



# An example of Appreciative Inquiry as a methodology for child welfare research in Saskatchewan Aboriginal communities<sup>1</sup>

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Aboriginal peoples have raised many concerns about research conducted by non-Aboriginal researchers. Their concerns address one central problem: research has been more beneficial to the researchers than to the communities being researched. Ethical guidelines have been developed for conducting research in Aboriginal communities, such as those established by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO).<sup>2</sup> Such guidelines are intended to ensure that research conducted with Aboriginal peoples is respectful, is guided by principles developed by Aboriginal peoples, and is of benefit to the communities involved.

In keeping with the NAHO guidelines, this project used Appreciative Inquiry as a method to identify and articulate the programs and activities that First Nations communities believe necessary to support the well-being of children and families and prevent child maltreatment. Appreciative Inquiry involves the practice of asking questions that strengthen the capacity of those answering the questions to focus on positive potential.

## **Purpose of the study**

- Engage First Nations communities in articulating the values and community practices that promote child, youth and family well-being and prevent child maltreatment,

- Identify and promote the existing programs and services that support child, youth and family well-being, and
- Envision how deficiencies in programs and services related to the first two points might be overcome.

## **Method**

The research team assembled an advisory committee consisting of representatives of four First Nations child and family service agencies in Saskatchewan, two Elders and a youth treatment facility representative. The researchers and the advisory committee jointly developed the methodology to be used. As the project progressed, advisory committee members facilitated access to key community groups, advised on local community protocol, and commented on progress.

## **Research approach**

The research team and the advisory committee developed the following positively framed questions:

- What positive programs, events and activities are happening in this community to help children and families in a healthy way?
- What makes these programs and activities good for children and families?

- What additional resources could be tapped to better these events and programs?
- What teachings (values) are practiced in your community?
- Which do you think are important for all children and families in the community to learn and relearn?
- As a community, how do you think these teachings (values) can be strengthened?

In addition, four more questions or statements for response were developed for youth:

- Name the five top values taught in your community.
- Who are the teachers?
- How are these teachings being taught?
- My community helps me to be to be a good person by [insert response].

### Communities and participants

Four Saskatchewan First Nations communities participated in the research. The communities were remote from one another and demographically diverse (differing in size, tribal allegiances, languages, cultures and religions). Within each community, participants were recruited from four groups (elders, service providers, general community members and youth). Over 300 people participated in the study.

### Data gathering

Researchers introduced themselves to the communities following the traditional protocols observed by each First Nation, and created a written partnership agreement with the leadership. After the local leadership approved the partnership agreement, researchers held the Elders focus group first, then conducted focus sessions with the other three groups.

### Data verification

Researchers categorized the information gathered from the focus groups in each community and returned to invite participants to comment on the information gathered. Community participants were asked if they found the information to be a fair representation of their collective responses to the questions asked, and additional comments were recorded and corrections made based on the responses received.

### Data analysis

Key findings were pulled from the data in four different ways:

- an “all gatherings” analysis identified the key findings that emerged from entire data set;
- a “participant gatherings” analysis compared the key findings that emerged when the data collected was organized by each of the four participant groups;
- a “traditional values” analysis put together the data that referred to traditional values, and
- a “concerns and ideas for improvement” analysis summarized ideas as to ways the research could have been improved.

### Results

Key values identified by all communities were the importance of cultural heritage, spirituality, community events, and knowledge (education and knowing a native language). Elders emphasized programs that strengthened a sense of community belonging. Service providers and general community members emphasized sports, recreation, employment training and adult education. Youth listed sports, recreational opportunities, and cultural and community events. Activities and programs that strengthened cultural identity, celebrated families and provided opportunities to build personal relationships were highly valued.

Elders spoke specifically of the importance of knowing traditional values and teachings, frequently answering the question about values practised in the community by advising parents and grandparents about traditional child-rearing practices. Service providers, general community members, and youth listed values related to the forging of positive, mutually beneficial, community-building relationships in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

### Discussion

The First Nations communities in this study showed a striking sense of community as a fundamental aspect of individual identity. They saw great importance in providing positive child and youth activities, educating children and youth about their history and culture, including children and youth in cultural practice and ceremonies, teaching traditional lifestyles, skills and language, and holding community-wide events. Emphasis was placed on activities and events that promoted positive interactions by involving the whole community, from the very young to the elderly; that transferred cultural knowledge (ceremonies, protocol, history, and language); that were enjoyable opportunities to

socialize; and that supported well-being through sports and other recreational activities.

These communities felt that children and young people need to develop a firm sense of their own identities, and an equally firm sense of support from their families and community, in order to grow into responsible, caring adults. The implications of this research are that policy-makers need to pay more attention to, and ensure support for, the programs, events and activities that have positive benefits for children, youth and families.

One of the characteristics of the Appreciative Inquiry method used in this research is that it strengthens the capacity of those answering the research questions to focus on positive potential. A tangible indicator of the method's success in this project was that, as a direct result of the interview sessions, one of the communities initiated a traditional round dance ceremony to honour their children, attended by over 1,000 people. Community capacity was strengthened as a result of the research process, and this event reinforced the validity of the finding that traditional ceremonies were highly valued as a way of transmitting cultural continuity to the next generation.

The strengths-based approach taken by this research showed that there was a largely untapped capacity for resilience in these Aboriginal communities. The premise underlying this research was that the people in Aboriginal communities have many of the answers they require to solve their own problems, a message that has resonated with Aboriginal leaders for decades.<sup>3,4</sup> The research project was able to provide a methodology that made the potential for positive change more apparent.

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- 1 This information sheet is based on the following report: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare. (2007). *Identity, Community, Resilience: the Transmission of Values project*. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work.
  - 2 National Aboriginal Health Organization (2003). *Ways of Knowing: A Framework for Health Research*. Retrieved February 19, 2007 from [http://16016.vws.magma.ca/english/pdf/research\\_waysof.pdf](http://16016.vws.magma.ca/english/pdf/research_waysof.pdf)
  - 3 Miller, J.R. (1990). Owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian policy. *Ethnohistory*, 37, 386-415.
  - 4 Turpel-Lafond, M.E. (2004). *Maskeko-sakahikanihk: 100 years for a Saskatchewan First Nation*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Houghton Boston.