

The applicability of attachment concepts in Aboriginal communities

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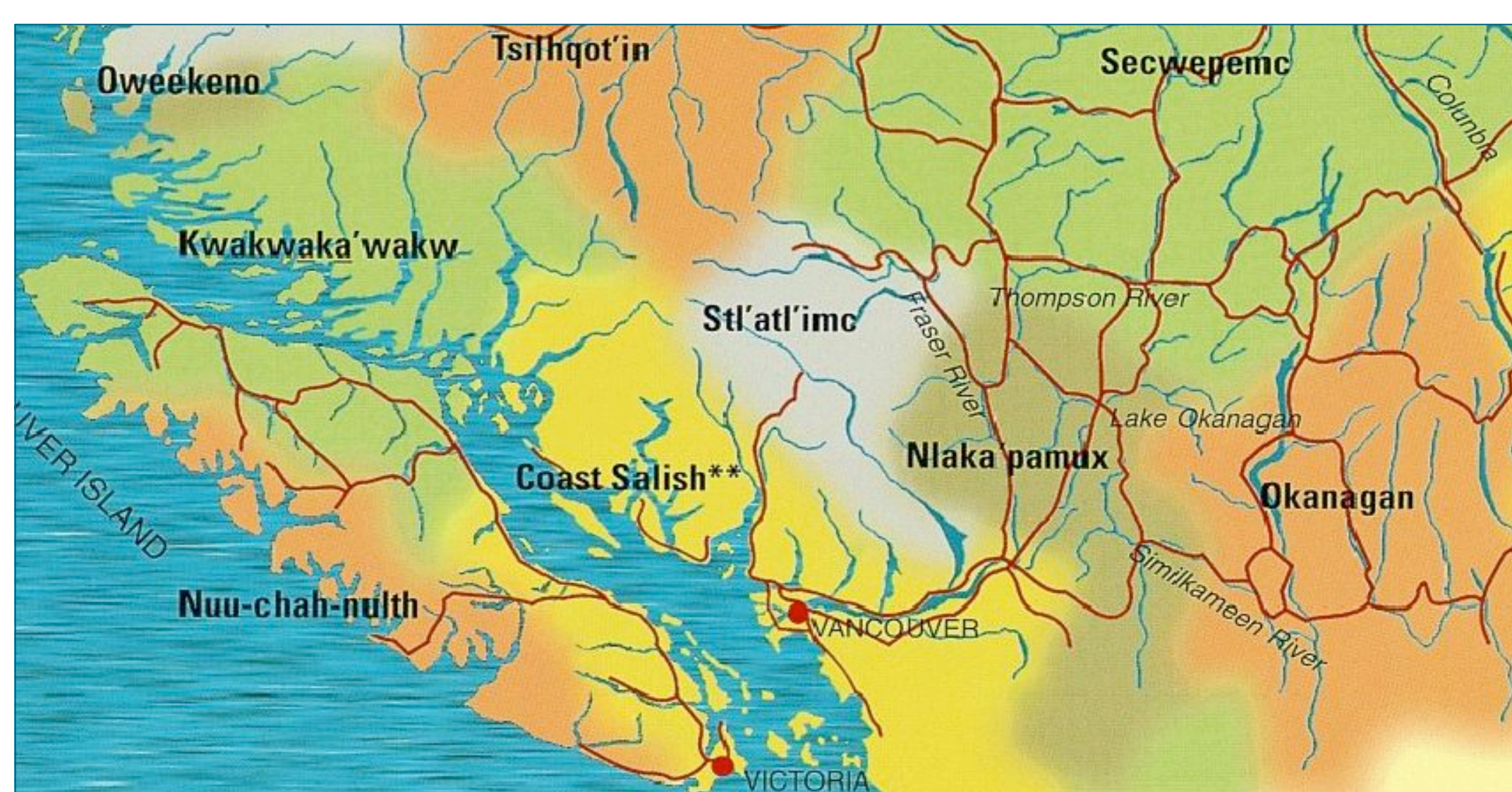
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Background

Attachment theory is a model of human relationships that describes the way in which our bonds with caregivers support our growth and development. When we have a strong bond to a primary caregiver, that person serves as a safe haven to which we return when we feel threatened. That person also acts as a secure base from which we go out to explore the world. These relationships shape our understanding of the world around us.

Some have questioned whether a Euro-centric theory of family relationships is applicable in Aboriginal cultures. The purpose of this project was to explore whether social service providers working with Aboriginal families in Coast Salish Territory on the south-west coast of British Columbia believe that conventional attachment concepts are applicable in their work. The findings will help shape an attachment-based parenting program for Aboriginal caregivers and families.



Map is available for download from British Columbia's Ministry of Education: <https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/map.htm>

Methods

To ensure our methods were flexible but rigorous we conducted semi-structured interviews. We established a list of potential participants who were trained to deliver the attachment-based Connect Parent Group program and who worked with Aboriginal youth and families. We interviewed a total of fifteen service providers working in Coast Salish territory, six of whom self-identified as Aboriginal. Questions focused on the cultural fit of conventional concepts of attachment and the measurement of attachment security. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis by a research assistant.

Discussion and Conclusions

Attachment concepts have sometimes been rigidly applied to Aboriginal families without consideration of cultural and historical contexts. Such approaches were rightly dismissed, not necessarily because attachment concepts have no relevance, but because respectful collaboration and a commitment to cultural understanding was lacking.

Our findings suggest that basic attachment concepts may be applicable in work with Aboriginal families and that attachment theory may actually help us understand the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Perhaps more importantly, our work indicates that service providers are willing to apply attachment theory in their work and many are already exploring adaptations to attachment concepts in their daily practice. There seems to be great potential to develop a culturally congruent attachment-based program for Aboriginal caregivers and their families.

Results

The Concept of Attachment

All of the participants felt that the basic premise of attachment theory – that we use supportive relationships to meet our needs and develop into competent adults – was applicable to the Aboriginal families they served; however participants also felt that the nuclear family model could not account for all of the attachment bonds an Aboriginal child would form. Children in Aboriginal communities may experience care from multiple caregivers within their family and from the wider community. Culture, language, land and a spiritual entity (Creator) were also identified as important relationships that promote healthy development. It was believed that failure to connect to these culturally-specific, non-human entities could result in an individual's needs not being met.

The Measurement of Secure Attachment

All participants agreed that it would be impossible to develop a measurement tool using a holistic view of attachment. Instead participants attempted to describe characteristics that would indicate to a service provider that the client was having his or her attachment needs met. Characteristics that were commonly mentioned included: being balanced; being grounded; having good relationships; and being nurtured in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual ways. Several participants suggested that secure attachment depends on an individual's sense of cultural identity and connection to culture. Secure attachment was not seen as a product of the individual's experience but, rather, a construct of the individual's relationships with the surrounding world.

Disrupted Attachment

A theme that dominated our conversations about attachment in Aboriginal families was the history of disrupted attachments in Aboriginal communities. The removal of children to Residential Schools was seen as the most blatant example of attachment bonds being disrupted. Residential Schools disrupted the children's connections to parents, community members, culture, and land. Although many have questioned whether attachment theory is relevant in Aboriginal communities, our participants used attachment concepts and the negative outcomes of severed attachment bonds to explain how Colonial practices and policies are tied to contemporary challenges in Aboriginal communities.

Limitations and Future Research

The most notable limitation in this work was the small number of Aboriginal participants. Only 40% of our participants self-identified as Aboriginal. Our findings represent an understanding of attachment among service providers working in Coast Salish communities but this may not be consistent with the understanding held by members of the Coast Salish communities. Future research should attempt to test these ideas directly with those of Coast Salish ancestry as well as other Aboriginal peoples.

A second limitation is that all of our participants are connected to the Ministry of Children and Family Development through the services they provide. MCFD utilizes attachment theory in its work, therefore practitioners working with MCFD may have a bias to assume that attachment theory is universally applicable. Underlying biases or beliefs were not measured and future research would benefit from addressing this possibility and recruiting participants from a wider scope of organizations.