

THE LEARNING CIRCLE AS A RESEARCH METHOD: THE TRICKSTER AND WINDIGO IN RESEARCH

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This study reports on how funded research – carried out by a recognized elder in selected communities on Manitoulin Island – affects the community experiences and perceptions of the emotional issues surrounding diabetes. In his research, this elder was able to assert an aboriginal approach of achieving human subjects' review approval.

The paper begins with an abstract overview of the theory given to the elder from his teachers, which outlines the healing dimension. The research context is also sketched. We then describe segments of the group process with reference to quotes from transcripts. Normally, the session would not be tape-recorded and transcribed, but permission to do so was achieved in this project with six different groups. Quotations from only one group session will be included here along with patterns from other groups. We then discuss this re-emergent phenomenon in relation to the dominant culture and to Native and non-Native structures for research and regulation.

This approach involves the following assumptions:

- Research is understood in Native terms to be a quest for the roots of problems, and a convening of the voices needed to re-member the history and assess the future.¹
- Research is not necessarily the prerogative of an “objective” elite with special technical skills but an aspect of the traditional community process that generates information sharing, decision making, supportive connections, and strategies that seek balance according to Native views.
- An important phase in the research process occurs after the group meets in the sharing of negative experiences, in the revealing of the rascals at work in temporary situations of imbalance, and in getting in touch with the dark side--the possibilities of Windigo.
- A crucial phase in the research process involves orienting the forces of balance and healing to constructively address the issues or problems, which can be adjusted indirectly in this view.
- Through the re-membling process, individuals are absolved of blame and the community is brought into re-connecting.
- The Trickster is always at work in the dialogue, and the humour arising from the dynamics between the Trickster and the speaker is a source of healing.
- This research process is not to be confused with research labelled “spiritual hucksterism” (see Churchill 1996.) The integrity of the group achieved in the process will continue to be a positive force in the community as the ripples of the circle extend balancing power to the four directions in circular

re-membering.

This circle of research and healing, which we are calling the “learning circle,” can be seen as a version of the Seven Grandfathers ceremony reported by Newbery (1980), and as a cultural adaptation. This adaptation attempts:

- to bring Native theory into the arena of mainstream research and development and to assert political self regulation and governance.
- to process information, such as that on diabetes, from both the traditional perspective and from views of the dominant society. This method offers an alternative to focus groups, which are not viewed as incompatible with Native culture but as originating from the dominant society, and which have been used successfully in research to communicate and process needs of the Native community, as has participatory action research (Hagey 1997).
- to recognize needs for “education as transformation,” which means expanding community healing resources (McShane 1987).

The traditional practice of the Seven Grandfathers, or talking stick ceremony, requires that nothing of substance (“so and so said x”) should leave the circle. That is, the dialogue extending out from the circle is not aimed at recounting any individual’s subjective reality. That person’s subjective reality belongs to his time in the circle, as do the mutual learning, joking and healing that will produce a balancing effect-- “to help us collectively deal with social and cultural phenomena that trouble us” (Berger 1993, 161). This effect reverberates throughout the community in everyday talk or in other reflective ceremonial situations (individual or group) with a healer or elder.

The learning circle, by contrast, does allow stories to be retold in the spirit of the Trickster. Substantive information is permitted to be reported to relevant agencies, as it is with focus groups, for the purpose of extending balancing connections. As with focus-group

reporting, the quotes remain anonymous, and respect for confidentiality is observed. This study, co-authored by the elder who led the circles, discloses narrative with the expressed permission of the members, in an attempt to share the eloquence, logic, and beneficent rationale of the Native research process.

Research as Group Process, as Healing, and as Part of Governance

The aboriginal approach to research contrasts with that of the role of science in European culture. According to Foucault, the latter has specialists in the domain of science who influence those in the media and those involved directly in governing; nevertheless, what Foucault sees as most important is informal communication, which reverberates throughout the masses, reconstituting them, including those in media, government, educational institutions and so on, so that the main mode of regulating/being regulated is through knowledge. Power/Knowledge is the great regulator. Research practice, then, is an instrument of power and control because it intends to shift the culture by changing discourse and practices (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991).

By contrast, aboriginal research is conducted in gatherings of people from groupings within a community. Functions within the groupings have been designated as specialist activities, as reported by contemporary Algonquin spiritual leaders. For example, the fish clan is seen to be endowed with observational and analytical powers, while the crane clan is known for leadership, and the bear clan for healing. So the concept of research and healing as part of deliberation and governance is built into the clan system (see MacMillan et al. 1998).

The teachings presented in both this paper and the one by MacMillan et al. are part of a movement to bring alive respect for the clan system in response to the reality of marginalization on the playing fields of Power/Knowledge.

The Healing Dimension

Windigo: without spirituality, out of control, or gone to hell

Even the dark side is not out of reach of the possibility for balance and is seen as natural, akin to the natural forces in hurricanes, floods, volcanoes, fierce winters, deserts, etc., because nature balances

itself in the long run and because something that appears negative will have a positive side.

For humans, the dark side of people begins in the East with blame and inferior behaviour. Examples include domestic violence and lateral violence in workplaces. The East is also the direction of nourishment, and the phenomenon of blame is conceptualized as a communal problem, as deficits in nourishment of mind, body, and spirit, not just as a defect in a person. For example, junk food is seen as negative.

As the circle turns to the South, we find deficits in relationships on the dark side. Envy is seen as the blockage; individuals are isolated, want something for nothing because they do not understand reciprocity, and typically, they are not willing to change their lifestyle or to heal themselves. They are not motivated to walk in balance, nor are they able to take in balanced nourishment.

Turning to the West, we find people who are unable to reflect, review or own their behaviours because they have only weak inner strength. They fear the dark side; they are typically angry about a lot of things, and they may deny problems leading to alcoholism or out-of-control diabetes. Inability to express anger and solve problems may result in depression. Resentment is the key word. We look only at the negative side of life and not the positive side. The elders tell us our inner fire becomes weak because of resentment.

Turning to the North, we find lack of compassion for self and others, which manifests itself in low energy and apathy.

The centre of the circle is conceptualized as barely a flicker of the Inner Fire. The person is so cut off from relations of support, so deprived and jealous, so fearful and angry, that there is an inability to listen or hear, and a fear and suspicion of taking advice. This is a situation involving depletion of mind, body, and spirit.

What is called for is healing through the sweat lodges, the traditional foods, and through lifestyle changes: such as, walking every day, using traditional medicines, and utilizing the services of the larger society.²

Nanabush: balancing relations in dialogue and laughter

The Trickster, as a cultural hero, symbolizes the magic of laughter and the benefits of seeing many sides of issues and situations, so that the person can shift from isolation and painful connections into

positive relationships and feelings. Nanabush enables one to be empathetic, to feel what it is like to walk in someone else's moccasins. That feeling is not just emotional but also physical and conceptual, relational and conscious, in a state of balanced reciprocity. The wit and wisdom of Nanabush is that he conceptualizes paradoxes, such as being strong through being in touch with our vulnerability, having more power by sharing control, blocking off feelings so we won't get hurt, and needing to listen to our spirit guides (feelings) to know how to protect ourselves.

The dawn or East, which is the direction of renewal, is honoured by giving tobacco to the healer or elder on entering into a healing relation. The Turtle Spirit (neither fish nor mammal) helps the person find their identity, enhance good feelings about the self in relation to others, and accept nourishing food and drink.

The South is honoured by using sage where the eagle (the messenger to the Creator) gives trust and helps the person build relationships because they can trust themselves to attempt contact.

The West is honoured by cedar and the thunderbirds, who bring rain, cleansing, respect, looking again, reflecting within, and repairing and healing relations.

The North is honoured with sweet grass and is signified by the bear, who has great strength and gives the power to heal. The change comes by balancing all the negativity with positive, overpowering the rascals of the dark side and by reverting to positions where positive and negative are in balance.

The Inner Fire becomes strong so that the person gains control over addressing their problems. They can reduce their jealousy and increase the positive in their lives through supportive relations, humour, joy, love, and courage.

Some of the elders who have elaborated these teachings wish to remain anonymous, but among those who can be mentioned are: Eddy Belrose, a Cree elder from Edmonton; Ed Burnstick, who is now deceased; Rebecca Martel (Kakegee Sikaw Wapestak, "keeper of the dawn"), and Michael Trasher (see also Spence 1914 and Benton-Benai 1988). As well, Colorado and Collins (1987) are credited for heralding Native science and its critical contribution to mainstream science, and Hagey and Buller (1983) for bringing Native approaches into diabetes care. Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996) have championed aboriginal theory. Webster and Nabigon (1994) have advocated for research directed and regulated by the aboriginal community.

Using the Research/Healing Approach as an Elder or Teacher

If we start by reminding the person of their responsibilities, we are presenting an external force to them, and they will resist that. But, if someone can look from within, the first step toward balancing, levelling out the negative with positive is taken. It is humour that does the healing, allowing them to begin to look within. The humour starts in the East, to connect them to their identity, and moves to the South to build up trust, so that in the West they can begin to inspect their relationships. The North gives the healing and balancing relations, which also strengthens their inner fire.

The minute we exclude, we weaken our own strength and we weaken our relationship with the invisible helpers. The sun shines for everyone, and it heals all life as we know it. This healing is why the Creator made the four doors. Each colour of humanity has a role and a function. This structures provides an approach to racism. Race is not the problem. The issue is that attitudes of inferiority get expressed as superiority.

One of the Seven Grandfathers is wisdom, the one who cherishes knowledge. Research is participating in knowledge and understanding; it is an empowerment process. Opposition to learning leads to weakness. When information is used to gain power over someone, the motivation stems from inferiority and envy, a state of spiritual imbalance, negativity and darkness. Colonial domination has been the source of much inhumanity and suffering, which reveals the spiritual depravity in the colonizer; we can help balance our own suffering without becoming oppressors.

Understanding the nature of balance is critical to healing any ailment of the mind, body, or spirit which includes feelings. We understand that different feelings, such as joy or depression, emanate from one's body. We understand **negative** as a human reality of everyday life, which has to be kept in balance so that morality in our understanding provides balance. The animals teach us about morality. The bears and wolves never sexually abuse their offspring or rape their partners. The loon has one partner for life, is a good provider, and will even die to save his offspring. The animals come to guide us in our spirit lodges.

Balance is a part of nature, as can be seen, for example, with the four seasons. Much life dies in winter and becomes renewed in spring. We are the extension of the earth. Without earth, we are

nothing. If we disappeared, the animals and the rest of the earth would survive without us. This teaches us humility, to understand we are only a small part of nature. We are created analogously to nature. For example, nature has extremes of cold, ice storms, and tornadoes. We have rage; as a group, humans can go on a rampage or put in place systems of disadvantage and poverty. But, just as earth returns to balance after a catastrophe, so too can humans try to balance those negatives they condone and understand as normal. It is not normal for these negatives to be out of control. During rage, we can cause harm to ourselves. Again, we can approach balance by entering the eastern doorway of the medicine wheel, beginning a healing journey.

The East offers us both the traditional diet and that of all people who have come to this land. Moose and other wild meats are healing, as are raw vegetables and plants from nature. Verna Johnston, Elder from Cape Croker, now deceased, spent many years teaching about traditional diet. Similarly, Ron Wakegijig teaches herbal and dietary sources of balance in controlling diabetes. The East is also the direction of renewal.

The sun in the South balances and sustains life. It enters our consciousness through our optic nerve, and we can also feel its warmth. It teaches us about warmth in human relationships and relationships with other animals and friends from nature.

The water in the West brings us the blood of mother earth, and that blood is our cleansing system, bringing nutrition and taking away impurities, which keep us in balance. Our eyes function with water. Our vision connects us to creation. If we destroy a lake, we are putting all those natural systems in peril and our own survival in jeopardy.

The air of the North is the principle of movement. Oxygen in our blood ignites the energy our muscles need to move us and to give us balance. If we are denied air, we become paralysed and die. Air is a life giver, and we become balanced as all our internal systems thrive on energy.

Our Inner Fire parallels that of the spirits. They live near the sun, the process of energy in motion. To fast, be without water and seek a vision quest is to honour those spirits. In the lodge, we meet the fires of our ancestors in the seven glowing rocks. We too become a glowing rock, leave behind the earthly comforts of food and clothing and join the spirits. Water enables us to see. Our ability to see connects us to the lakes. The mist of the atmosphere inside the lodge is the mist

of creation, and we come out of the womb of the lodge reborn. These ceremonies give us the unconditional love of our ancestors, which is our internal fire of energy, trust, respect, and courage to walk in balance with the Seven Grandfathers until our next sweat.

The Little Boy brought us the teachings from the Creator. He had been taken into the home of the Creator and guided by the Seven Grandfathers; they are still there. They taught him the four sacred doors of the sweat lodge and the meaning of the rocks so that he understood how the Seven Grandparents help us heal and balance our lives. The Creator gave the Little Boy the responsibility of naming all the plants, animals, trees, waters, human beings, and all that the four directions represent. He is, therefore, held in high esteem because he teaches us how to heal ourselves. We honour the Little Boy at the time of the sweat lodge by using tobacco, which is laid in the Eastern direction. This aspect of the ceremony honours children who have a natural developmental stage of naming and learning about creation. This Little Boy is a healer, a different entity from Nanabush, the Trickster, and he brings us the following values as gifts from the Creator; these are gifts that we must learn:

- Wisdom – The Little Boy emphasizes the strength of knowledge. To cherish knowledge is to have wisdom.
- Love – To know love is to know peace. The Rock replaces all the rascals and gives us the true meaning of love.
- Bravery – With bravery, we face internal demons without fear. We invite ancestor Rock to heal the rascals by balancing those negatives with the rock that comes in as we become a rock ourselves.
- Self-Honesty – This is the gift through which the Creator allows us into the lodge to know the rascals and change them, balance them.
- Courage – Courage lets us face our darkness without fear.

- **Respect**—To honour all of creation is to have respect.
- **Truth** – Truth is to know all of these things, to understand the nature of balance by walking in balance. We need the strength of the Creator to live in balance.
- **Humility** – This is to recognize oneself as a sacred part of (connected in relations with) creation.

All these seven values are bound together by truth and the recognition of all the other values and relations. The grandparents (Mishomis, Nokomis) and their gift of kindness helps us move toward balance in life. We learn to accept our own participation in destructive processes. For example, there was massive damage done in the residential school system, and as a people, we participated in that. Windigo, the absence of Nanabush, can eat away at someone's soul and humanity; it can suck the spirit right out of us, resulting in destructive relationships. Bad medicine uses the Windigo spirit to do bear walking, to do "power-over." This medicine rests on the absence of the Trickster, Nanabush, who shows us balance, and protection from Windigo. We offer sage to the South to honour positive relationships, to engage in "power-with" instead of power-over. Nanabush knows the tendency for power-over comes from being hurt and wanting to balance that hurt. Nanabush helps us to have the courage to choose strategies that will not deceive us and push us more off balance.

The Research Context

A recent article by Dyck and Kearns (1995) entitled "Transforming the relations of research: towards culturally safe geographies of health and healing" reviews the cultural safety debate in Aotearoa/New Zealand initiated by the Maori. Addressing comparative health status statistics, the Maori and their advocates argue that there is a connection between health problems and social relations, and that this social problem should be faced with honesty and integrity.

The concept of cultural risk refers to "people from one culture being demeaned and disempowered by the actions and delivery systems of people from another culture" (Ramsden and Spoonley 1993, quoted

in Dyck and Kearns 1995, 141). It is believed that cultural safety can operate on both individual and community levels and is influenced by the socio-economic determinants of health. It is recognized that both individual and institutional racism have an impact on health and health delivery. It is advocated that aboriginal people themselves have a right to define various realities. This raises epistemological and ethical concerns with the current research hierarchy that impinges on aboriginal people and the constitution of their identities and relationships, which includes power relationships. The authors assert Hall's (1992, 254) observation that "how things are represented in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role." They offer the notion of cultural safety as one that honours particular treaties, documents, and social history, and they call for a transformation of the asymmetric research relations between Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori).

Correspondingly, Aboriginal people in Canada compete for health resources in a multi-cultural, multi-layered system of governance with very little stake in a research arena that feeds distributive decisions, and they continue to be subject to arbitrary disputes beyond their control. A recent example is the closing of the Sioux Lookout programs at the University of Toronto, which provided 15 physicians to a population of 14,000 people, many with multiple health problems "on a cost recovery basis from physician-generated OHIP billings [to the province] and money provided by Health Canada" (University of Toronto *Bulletin* 1998, 1). The research relation that exists in most teaching hospitals can be seen as one of the barriers. Natives are wary of lack of control over research affecting them, and researchers in the university are becoming subject to even more restrictions or attention to community particulars in new ethical guidelines (see Tri-Council Working Group 1997; see also Kaufert and O'Neil 1989 and Kaufert, O'Neil and Koolage, 1991 for culturally specific particulars) requiring even more energy going into research relations. Labour intensity can function as a disincentive to building research programs that can compete in today's funding milieu. The Dean of Medicine ended the program because "U of T was not in a position to risk the possible shortfall in OHIP [Ontario Health Insurance Program] earnings necessary to fund the program" and noted that Native health is the federal government's responsibility. A crisis has ensued because of the closing of the emergency department of the hospital and the reduction to two family physicians. The

Province of Ontario and Health Canada both deny responsibility. McMaster University is exploring entry into a relationship, but reportedly, they will also want government guarantees to balance the budget. Nevertheless, McMaster University has demonstrated considerable creativity in its programs with Native communities, most recently its Aboriginal Health Services Program (Mutch 1998, 20).

Taking the concept of cultural safety and applying it to the situation in Sioux Lookout, we can see that Native morbidity and mortality could potentially develop from this dispute, which has grown out of particular colonial relationships that racialize and problematize Native people and the delivery of health resources to them. While decision-making based on research findings had little to do with the ultimate decision in this case, the issue of research relations remains one of the problem areas because the universities more and more take their *raison-d'être* to be research.

The new ethical guidelines for research with humans, prepared as a joint initiative by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Medical Research Council, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, underscores the respect that must be paid to vulnerable populations. Examples outlining certain principles are given where researchers are dealing with Natives:

Informed choice needs to be obtained in a manner that is considered legitimate by the collectivity with respect both to process and to content, and normally the informed choice of all the collectivities engaged by the research is required. (Tri-Council Working Group 1997, VII-5).

What is missing from the document is the guidelines prohibiting the abuse the authors have personally witnessed in relation to Native communities in recent proposals that have received human subjects approval from their university-based committees. So, while the policy is a beginning step towards coming into line with what Native communities want as protection in research relations, the prevalent attitudes and practices are far from reflecting the spirit of the policy. Examples of abuse revealed in written proposals include, to name some of the glaring ones: manipulation of the consent process; violation of informed consent procedures; failure to enter into a true

research partnership, for example, by taking a community-based or culture-based approach to health needs and monitoring how those needs are being met; failure to give something back to the community in light of the fact that the research findings could lead to new profitable products; lack of scientific rationales for population selection; clear health risks in the conduct of the research; failure to plan with the community for health follow-up following invasive data collection methods. There is also the problem of researchers who orient research to the time lines of the funders and agencies they are accountable to, which jeopardizes their accountability to the community research partnership (Hagey 1997).

Because of the chronic persistence of the attitudes towards Native communities that produce such abuse, there has been a movement afoot to set-up province-wide Native research review procedures in universities that are willing to collaborate. The rationale here is that only when Natives take charge of the review process will communities have confidence in research. This thinking is occurring in a milieu which is calling for evidence-based practice decisions, which means there will be growth in program evaluation and in the development of new methodologies. For example, the final report of the recent National Forum on Health (1997) points out "there is a clear need for a greater focus on evidence-based decision-making which will improve public accountability" (19). The same document recommends an aboriginal health institute for "performing and advocating health research to meet the needs of Aboriginal people and communities" and for "identifying approaches to disease management that are culturally relevant and appropriate for the context in which Aboriginal people live" (26). The latter two statements shed light on the benefit of Native approaches to research for the purpose of integrating health management and research into self-regulation and governance.

The Healing and Wellness Strategy of the Province of Ontario provides an example of Natives organizing the monitoring of programs through both qualitative and quantitative research. Here they are appealing to researchers in the university community and private consultants to participate in systematic evaluation. The need for this type of research is tied to the need to be accountable for program funding. The Healing and Wellness Strategy has been successful in coordinating health innovations and programs, and Native agencies are now competing less with each other for the same dollars and are not having to spend scarce time and money on proposal writing.

However, there has also been a drying-up of the market, which has had an impact on Native research consultation business opportunities.

Natives taking over management and administrative practices as the transfer process unfolds (see Penner 1983; Mawhiney 1994; and Waldrum, Herring and Young 1995) face down loading of federal services onto local communities. Consequently, there has been a growing demand from the communities for accountability and attention to principles of governance and justice (see Boldt and Long 1985.)

We believe the learning circle may be a helpful process in addressing accountability and governance issues because of its congruence with community values.

The Learning Circle: Research and Healing as Part of Community Process

The focus of this approach to research is not easily understood from a western research perspective. It is not “external” empirical research. Instead, it is interested in historical experiences, in the expression of the roots of problems, in reflecting on situations. It is not oriented to extracting data but rather to acts of sharing. Permission is given for the leader to report in this case, but the write-up is not essential to the process nor part of the tradition as it is currently practised. The purpose is good for the community and good for Native people as a whole, and this good is conceived as balance.

The leader is responsible to the group members as well as to community members who are not present in the group. Interpretation is “objectified” to the extent that seeing through the eyes of Nanabush provides some objectivity and distancing where issues can be distressing, painful, or vengeful. However, there can be no objectifying of a person. That is, a person cannot be made into a means to get a story line or morale across. Each person participates for their own healing. Each person has autonomy in how much they will disclose. As the group proceeds, there is little if any referring to what someone discloses. The leader may say “that’s hard for you,” which acknowledges the pain and offers support and encouragement. The leader addresses each individual in a myriad of ways to give honour to the person and to give them recognition within the group. The leader behaves in a humble manner, may be the brunt of jokes, and openly discloses his or her own weaknesses. This establishes the leader’s

identity with Nanabush. There may be individuals who do not literally know the name or significance of Nanabush, but who would recognize if a leader were to step out of this character and behave inappropriately.

Each person is free to speak without interference, interruption, or questioning. (See Black 1973, Darnell 1981, and Hagey 1986). Everyone waits for someone to finish speaking in turn, around the circle in the same direction as the dance, clockwise. The clock is not honoured. People are prepared to stay for as long as it takes. The communication is understood to be between the person and the Creator. Each speaker is allowed to complete their thoughts before the next person's turn. There is an air of light-heartedness or fun; it is not serious, yet deeply serious, and this is the presence of the Trickster.

Outsiders unschooled in the cultural meanings of the process make serious errors in interpretation. And, these outsiders can include individuals who have Native ancestry but little cultural contact.

The participants work to get rid of blame, which is intuited as inferior or undesirable behaviour, and this shedding of blame becomes the key for change. In this view, getting rid of blame encourages participants to accept responsibility and to participate in "power-with." The format is not confessional. The concept of the grandfathers and grandmothers providing unconditional love sets the stage for forgiving oneself and others. There is an etiquette of honesty; the past is past, and one cannot do anything to change it; however, one can learn from it. There is a sense of reality orientation and grounding in the here and now.

The leader may give information in the form of best practices or research findings, and this method is in stark contrast to mainstream qualitative research. But, as in quantitative research, the information embedded in the prelude to questions, or the questions themselves, is known to be transferring ideas to the participants. Whereas positivist research takes stock in the variation of responses to fixed choices, this type of research places value in the activity of processing the information, gaining new perspectives, and moving closer and deeper in mutual understanding, which has been discussed in the qualitative literature (see Reason 1994). And, while the re-awakening of the tradition of introspective research called Esoteric Knowledge focuses on an enlightenment process (Favre and Needleman 1992), this Native approach to research is literally a quest for community enlightenment. The learning circle is a quest for truth

and knowledge, which is seen as healing for individuals and for the body politic. Its goals and tenets are consistent with the methods of Champagne (1993), which address issues of racism in order to do beneficial (reconstruction) research in this area.

Through the Eyes of Nanabush

By taking the point of view of Nanabush, we can step back and reflect on the group process. And Nanabush, of course, can see inconsistencies, upsides and downsides, six of one, half a dozen of the other, as well as maybe yes, maybe no – all the conundrums of balance. While daily living and encounters with people are supposed to be in balance, group process led by a healer carries large expectations as an example of balanced relationships. The years of required apprenticeship and the ability to learn from other leaders and healers give the leader knowledge about setting the tone for balance and healing. The power of the circle is its balancing effect.

The group we are referring to here is the first one of a series and the first one on which we are reporting. It is composed of a mix of staff and clients in an agency responsible for diabetes health care: men and women, educated professionals and people without credentials who are shy about speaking English, people from the community and from outside, ranging in age from young adults to seniors, 18 people in all and only half of them chose to speak up in this session.

The beginning of the circle permits the free flow of social conversation, which gets across the message that everyone is having a common experience here today. Joking cuts the social tension and sets the tone for matters of communication and concern being addressed. There is a candle in the centre of the room, which symbolizes the words feeding the fire that burns up negativity, while positively strengthening everyone's inner fire, the essence of healing. The leader eases into the topic of "stress" obliquely, by using the indirect approach (Hagey 1986); for example, the statement "I don't even know what stress means" announces stress as one of the topics but also conveys the messages "I'm not the expert," "We are learning together;" "For each of us what is important is our own understanding."

The leader is speaking in English, but people freely interject Ojibway, and the leader responds with acknowledgment, invites the translation, which shows that he or she cares about Ojibway

knowledge and understanding. Every effort is made to put everyone on an equal footing. Yet, there is open tolerance for opposition. Each participant can challenge, and joking will follow to soften the challenge and maintain unity through laughter. Following the character of Nanabush, the leader indicates he is not perfect conveying the messages: “I make mistakes;” “We all learn from mistakes;” “We can share our mistakes and accelerate our learning.” He even shares his own difficulties with diabetes protocol, which is part of a rhetorical style of openness and flaunting to come into the circle of balance, which offers the freedom to choose balance.³

The healing phase of the circle begins with the go-around. The leader gives the rule that we can pass, we don’t have to speak, and introduces the research question, “How do we balance the positive and negative?” Note that the rhetorical style is more likely to be “how do we” and not “how do you” as in mainstream research. However, similar to mainstream research, there may be dialogue and the asking of rhetorical questions using non-Native direct questioning. The leader may interject responses or invite further clarification. This gives the leader more intervention power and in a way, diminishes the power that a healer would have by not intervening and thereby letting the ancestors speak directly to the participants, as in a ceremony that is strictly for the purpose of healing a specific situation or family. Since this learning circle usually has people from different communities who do not know each other, the leader may not be very familiar with individuals; therefore, there is more need for clarification and dialogue. Furthermore, there may need to be some focussing devices, in the form of questions the leader can use to stay in the domain of common concerns, given that the group is diverse, having both commonalities and very different understandings. To this end, the leader uses the following opening questions.

Questions Emanating from the Medicine Wheel

These questions are used as probes in an open-ended interview style with individual informants, as well as focus groups.

Round one (getting out the negative reflections on diabetes, feelings, and behaviours):

- 1) What is your understanding of individuals who stop caring?

- 2) How do you know when someone feels inferior?
- 3) Our elders explain that envy is wanting something for nothing; what is your understanding?
- 4) The word resentment implies re-feeling of the past. What is your understanding?
- 5) Our elders emphasize the importance of hearing. What is your understanding if someone isn't listening?

Round two (starting to heal feelings and relationships, promoting healthy behaviours, and controlling diabetes):

- 1) Our elders say caring is interaction. What is your understanding?
- 2) What is your understanding of eating healthy foods?
- 3) What is your understanding of a balanced relationship?
- 4) What is your understanding of the word "respect"?
- 5) The elders remind us that in order to build our spiritual fires we have to listen. What is your understanding?

When the leader does begin with a more focussed question, an answer of deflection can signal that the leader has not yet earned the trust needed before the people can open up, and the leader may respond by triggering more joking at his own expense. This can happen, for example, if he calls someone by the wrong name, and people take him to task for it, or by self-disclosure, as in "I'm under stress; [group laughter] my blood sugar rose a couple of points here." Also, the leader can just let people have time to get comfortable and speak up later when ready, which lets each person pass in turn until someone takes the opportunity to speak.

The leader's mission here is to create an environment in which people can heal themselves and can ask the Creator to help. Guided by the teachings and extensive experience in groups, the leader will infuse humour throughout the circle, try to continually build trust in the circle between all members, and encourage participants to challenge and to ask questions. Each member is acknowledged as a researcher as well as someone who participates in healing, whether they contribute verbally or not.

By beginning with the notion of stress, the leader is starting

with the rascals and inviting people to “get the garbage out.” By topicalizing the issue of European foods, the leader is starting in the East. The circle progresses to the South, where problematic relationship issues begin to be discussed. For example, one participant said:

Lateral violence seems to be the biggest killer of trust in the community. And a lot of it has to do with people’s egos. I believe as a worker, you know, we don’t need egos. Even as a person, we don’t need an ego. But sometimes you know with Native people, we base our whole being around who we are as a worker. And it’s important for us to learn that as a worker it’s okay to accept constructive feedback. That doesn’t mean they’re attacking your character, who you are. So we got to start learning, you know, as workers to separate who we are as a person and who we are on the job. And being aware of our own issues, you know as workers, and because it’s these issues that get in the way of us helping the community and the community members in a positive way.

Another issue or problem that I see here in the community, I guess, would be the lack of trust. Being an outsider, the lack of trust is not the real problem. The real problem is what made people get to this point? And with this particular community, it’s been the multiple trauma issues that people have gone through. And what has happened is in turn, you know, as Native people we talk about unity. About being one. And that’s good, you know, in a time of crisis we always have to pull together and we don’t work effectively as a team. And so the trust issue, you know, also goes around, you know, comes from the lateral violence as well. The gossip and the rumours go around and then usually it gets back to us who start these things. And then we kind of don’t have that trust no more. As workers we got to promote, you know, ties. And if the lateral violence is on the job, then it makes the issue of trust a lot harder to deal with.

The circle turns to the West as people begin to be willing to self-reflect and disclose, which provides the example of taking responsibility. For example, someone shares:

When I did my genogram work in 1988, I was able to establish a pattern between the fathers and the sons in my family. And there's always been an issue there, lots of anger between father and son. In identifying that issue, I was able to talk with my father about these things that bothered me as a young man, and he listened and he remained objective, and so that was able to help me. So now that I'm aware of the issue it stops with me, I don't pass it down to my son. It's important when we take a look at multi generational trauma that we don't blame. A lot of people who are in this line of work will blame it on the boarding-school era. Sure, a lot of it may have started then, but instead of blaming, let's take energy from blaming and turn it into "What can we do?"

The circle then turns to the North, to movement, problem solving, understandings of change. For example, a participant states:

Some people just have more skill than others, and some people understand the multi-generational grief cycle a lot better than others because, you know, it all goes back to who we are, what issues have we worked on, have we worked on all of them? So I guess we do need to go to the Native approach, but we also have to be aware of where the community is at with that type of approach.

As the circle comes to completion, balancing forces are alive. Balance is not conceptualized as a "state of affairs" outcome. Rather, it is the dynamic balancing power of the circle that can be felt by everyone.

At this point, the leader acknowledges the contributions, strengths and achievements of the session and thanks the spirit grandparents or the Creator. Some groups may close with hugs and handshakes with each member of the circle.

This pan-North American style has been misinterpreted by health professionals and researchers alike who have a blind preference for their own educational methods, which they do not see as culturally specific (see, for example, Brossard, Bass and Jackson 1982; Hagey 1984; and King-Hooper and Hagey 1994).

The Learning Circle in the Context of Future Research

Nishnaabe Kinoomaadwin Naadmaadwin

As the Medical Services Branch of Health and Welfare Canada turns up the volume by announcing that policy and agency decisions should be driven by outcomes, we can observe a flagrant disinterest in evidence. Rather, shrinking budgets dictate decisions. Decentralization and increase in local "control over misery" (King-Hooper and Hagey 1994) comes as the centralizing forces of underfunding and downloading from Medical Services to the province weaken the delivery of services and heighten the tension between ethics and economics (see Storch 1996).

And, in such an environment, there could arise a critical discourse that asks "How do these learning circles really work, how effective are they and under what conditions?" Independent investigation can be undertaken to address such questions, and Native communities can choose to hire independent consultants or to embark on stock taking. But, in the meantime, recent policy documents, such as the Jakarta declaration (1997), emphasize that

training and practice of local leadership skills should be encouraged to support health promotion activities. Documentation of experiences in health promotion through research and project reporting should be enhanced to improve planning, implementation and evaluation (11).

In line with the Jakarta declaration, we would recommend this methodology we are reporting for its potential to increase community capacity, empower individuals, and influence the determinants of health. Our argument is that this method is even more culture-based than participatory action research (P.A.R.), which has been shown to enable people by strengthening their awareness of their capabilities (Park 1993), and like P.A.R., it can be used in inquiry, intervention (Tandon 1981) and evaluation (Tandon 1984). Because of its added focus on mental health and healing, it holds the potential for reflective and empathic decision making as well (Goleman 1995).

We believe it is up to Native communities themselves to determine whether the learning circle is a genre of research that can support the development of leadership and the healing of communities. We have tried to show that the learning circle is not in conflict with local values for community participation in decision-making; it can incorporate research findings and research methods from more conventional approaches.

Notes

1. For more on this use of the word “re-membering,” see King-Hooper (1991).
2. See Swartz (1988) for a description of the healing powers of the sweatlodge ceremony, and Miller and Stiver (1997) for theoretical contrast between relational models of therapy and those of mainstream psychiatric practice.
3. For a theoretical articulation of the motivational base of rhetoric see Burke (1950).

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