



WELLESLEY INSTITUTE
advancing urban health

Enabling Grant Research Report

Nurturing the Spirit of Urban Aboriginal Adults: Symbolic Reflection of Experiences with Cultural and Recreation Programs

Introduction

The principal aim of this project was to explore the health impacts of physical activity for urban Aboriginal adults. The physical activity was a martial arts program offered at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. The theoretical basis of this project was rooted in an indigenous understanding of health. The Medicine Wheel teaching of health is based on the interconnection and balance of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. Two indigenous methods were used to capture the stories of the participants; sharing circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection. The latter method was a novel method piloted in this project. The participants' stories and the symbols they developed were rich in describing how physical activity impacted their lives emotionally, mentally and spiritually. These outcomes have assisted the program's instructor and the Native Canadian Centre in demonstrating the value of physical activity for the urban Aboriginal community. The stories reflected the importance of acknowledging the impacts of colonization on the health of Aboriginal people today, specifically issues related to identity and 'undeservingness' or self-esteem. Plans for the future include applying for funding to explore the two primary themes related to the health of Aboriginal people and further development of the Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection as an indigenous research method.

Project Review

One of the major unexpected outcomes of this community-based research occurred through the interaction with the participants and research community assistants. After reflecting with the community on the goals of this project the theoretical basis of this project became clear – that of the Medicine Wheel understanding of health described above. The project did not begin with this understanding but as the project developed it was clear that this was the basis for the project. The interconnectedness of physical activity with mental, emotional and spiritual well-being became the focus of the project. What I am explaining here is not necessarily the research priorities but the theoretical framework and how it is important to start with an indigenous research framework basing the rationale for the research in indigenous teachings. The research questions then corresponded to the indigenous research framework and the medicine wheel teachings exploring physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being.

As an aboriginal person who is also part of the academy, I didn't realize until doing this project that my colonial education has shaped how I view research and that this is in conflict at times with my indigenous worldview. A lesson learned through this project was the understanding of an indigenous research framework being based on indigenous knowledge and indigenous teachings. In retrospect, it seems obvious but the academy heavily influences how we do community-based research, often with the rationale being based on 'ivory tower knowledge'. Even the most well intentioned community-based academic research may unwittingly be imposing an academic worldview, particularly when applying theoretical frameworks that have been developed in the academy.

The two methods, sharing circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection have added to the knowledge base of indigenous research methods. Sharing circles have been done by other researchers. However, each time a sharing circle is done it incorporates different customs based on the participants' background. For instance, this research involved 17 people predominantly from the Ojibwe, Cree and Métis Nations. Therefore the protocols involved in this research reflected their customs. Documenting these protocols is important for future researchers.

The Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection was originally named Aboriginal Symbolic Reflection. The name was changed to reflect the participants of this research. They participated in naming this method. Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection was piloted in this project and ended up being a very important aspect for the participants. Eleven participants developed symbols to reflect the meaning of the physical activity program. The symbols reflected their healing, emotional and spiritual growth. This method was easy to explain to the participants and they developed their symbols within a few weeks. Everyone was curious to see what others had done and they were eager to share their work with others. We had a sharing circle where everyone presented their symbols. Two people shared indigenous songs to reflect the importance of the program in their lives. One person made a soap stone carving, there were two paintings, four medicine wheels, and two picture collages. Their work was absolutely amazing.

I presented this research, including the methods at various conferences and events.

Lavallée, L. (March 2007). Threads of Connection: Addressing Historic Trauma of Aboriginal People through Cultural Recreation Programming. Annual poster presentation at Ryerson University, Faculty of Community Services. Toronto.

Lavallée, L. (October 2006). Indigenous Research Frameworks. Community-Based Research in Aboriginal Contexts. Indigenous Education Network, University of Toronto.

Lavallée, L. (June 2006). Threads of Connection: Healing Historic Trauma through Cultural Recreation Programming. Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Aboriginal Capacity and Development Research Environments (ACADRE) Gathering of Graduate Students in Aboriginal Health. Hamilton and Six Nations, ON.

Lavallée, L., (April 2006). Experiences of Aboriginal Recreational Program Participants: Reflections through an Indigenous Research Framework. Institute for Doctors in Social Work. University of Toronto, Ontario.

Lavallée, L., (January 2006). Aboriginal Methods and Methodology. Invited presentation for Anti-racism, Multiculturalism, and Native Issues Centre, University of Toronto, Ontario.

As a result of these presentations I have been contacted by other researchers regarding the indigenous methods. I have submitted three publications and planning a fourth focusing solely on the indigenous research framework and methods.

The following publications are under review.

- Submitted Jan 30, 2007. Addressing Historic Trauma Through the Physical Direction of the Medicine Wheel. Journal of Indigenous and Aboriginal Community Health.
- Submitted Feb 23, 2007. Healing the 'Undeservingness' of Urban Aboriginal Women. Journal of Aboriginal Health.
- Submitted Dec 29, 2006. Assessing the Impact of Sport Using an Indigenous Research Framework. Sport Information Research Circle.

I am unable to share this material due to restrictions related to making the manuscripts public before hearing back from the journal editors.

Reflection

As noted above, one of the lessons learned was the importance of an indigenous research framework guiding projects in the Aboriginal community.

Another challenge was having the funds from the Wellesley Institute flow through the community agency. Prior to submitting the project to Ethics at the University of Toronto I called the office to find out if the project had to go through their contracts office given the funds were being administered by a community agency. I was informed that the ethics proposal need not go through UofT's contracts office. However, when the ethics was returned to me it stated that the project needed to go through UofT's contracts office. I spoke with the Research Director at Wellesley Institute and she stated she would offer any support needed. After calling the Ethics office again and resubmitting the ethics proposal the project was approved.

A second challenge with ethics was explaining the value of someone from the community being a principal researcher in a community-based project. I had to explain some of the principles of community-based research and how I would 'control' for my 'biases'. This is probably a challenge that other community-based researchers have faced and/or will face in the future.

The hiring of the Community Research Assistant was a small challenge. The initial person hired was unable to complete the work due to personal circumstances. I did find other people to complete the work. I think what would be valuable for me to learn and could be offered (if it is not already) by Wellesley Institute are tips in hiring and managing Community Research Assistants.