type into any search engine "BCCDC COVID" and click on the [Indigenous Communities Resource](#) page, you will see that we have an Indigenous graphic designer. Indigenous people can see themselves within the guidance, right?

But more importantly, we went through a consultative process, both informally and formally, to find out what the community wanted translated. I'm not an expert when it comes to, let's say, Klemtu, that's a fly-in remote community, right? And so when I'm developing a program, if I don't know what Klemtu's reality is, we have to meet with the community and say, "What do you want? What do you need?" Right? And so part of that cultural relevancy is also I must be humble.

"we have to meet with the community and say, "What do you want? What do you need?" Right? And so part of that cultural relevancy is also I must be humble."

HARLAN PRUDEN

BERNICE

In addition to being attuned to the needs of the community and really practising that deep listening and demonstrating humility, do you have any other sort of advice or, I guess, hopes or desires for public health in terms of some steps they can take to support Two-Spirit individuals and communities?

HARLAN

One, I think, is just the humility, just being humble.

BERNICE

That's huge, yeah.

HARLAN

Huge!

Understanding that you don't have the hegemony on power. You don't have the hegemony on knowledge. There were many, many other knowledge sets out there, and you have to put them in concert and play with one another.

A part of the Two-Spirit Dry Lab, but deeply on a personal thing and building upon Shawn Wilson and Evelyn Steinhauer, who is a relative of mine, who assert that from a Cree ontology, all knowledge is relational. So many people think that knowledge can exist by itself. But if I came up with a cure for cancer and I didn't have a network in which I could share it, or I made it inaccessible so no one could understand it, do you have a cure for cancer? No. So all knowledge is relational.

"all knowledge is relational. So many people think that knowledge can exist by itself. But if I came up with a cure for cancer and I didn't have a network in which I could share it, or I made it inaccessible so no one could understand it, do you have a cure for cancer? No."

HARLAN PRUDEN

And so I think that what we have to do is to lean into the complexities of relationships. And once you lean into a place of relationships, it's intertwined, interconnected, but it becomes super messy. But then the possibility of knowledge exists in knowledge exchange. And it can be bidirectional, multidirectional and, unfortunately for our colonizers, it's not unidirectional because you do not have a hegemony on knowledge.

I think those are the things. And part of that is actively listening. Listening or deep listening to what is not only said, but what is also not said, listening into the void. And it takes a skill set.

And then finally it's just the equality and conversational turn-taking. That's why we have our talking circles where everyone shares and there is no one leader, we all share, right?

Once you have those, you have the possibility for psychological safety resulting in the following outcomes. And that would be like supporting each other so that we can bring forth the best ideas. It's not going to be your idea. It's not going to be my idea. It's the best ideas.

Working together that is mindful and respectful ways because it's relationship-driven.

And then developing innovative capabilities that we can dream of better tomorrows, and that we are all in good relations to one another. And I think that's what reconciliation wants us to do.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

A warm thanks to Harlan who helped us conclude a vibrant first season of Mind the Disruption.

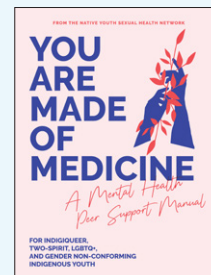
In this episode, Harlan reminded us that better tomorrows for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Indigenous communities are possible.

That as a public health community, we have the responsibility to fight against colonization, transphobia and homophobia.

He asked us to reflect on our values and gifts, to practice cultural humility, to dive into the complexities of relationships, and to always remember that public health works in service to community.

You are made of medicine:
A mental health peer support
manual for Indigiqueer, Two-
Spirit, LGBTQ+, and gender
non-conforming Indigenous
youth

Native Youth Sexual Health
 Network. [2021].



“We all deserve to get the support that we need” (p. 18). Colonialism, homophobia and transphobia are structural determinants of health that have intersecting harmful impacts on the health and well-being of Two-Spirit people and youth in Canada. Public health practitioners are encouraged to read and share this mental health peer support manual from the [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#) that is written by and for Indigenous youth who are Indigiqueer, Two-Spirit, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming.

You can find the resources that were mentioned in this episode, links to the Chee Mamuk and Two-Spirit Dry Lab websites, and more in the episode notes, such as *An introduction to the health of Two-Spirit people* from the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health.

From the Mind the Disruption team, Carolina, Rebecca and me, we hope you remember these lessons in your practice and we look forward to spending Season 2 together. Until next time.

REBECCA

Thanks for listening to Mind the Disruption, a podcast by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Visit our website nccdh.ca to learn more about the podcast and our work.

This episode has been produced by Carolina Jimenez, Bernice Yanful and me, Rebecca Cheff, with technical production and original music by Chris Perry. If you enjoyed this episode, tell a friend and subscribe. We have more stories on the way of people challenging the status quo to build a healthier, more just world.

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