

Relationship Building: A Best Practice Model for Aboriginal Women's Health Research

Susan Manitowabi, Assistant Professor
Laurentian University
Denise Gauthier-Frohlick, Transitional Coordinator
Laurentian University

Background

In the fall of 2006, Aboriginal women healers from the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge approached the Anishinabe Kweok Research Network (AKRN) to conduct a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cedar Bath and its teachings. Subsequently, in 2008 we were invited by this same group to conduct another study on the effectiveness of Soul Retrieval as a way of healing from the impacts of family violence and trauma. These two research projects were undertaken to determine the effectiveness of traditional healing modalities and their usefulness for healing those with family violence issues.

This article explores the partnership between Aboriginal women researchers (associated with the AKRN) and Aboriginal women healers versed in holistic and culturally appropriate healing techniques. The development of this partnership will be highlighted to demonstrate a respectful research process that utilizes best practice such as identified within the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) – Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal Peoples. The primary goal of the AKRN is to provide up to date and relevant research that focuses on Aboriginal women's health as well as to build research capacity and knowledge transfer.

Introduction

For generations, Aboriginal peoples have used their ceremonies, their cultural teachings and traditional teachings to improve their health and well-being (Cole, 2006; Clark, 2006; Hart, 1999; LaFromboise, 1994). As these ceremonies and teachings are passed along from generation to generation by oral means, little written documentation exists on these healing methods. While few research studies do explore the need for traditional approaches to facilitate the promotion of health and wellness, there is a dearth of evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional treatment approaches with family violence, mental health, corrections, substance abuse, grief and loss, and other health issues (Beltran 2010; Graham, 2002; Hodge, Limb & Cross 2009, Limb & Hodge, 2008, Weaver, 2002). The need for further study on traditional treatment approaches is supported through documents such as the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey 2002-2003 (2005) which recommends that “only an increase in traditional medicine practices and culturally sensitive healing and knowledge paradigms will improve community wellness, including culture and self esteem among Indigenous peoples and their communities” (p.150). The Regional Health Survey (RHS) is a “First Nations initiative led and coordinated by First Nations through the First Nations Centre (FNC) at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)” (pg. vi) and provides a First Nations perspective on health and wellness.

Struthers and Eschiti (2005) found that one’s culture determines how one views health and illness, that the choice of healing should be theirs and that traditional knowledge is still paramount in a contemporary society. Therefore, it is necessary for Aboriginal people to incorporate indigenous healing practices in order to attain the highest level of well-being potentially leading to a decrease in health disparities. For Aboriginal people, the need for healing is necessary when the client/community has lost the ability to be in harmony with the life process that they are a part of (Duran, Duran, Brave Heart & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998).

Authors such as Duran and Duran (2000) and Burstow (2003) argue that healing from trauma should take place outside of psychiatric institutions. Further they support that the focus of healing should be on strengths and

capacities rather than illness. Mitchell and Maracle (2005) proposed using a Post Traumatic Stress Response model that promotes a holistic perspective on health consistent with the cultural concepts of the medicine wheel. This wholistic model stresses the importance of culture, elders, community process and traditional healing further, that therapeutic and psycho-educational approaches have proven effective for addressing historical trauma among the Lakota including attending to:

- the mind, by remembering, speaking and coming to terms with the horrifying, overwhelming experiences that lead to the trauma response
- the body by learning to acknowledge and master the physical stress responses like anxiety and sleeplessness
- the emotions by re-establishing relationships and secure social connects, and
- the spirit by recognizing the spiritual and the cultural that have often been critical aspects of the original wound or trauma for Aboriginal people (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005, p. 19).

Traditional healing and purification practices can be used to help people grieve, to share common trauma experiences thereby reducing trauma through increased understanding and cultural renewal. Cultural ceremonies provide structures for individuals, families and communities to acknowledge and mourn common wounds. Group healing within ceremonies reduces feelings of isolation, guilt, shame and anger and enhances feelings of self worth (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005).

The legitimatizing of Aboriginal thought in the Western world remains a challenge. Aboriginal communities can help the process by legitimizing its own knowledge and allowing the healing to emerge from the community. Research that demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional treatment approaches to deal with family violence, mental health, corrections, substance abuse, grief and loss, and other health issues can help endorse Aboriginal healing methods.

Anishinabe-Kweok Research Network (AKRN)

In June of 2006, an Aboriginal Women's Health and Social Research Network (AKRN) was formed with funds received from the Department of Canada Heritage. The AKRN is made up of Aboriginal women who share a common concern about the paucity of research documenting the unique challenges facing Aboriginal women in Northeastern Ontario; the high level of violence that Aboriginal women are subjected to; and, the impact that this has on their overall health and well-being. The primary focus of the AKRN is to provide up to date and relevant research that focuses on urban Aboriginal women in this geographical area; a secondary focus for this group is to build research capacity for Aboriginal women researchers in this area.

Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win (Ability to see into the Future) Teaching Lodge

One of the first projects undertaken by the AKRN was to evaluate a Cedar Bath ceremony and its teachings with respect to assisting Aboriginal women to heal from abuse and violence. In the fall of 2006, the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge proposed a partnership in which they would host a Cedar Bath Wellness Retreat which provided an opportunity for the AKRN to conduct its evaluation of the Cedar Bath ceremony and its impact on the participants. Then in 2007, the healers invited the research team to conduct another study on Soul Retrieval as a means of healing from impacts of family violence. Subsequently, a five day weekend retreat was planned which provided an opportunity for participants to experience Soul Retrieval. These research projects assisted the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge to realize one of its goals which was to demonstrate the effectiveness of traditional healing techniques to address issues of abuse and violence.

Cedar Bath Project

In the fall of 2006, the Aboriginal women healers approached the AKRN to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cedar Bath and its teachings. The Aboriginal women healers had been working with Cedar Bath and other

traditional healing methods to assist Aboriginal peoples to deal with family violence issues. The Cedar Bath project served two overarching goals: 1) to demonstrate the effectiveness of Cedar Bath in assisting Aboriginal women to heal from abuse and violence; 2) to assist in the capacity building of Aboriginal women researchers.

Through their previous practice, the healers witnessed first-hand the improvement in the well-being of the people they worked with but they did not have the proper evidence needed to demonstrate to their funders their success in addressing family violence and other health and social issues. Consequently, they approached the AKRN about engaging in a research project that would explore the effectiveness of Cedar Baths as a means of healing the pain associated with family violence issues. More importantly, they were interested in demonstrating the healing impacts of the Cedar Bath on their participants. Subsequently, the research question became "Does participation in traditional healing approaches (such as Cedar Baths) contribute to health and wellness?"

The Cedar Bath is a symbolic washing for those areas that have been abused. Washing away of all the hurts and pains that are carried is part of the ceremony. In the Cedar Bath ceremony, participants were encouraged to let go of their trauma and replace the traumatic experiences with forgiveness and self-affirming behaviours. Cedar Bath requires that one learns how to let go and to forgive. Forgiveness is a gift from the creator that allows people to let go of their baggage and to begin the process of change enabling one to move forward, creating a sense of empowerment and to take charge of their own recovery and growth. Because participants re-live trauma head-on during these processes, establishing a safe, nurturing environment and creating a sense of safety is essential.

Soul Retrieval Project

As a follow-up to the Cedar Bath study, the Soul Retrieval project aimed to explore the effectiveness of Soul Retrieval in helping to heal from the pain associated with trauma, abuse and family violence. This project explored the experiences of participants in the Soul Retrieval ceremony. Several other goals were associated with this project: to validate the use

of Soul Retrieval to deal with issues of abuse and violence; to show that Soul Retrieval is a culturally-appropriate and valid healing method; and, to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal women to gain research experience.

According to Clements (1932), there are two popular beliefs about illness; illness is caused by a diseased object that has invaded the body for which the cure is surgical removal, and the second belief of illness involves loss of the soul. Soul loss may derive from two means: the departure of the soul from the body or the theft or abduction of the soul. Spirit intrusion or possession can also occur when a person is made ill by an evil spirit invading the body and causing the illness (Duran & Duran (2000).

To understand the concept of ‘soul retrieval’ it is necessary to define what is meant by ‘soul’ and ‘soul loss’. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the soul as ‘the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being, or animal, often regarded as immortal’ (Thompson, 1995). According to Ingerman (1991), soul loss is a result of such traumas as incest, abuse, loss of loved ones, surgery, accident, illness, miscarriage, abortion, the stress of combat or addiction. Soul loss can be described in the following way: every time we experience a trauma, a piece of our soul is lost to the universe. Therefore, to become whole again, we need to recover those lost soul pieces. The treatment for soul loss is restoration of the soul by a healer (Battiste, 2000, Clements, 1932; Duran & Duran, 2000; Duran et al, 1998). Soul retrieval is a ceremony in which the participant journeys back to recover soul pieces that have been lost as a result of trauma or of someone having stolen a piece of one’s soul (Duran & Duran, 2000).

The Soul Retrieval weekend retreat involved utilizing traditional healing methods such as teaching, visioning, smudging (sage), hand drumming, and meditation (journeying) to come to an understanding of how the ritual of retrieving lost parts of one’s soul becomes part of the healing. The Soul Retrieval ceremony exposed Aboriginal women to the teachings and provided the participants with the opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal traditional teachings and culture allowing them to become aware of their cultural distinctiveness and contribute to the maintenance of their cultural identity.

Foundational teachings must be carried out prior to attempting the Soul Retrieval journey. Experiencing Soul Retrieval does not happen unless one is fully ready, “the spirits are the ones who allow you to go to those places”. Other teachings were also provided about finding one’s colours, animal helpers, clan, and visioning. Participants were provided teachings on “attachments” and how these attachments can be removed by journeying to regain lost pieces of soul.

A Qualitative Framework Design

These projects offer a context for locating Indigenous methodologies within research practice. While Indigenous research methodologies are distinct from other forms of qualitative inquiry they can be situated within the qualitative landscape because they encompass characteristics congruent with other relational qualitative approaches that value both process and content in the research design such as feminist methodology or participatory action research (Kovack, 2009). This is important because it creates a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to understand each other.

Methods

According to Kovack (2009), qualitative inquiries are allies for Indigenous researchers. She further states that phenomenology and narrative inquiry are useful methods for making meaning of the story (p. 27); therefore, a phenomenological approach was used with these two qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers use stories in methodologies that value contextualized knowledge such as phenomenology, narrative inquiry, feminism and autoethnography (Kovack, 2009, p. 96). In Indigenous societies, stories: remind us of who we are and where we belong (Kovack, 2009); teach values, beliefs, morals, history and life skills (Brown & Strega, 2005); and, provides an important process for visioning, imagining, and critiquing the social space around us, and ultimately challenging the colonial norms fraught in our daily lives` (Simpson, 2011).

Phenomenology was used to elicit the healing stories of the women. According to Creswell (2007), “...a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a phenomenon”

(p. 58). The rationale in choosing to use a phenomenological approach is to grasp the human experience of the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval and describe the essence of the experience of the participants. According to Struthers and Peeden-McAlpine (2005), phenomenology is well suited with Indigenous people because it values the essence of their shared and lived experiences. Through the telling of their stories, participants have the possibility to reflect on changes that may improve their health in a holistic and cultural way. Because qualitative research is interpretive, the stories of both the researcher and research participants are reflected in the meanings being made (Kovack, 2009). Culture is important in a phenomenological study because humans create meaning from their experience within their shared environment (Struthers & Peeden-McAlpine 2005). Caelli (2000) states that phenomenological meaning is culturally constructed and is found in the description of the experience.

A qualitative research approach often uses participatory knowledge claims, narrative design and open ended interviewing to collect data (Creswell, 2007). However in this phenomenological research project, researchers used the discussions held in the circles, the focus group transcripts and observation notes to elicit the experiential meaning, to increase the practical insights (van Manen, 1990), and to explain the phenomenon of traditional healing modalities such as the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval experienced by the participants. Sharing Circles is an open ended method that invites story; using open-ended conversational methods demonstrates respect for the participants story and allows the participant greater control over what they wish to share (Kovack, 2009, p.124).

Foundational Teachings

The foundational teachings for this research project came from the Seven Grandfather Teachings (respect, love, bravery, truth, honesty, humility and wisdom) and the Medicine Wheel Teachings. Throughout the weekend retreat, the circle was used to facilitate the sharing of information and to gain feedback from the participants. For Aboriginal peoples, the circle is an important concept that contains many teachings about how one should relate to another. Inherent in the concept of the circle is the notion of respect (Hart, 1999). When Aboriginal people sit in the circle, the circle

defines the respectful way each human being in the circle should conduct themselves. This respect includes the respect for confidentiality of what is being said within the circle.

Aboriginal protocol involving the use of tobacco and the Eagle feather was utilized to signify the sacred trust among some Aboriginal people. Traditionally, tobacco is presented when asking for something and the acceptance of the tobacco signifies their consent to participate. In this instance, the acceptance of the tobacco signified their willingness to participate in this research project and their willingness to share their experiences. The Eagle is a highly revered animal in Aboriginal culture, recognized for its ability to soar above the world and its ability to see far and to envision. The Eagle feather was used to signify confidentiality and respect. The use of the Eagle feather and the tobacco constitutes what is considered equal to an insurance policy in mainstream society.

Both the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremonies are very powerful healing methods but it is also acknowledged that the teachings are equally important. It is important to combine the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremony with the teachings. For both weekend retreats similar methods were used to gather information. The research team was introduced to the participants at the start of the weekend during the introductory circle, where their role as observers and documenters of the process was explained. The circle was used to gain feedback from the participants over the course of the weekend. The participants were informed that a focus group discussion would be held at the end of the weekend retreat.

Traditional teachings, including circle teachings were an integral part of both the Cedar Bath ceremony and Soul Retrieval ceremony. These teachings helped to prepare the women for what to expect, set the environment for the ceremony and explain the protocols around the ceremony. This reinforced expected behaviour and addressed issues around confidentiality and trust. Circle teachings were used to set the environment and prepare participants for both weekend retreats, as well as a method for debriefing with the participants. The healers talked about the circle teachings, where everything is done in a cycle: "the seasons are in a circle; when we work in the circle, we each bring energy to the circle; and there is power in the

circle”. The healers acknowledged the power of prayers, which provide us with power when we do healing work. Establishing a sense of safety was crucial to building a trusting relationship between healers (grandmothers), participants and the researchers. Additionally, the use of circles allowed the participants, healers, and researchers the opportunities to share their feelings and expectations.

The Eagle feather and teachings about the feather were introduced to remind participants of the protocols that are to be respected when in a circle. In the opening circle, the healers talked about the importance of learning how to live and let go of past hurts and pain in order to change and grow; “to let go of feeling ashamed of our past and instead to carry our past experiences with pride and dignity”; and “how these experiences provide an armor that helps to protect ourselves and develop coping strategies”. This circle introduction worked at a cognitive level to help the participants increase their awareness that past experiences can be used to change and grow.

Smudging is a form of purification to help people clear thoughts of any negative energy and replace it with positive thoughts and prayers for what a person is about to do. Smudging is a way of connecting to the spirit world. The participants were given tobacco and invited to relax and focus on their reason for being there. Through this process the participants were able to let go of their trauma and were encouraged by the healers to replace the traumatic experiences with forgiveness and self-affirming behaviours allowing the participants to move forward and take charge of their own recovery and growth.

Significance of Partnerships

Community based research begins at the ground level and is rooted in community knowledge (Smith, 1999). According to Fletcher (2003), Community based participatory (CBPR) research recognizes the value of local knowledge systems and their ability to contribute to a larger understanding of the world and the place of humans in it. CBPR seeks to engage people and communities in all phases of research from the conceptualization of the research problem to the dissemination of the results. This community based research project used a “participatory”

approach. The Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge was consulted on all aspects of this project from the initial discussions to the formulation of the research project, through to the development of the assessment tools and feedback on the draft documents.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (p.13). An important aspect in the unfolding of this partnership was the relationship building process that needed to occur before any work on the project could proceed. It took many months to build the relationship between the research team and the healers. This step was a necessary part of the process because of the history of research in Aboriginal communities. Research has gained an unfavourable reputation in many Aboriginal communities due to the way in which research has been conducted (CIHR 2007; NAHO, 2007; Smith, 1999). Typically, past research was conducted by mainly non-Aboriginal researchers who 'parachuted' into the community, conducted their research and then left with the research data, a concept referred to as 'smash and grab' in ethnographic research (Kovack, 2009; Martin & Frost, 1996). Reports, articles and presentations about the research became the property of the researchers and leaving the researched with very little or no say in the findings of the research or the decision about what would be done with the research (CIHR 2007, NAHO, 2007). Because of this history, it was necessary for the healers to get to know the research team on a more personal level. The healers needed to know the values from which the research team operated, to understand if they could be trusted with very sacred traditional knowledge, how the research team would represent that knowledge, as well as the capacity of the research team to conduct this research. The researchers also needed to know what Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval entailed so that they could accurately represent the findings of the research. In order to do this, the researchers needed to experience these ceremonies and the teachings associated with the ceremonies. This provided great insight into what the experience would be like for the participants and added to the understanding needed to effectively document the findings of the research.

In the past, individuals interested in training as traditional healers required a commitment to working as an apprentice for many years alongside

traditional healers for little or no pay. The “real” traditional healers have become scarce and the knowledge that they possess is at risk of being lost. Documenting the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremonies is viewed as one way to preserve this knowledge. It is the mandate of the Teaching Lodge to work at establishing a training program for potential healers, aiming to become recognized as health professionals thus validating the services they perform. While these projects did not lead directly to the establishment of a training program, one member of the original research team was recruited by the healers to work as an apprentice.

Finally, the Teaching Lodge directly benefited from the research by being able to use the final reports from these projects to advocate for funding to reach its vision of being able to offer meaningful programming to train Aboriginal healers and to facilitate and enhance program development. Some women involved in these projects gained confidence to learn more about the ceremonies and take on active roles in facilitating the healing of other Aboriginal women.

The Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching lodge was able to use results from these two projects to generate other funding proposals that resulted in several successful grants. The Teaching Lodge received funding from Ontario Women’s Directorate to host grandmother gatherings. The purpose of these gatherings was to provide grandmother teachings to Aboriginal women and to solicit feedback on what the role of grandmothers should be. Funding received from the Status of Women Canada allowed the healers to conduct their ceremonies and bring their healing into other communities. The healers made a commitment to conduct two ceremonies per month in the Northeast Region of Ontario. The Teaching Lodge was able to secure funding from the Trillium Foundation to hire a manager to oversee the administrative functions of the organization thus allowing the healers to focus on their work. The role of the manager was to seek additional funding opportunities, to coordinate activities and complete reporting requirements.

The Teaching Lodge was able to gain Non-Charitable status and become incorporated which allowed them to seek out funding from other charities. To date, much of the funding received came from the churches. The purpose of the funding is geared towards programs that address healing

from sexual abuse and abuse in general. This limited funding allows the healers to provide their services in other communities.

Building Research Capacity

The research team worked well together. The research team members were guided by the Seven Grandfather Teachings (respect, love, humility, bravery, truth, honest and wisdom) and operated from a strengths based approach, identifying the strengths of each team member and using those “gifts” that each team member has to support the work that is required (Hart, 2002). For example, one member of the research team was quite skilled in the development of budgets and reporting on operating expenses, while another member was skilled in focus groups and another was skilled at report writing. Over the course of the weekend, the team was able to share roles and responsibilities and take turns in leading the research process. This could not have been done without knowing and understanding the capacities and skills that each member possesses and respecting one another.

With regards to the partnership with the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge, the research team operated from a strengths perspective and worked in a respectful manner with this partner organization. The ethics of the Tri-Council Policy Statement and guidelines for research involving Aboriginal peoples were followed (TCPS, 1998). The research team worked closely with the Teaching Lodge every step of the research project, including the dissemination of the project findings.

In keeping with a fundamental research principle with regard to capacity building, the research team was able to secure a research assistant through the School of Native Human Services (social work) program. This student expanded the literature review, attended various traditional ceremonies within the community and participated in the Soul Retrieval weekend. She also took some participatory observation notes and transcribed the data collected while expanding her research experience. During the course of the weekend retreat, the research team met with the research assistant to discuss how the research was proceeding thus providing mentoring for the student.

Conclusions

According to the Guidelines for Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples, the research should be of benefit to the community as well as to the researcher. While this project has contributed to the research capacity building of urban Aboriginal women researchers, it has also contributed to furthering the knowledge about traditional treatment methods specifically around dealing with family violence issues. By documenting the effects of the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval on participants, we were able to add research credibility to holistic and culturally-appropriate healing techniques.

The information gained from this research has been valuable to the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge as the findings supported program development, enhancement of existing programs and re-affirmed traditional treatment strategies that the healers used to address family violence and other health and social issues.

Findings from the Cedar Bath study were presented at two community forums that targeted health and social service providers including, police officers, sexual assault counsellors, family violence counsellors, child and family service providers, mental health and addiction counsellors and local Aboriginal leadership as well as the local Minister of Provincial Parliament. While the findings do not directly influence public policy and decision-making around treatment of health and social issues regarding Aboriginal women, the dissemination of the findings create awareness of the potential of traditional healing practices to health and social issues. Making this known to service providers creates another avenue for these providers to seek help for their clients.

Documenting the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremony is one way in which traditional knowledge can be preserved and made available to other potential Aboriginal traditional healers. It is the hope of the Teaching Lodge that they will be able to establish a training program for potential healers and that they might become recognized by Western Society as traditional health professionals thus validating the services they perform.

Without adequate reliable and relevant research it is difficult to address policy and programming issues that relate specifically to Aboriginal women's health and wellness. Through these two projects we were able to contribute to the capacity and knowledge transfer of Aboriginal women researchers to conduct research based on sound ethical principles.

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**NISHNAABE KINOOMADWIN
NAADMAADWIN**