Ceremonies of Relationship: Engaging Urban Indigenous Youth in Community-Based Research

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Abstract
Indigenous communities from around the world, and particularly marginalized youth from within these communities, have not always been adequately included and valued as potential collaborators in various research processes. Instead, research has relegated Indigenous youth to subjects where adults, operating primarily from Western knowledge positions and assumptions, remain the experts. Given the role of research in informing programs and policies, the ways research meaningfully engages and includes Indigenous youth are of key concern. This article presents experiences gained throughout the duration of a study that sought to identify the knowledge, resources, and capabilities required to support the health, resilience, and well-being of Indigenous youth within an urban Canadian context. In particular, this article focuses on methods and approaches of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems throughout the research process and how this can in turn foster meaningful and transformative engagements with Indigenous youth. We argue for the importance and value of traditional cultural practices and knowledge systems and what we call ceremonies of relationships, existent within Indigenous communities around the world, and how their integration in research processes can support constructive and meaningful engagements with Indigenous youth research collaborators.

Keywords
Indigenous knowledge, youth engagement, resilience, community-based research, ethical relationships, Indigenous youth

What is already known?
We know that central to Indigenous community-based research is the forming of ethical and responsible relationships and practices of engagement with members of a community.
We know that it is important to include youth perspectives in research and this can significantly increase the scope, significance, and applicability of research findings. We also know that previous research has not adequately involved youth perspectives in the research process, with Indigenous communities or other marginalized populations.

What this paper adds?
This article contributes to our understanding of meaningful youth engagement in research, reviewing strategies and the importance of increasing both youth engagement and knowledge mobilization through the establishment of research partnerships with community-based organizations. In particular, this article elaborates on ceremonies of relationship that signify for us a sacred character to knowledge generation as well as relationship building with youth, community members, parents, elders, and community-based organizations. This article adds to the ways in which research with Indigenous youth can be approached ethically, making an important contribution to

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the theory and practice of adolescent development–focused research. This article also contributes to our understanding of meaningful youth engagement in research and knowledge generation more generally.

Central to Indigenous community-based research is the forming of ethical relationships and responsible practices of engagement with members of a community. Indeed, Brant-Castellano (2004) stipulates that Indigenous community members involved in research must be engaged as partners or co-researchers, rather than being labeled as participants or subjects. This perspective is particularly relevant when undertaking research with Indigenous youth, as well as young members of other marginalized populations, since we know from previous research that meaningful engagement with youth can increase the scope, significance, and applicability of research findings (Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Burn, Lapointe, & Chiodo, 2016; Liebenberg, Ikeda, & Wood, 2015). When meaningfully engaged in the research process, youth have the capacity to make significant and important contributions to research approaches and knowledge generation.

By drawing on experiences from our Youth Resilience Project discussed throughout this article, we highlight the experiences gained and lessons learned in building effective, ethical, and responsible relationships with Indigenous youth research collaborators. The objective of this 2-year project—as identified by youth, community collaborators, and local elders—was to discover sources of resilience and positive health strategies that can inform early intervention theory and policy to promote Indigenous youth wellness in Saskatoon and other Canadian urban contexts. The operating principle behind this study was that the resources, knowledge, and capabilities required to support the health and wellness of Indigenous youth are already present within inner-city contexts and the young people themselves and thus need only to be collaboratively identified, learned about, and fostered.

This project illustrates several ways in which Indigenous knowledge (IK), spirituality, and notions of research as a ceremonial process can be drawn on to engage Indigenous youth meaningfully in research (Wilson, 2008). Specifically, we elaborate on ceremonies of relationship that signify for our research team and youth collaborators a sacred character to knowledge generation as well as relationship building with youth, community members, parents, elders, and community-based organizations. Ceremonies often mark significant human events (i.e., birth, graduations, marriage, and death) or the initiation of new processes or cycles (i.e., changing of seasons, cycles of the moon, or planting seeds). Described throughout this article are such moments where interactions and exchanges among people for the purposes of knowledge generation (i.e., research) were imbued with ceremonial and spiritual significance. These interactions took on and were saturated by a “spiritual” or “sacred” character, insofar as they included practices such as smudging and prayer, invocations to a higher power, a creator, or our ancestors. These interactions were also treated with a significant degree of reverence and respect, involved sharing of deeply personal stories and life lessons, and concerned the conscious application among research team members of spiritual qualities and attitudes like compassion, respect, humility, kindness, and trustworthiness. All study processes—including signing consent forms, conducting interviews, hosting research meetings, or data generation, translation, and exchange—were therefore “elevated,” through the application of IK and teachings, to hold a ceremonial and sacred significance, thereby facilitating the meaningful engagement between the research team and the collaborating Indigenous youth and communities.

The current research remained grounded within the local social and cultural contexts of the urban Indigenous youth in this study. The term “Indigenous” is generally used to represent a vast diversity of “First Peoples” who occupied a particular land or place. Broadly speaking, this term is taken to be synonymous with the Canadian legalistic concept of “Aboriginal” that together represents First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples comprising approximately 1.4 million people (Statistics Canada, 2013). More specifically, the term Indigenous is used throughout to reflect the local cultural contexts of the Plains Cree and Métis youth who participated in this research from one urban Canadian environment of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

To situate our discussions, we first describe some relevant historical contexts that inform the rational for the current project. To develop key concepts used throughout, we then highlight literature in the area of community-based research, including participatory action research (PAR), community-engaged scholarship (CES), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and Indigenous methodologies and knowledge. Next, we outline our Youth Resilience Project and its history. Following this, we offer reflections on three key aspects of our engagement approach: (1) relationship building and visions of youth, (2) community ethics and cultural protocols, and (3) wider community engagement approaches. Overall, this article focuses on methods of how IK, and Cree cultural practices specifically, were integrated into our research approach to enhance engagement with our Indigenous youth collaborators. This article therefore informs the ways in which research with Indigenous youth can be approached ethically, making an important contribution to the theory and practice of adolescent development–focused research. The article also contributes to our understanding of meaningful youth engagement in research and knowledge generation more broadly.

**Historical Context and Project Rational**

The objectives of and rationale for this project were drawn from existing inequities of mental health problems and social distress that have become evident among Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan and in other urban settings in North America (Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011; Kirmayer, 2014; Modupalli, Cushon, & Neudorf, 2010/2011). Across various contexts in Canada, adversities impacting Indigenous youth and their families are directly attributed to colonization, which has taken place largely through acts of violence and systemic marginalization by European empires historically and
the Canadian government more recently (Meyer & Alvarado, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Over a 500-year period of colonization, a diverse array of Indigenous peoples across Canada were similarly subjected to oppressive governmental policies that were rationalized by an ideology that Indigenous peoples were “primitive” and needed to be “civilized” in order to participate in the evolving dominant Western society (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014). Such harmful practices included the explicit banning and criminalization of cultural practices and spirituality, the forced removal of Indigenous children into residential schools designed for assimilation, dislocation of communities to reserve areas, systems of economic marginalization, the purposeful spreading of infectious diseases, forced proselytization, slavery, and deliberate acts of violence or war (Daschuk, 2013; Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). The residential school system, in particular, ensured that many Indigenous children and youth were separated from their families and forbidden to practice their traditional forms of culture, spirituality, and language (Hatala, Desjardins, & Bombay, 2016; Milloy, 1999). The last residential school in Saskatchewan, Canada, closed in the mid-1990s.

Colonization is not just a process that happened in the past, but is ongoing in the present, enacted in relationships of power and privilege that directly impact the social determinants of Indigenous peoples’ health today (Goulet et al., 2011; Reading & Wien, 2009; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). As such, many Canadian Indigenous youth bear the brunt of the intergenerational effects of the collective traumas experienced by previous generations of family and communities (Kirmayer, 2014; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Indeed, a large body of health research indicates a link between the historical and contemporary impacts of colonization and the residential schools systems in Canada, and the high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, interpersonal violence, suicides, and mental illness and disorder experienced by many Indigenous youth across Canada today (Brooks, Daschuk, Poudrier, & Almond, 2014; Waldram et al., 2006). These youth are also noted to have higher rates of involvement with child welfare systems, are more likely to live in poverty and inadequate living conditions, and to experience higher rates of violent victimization when compared to non-Indigenous youth across Canada (Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, 2011; National Council on Welfare, 2007).

The histories of Canadian colonization and resultant health inequities signal a crucial need for targeted research to reveal the characteristics, conditions, and contexts of resilience and wellness among contemporary Indigenous youth and their communities. Of central concern, however, must be how this research occurs and how youth are engaged meaningfully throughout the process. The reflections offered here are one attempt to illustrate some of the strategies and approaches to research that bring IK to the forefront. These reflections thereby contribute not only to learning about respectful engagement with youth collaborators but also to rigorous community-based knowledge that can inform health interventions designed to address contemporary inequities.

Research: From Colonization to Collaboration

Historically, academic research did not undergo ethical and moral engagements with Indigenous communities and their youth, as academic scholarship and research has been plagued with a clandestine history of colonialism and neo-colonialism (Battiste, 2002; Bennett, 2004; Smith, 1999). These approaches informed a top-down view of community engagement—which in many ways persist today—with minimal or no impetus for responsible and reciprocal forms of relationship building between researchers and community members. Additionally, subtle forms of systemic and systematic racism in academic cultures further perpetuate a colonialist “savior” complex contributing further to forms of “othering” that can adversely impact Indigenous community–university relationships (Bull, 2010). As Kajner (2015) argues, “constructing community as an Other in a way that reflects the dominant European heritage of colonial relations” (p. 15) can hamper effective research relationships since “the othering…serves to position the institution as dominant in the arena of knowledge and scholarship even as it recognizes and includes community knowledge” (p. 27). Researchers operating from these assumptions may do little to hear the voices and concerns of those they are researching, as they are viewed as knowledge “experts” that are in hegemonic control of the process.

In an attempt to move away from these harmful research practices of the past, PAR is one methodological approach that has become a common and effective strategy for knowledge acquisition, mobilization, translation, and exchange within community-engaged research and scholarship (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012; Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009, 2010). As Lavallée (2009) observes, these practices are considered socially conscious in that they “directly [involve] the participants of the research in a practical and real way” and that they also “[aim] to empower people and contribute to immediate problematic situations” (p. 30). Indeed, St. Denis (1992) further explains that PAR is a process whereby members of the community are given an opportunity to voice their opinions and be involved in the research process throughout the duration of a proposed project, and in many cases, continue to be engaged long after the project reaches its completion. Due to its focus on building community relationships, Bennett (2004) argues that PAR is a means by which systemic and systematic forms of power imbalance, racism, and epistemic oppression can be addressed within and throughout a research project. In effect, PAR seeks to establish a liberating dialogue emphasizing community-based production of knowledge and exchange (Mertens, 1998). In this way, PAR approaches can assist researchers to create environments that are conducive to the effective integration of youth perspectives into what is researched and how it is researched. As such, findings from these approaches are more likely to align with the priorities and experiences of youth, increasing the potential for positive impacts and fostering constructive relationships between youth
research collaborators, their communities, and academic researchers.

CES is another research approach helping to destabilize power imbalances that have infused previous research with Indigenous communities. According to Armitage and Levac (2015), CES is focused on creating civic spaces where “communities work together to improve the quality of life in a given community through the sharing of knowledge, skills, values and motivations” (p. 148). This can include the concepts of knowledge brokering (KB), which use a reciprocal approach in obtaining research by creating “win-win” opportunities for communities involved in the methodologies of the academic researchers (Ward, House, & Hamer, 2009). According to Lomas (2007), KB is defined as “all activity that links decision makers with researchers, facilitating their interaction” so that they “are able to better understand each other’s goals and professional cultures, influence each other’s work, forge new partnerships, and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision-making” (p. 131). In this way, CES frameworks attempt to redirect scholarship that formerly may have been exploitive of Indigenous communities and younger populations to centering on mutual benefits, consultations with community, and respectful exchanges of knowledge.

Following the principles of PAR and CES, CBPR is yet another framework that makes explicit an agenda of social justice. In this approach, social change and transformative action are embedded into research strategies that are decided by the community member collaborators (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Minkler, 2005). According to Johnny, Phipps, and Wedlock (2015), “The goal of CBPR is to shape the research process to fit the perspectives of community members so as to generate knowledge that contributes more directly to social change” (p. 140). Thus, CBPR actively avoids historical troubles of what we describe as break-and-enter approaches to research, where academics are seen to enter a community for a short time, collect data they require, and then leave without proper engagement or working relationships with the community—all crucial considerations when engaging Indigenous youth in the research process.

Extending this conversation further, several authors advocate for specific forms of Indigenous methodologies that include aspects of IK as central to the research approach (Absolon, 2011; Botha, 2011; Brown, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009; Simpson, 2008; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Although CBPR, CES, and PAR frameworks adequately take into consideration the important role of social action, power distributions, justice, and change, this research can still carry with it subtle forms of epistemological imbalances that place academic or “Western” forms of knowledge as superior to other ways of knowing (Botha, 2011; Wilson, 2008). The intention of an Indigenous approach to research, then, is to both decolonize the areas of collaboration and knowledge production between Indigenous and Western modes of research and to rewrite and thereby “re-right” the boundaries between these ways of knowing (Smith, 1999). An Indigenous research approach with youth can build upon conventional CBPR, CES, and PAR frameworks by operating from an Indigenous epistemology and prioritizing aspects of spirituality and the well-being of a whole person. This implies a recognition of the “interconnectedness of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of individuals with all living things and with the earth, the star world, and the universe” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 23). It is this spiritual domain that is too often neglected in contemporary community engaged research (Begay & Maryboy, 2000; Hanohano, 1999; Hatala, 2008), a limitation Indigenous methodologies and knowledge systems are working to correct. Moreover, utilizing an Indigenous research approach creates space for incorporating an Indigenous ontology that sees knowledge as relational, requiring researchers to reflect on their own contributions to the knowledge generation process as well as their relational accountability to the communities they work alongside (Hart, 2010; Lavallée, 2009; Wilson, 2001). An Indigenous ontological positioning contrasts ontologies that typically inform Western approaches, as value is placed on subjectivity instead of objectivity, and the research process requires focus not on realities, knowledge, or ideas generated in and of themselves, but on the relationship we share with them (Wilson, 2001).

Building on CBPR informed by Indigenous methodologies and IK, our research project employed aspects of Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices throughout, mostly those from a Plains Cree perspective. As Wilson (2008) suggests, research is a ceremony and a process that should be approached with reverence and sacredness, referring to both the sacredness of knowledge and the stories that emerge from research, but also the application of spiritual practices to the research approach and methodology itself. Throughout our research, we have found that viewing methods of engagement with Indigenous youth as ceremonies of relationship helped to ensure that this vision of “research as ceremony” was being applied in a good way (Wilson, 2008) and giving way to an approach that centers on the meaningful engagement with community collaborators in the research process.

The Youth Resilience Project: Working With IK

The Youth Resilience Project was primarily carried out within the inner-city neighborhoods of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, at the Community Engagement Office, a satellite center of the University of Saskatchewan. This project involved 32 Indigenous youth mostly from Plains Cree First Nations and Métis backgrounds. By evaluating protective factors/strengths evident in the youths’ experiences and stories, this project was able to identify critical developmental challenges and indicators in becoming healthy as Indigenous youth living in an urban environment. In this respect, the youth inspired for us a concept of resilience as a process of doing well despite facing adversity (Hatala, 2011; Hatala et al., 2016; Ungar, 2008). In the urban Indigenous youth context, adversity is observed as more than an acute stressor, rather adversity often involves dealing with chronic issues like structural inequality, poverty, racism, and
the adverse effects of many years of Canadian settler colonization. In addition, the youth highlighted the concept of resilience as one that is dynamic and contextually specific, meaning that it is a process—which some indicated they were still currently navigating—that occurs in the midst of real-life struggles. By becoming attuned to the youths’ real-world circumstances, our research process became an opportunity to encourage youth and support perseverance and resilience processes. To explore knowledge of these resilience and wellness strategies among urban Indigenous youth, this project utilized a combination of various research frameworks and methods, including photo-voice and qualitative talking circle interviews that actively sought to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies.

A diverse interdisciplinary research team that consisted of persons from different cultural, ethnic, and academic backgrounds, who possessed knowledge and experience in incorporating Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies into research processes, were involved together in all aspects of this project. All of the authors were engaged in this process to some degree, with the first three authors forming the core research team and the latter two assisting with coding and data analysis. Before the start of the research process, members of the research team consulted community elders and various localized partners and organizations, such as the Pleasant Hill Community Association, Saskatoon Tribal Council, and Core Neighborhood Youth Co-op. A community advisory research committee (CARC) comprised of two local Indigenous parents, two older Indigenous youth (aged 19–25 years), and two local Indigenous elders from Saskatoon’s core neighborhoods was established to guide and drive the research and engagement process. The need to focus on resilience and the strengths that were already present within this inner-city context emerged from the initial discussions, in which youth voices were included. We relied on members of the research team’s previous experiences in the their formation of the CARC and crucial guidance and support from our partnering organizations and elders to ensure the project adhered to concerns voiced by Indigenous researchers and the Tri-Council Policy Statement II (Chapter 9) regarding “community-driven” ethical guidelines (Baydala, Bourassa, Hampton, McKay-McNabb, & Placsko, 2006; Bennett, 2004; Schnarch, 2004).

The Youth Resilience Project was also constructed in a way that positioned the Indigenous youth as co-researchers with the research team, fostering collaborative storytelling and contributing to the building and deepening of relationships. Moreover, empowering youth to choose how and what data are collected, what parts of their stories are shared, and the ways their stories are utilized can help foster their consultation skills, competence, confidence, and their trust of research and community partners—all central processes of a broader movement of capacity building and empowerment. Moreover, as youth collaborators were engaged as cocreators of knowledge in the research process, they become witnesses to and allies in their individual and collective stories. The youth were thus able to assert their strengths and offer authentic images of their experiences as inner-city Indigenous youth through co-constructed ceremonies of relationship, ensuring that the research informs action in a manner that is grounded in the values, belief, knowledge, and needs of those it intends to impact.

Through the diverse interdisciplinary perspectives of our research team, community collaborators, and CARC, we learned about applying a “two-eyed way of seeing” research approach (Martin, 2012), whereby contributions of our combined Indigenous and Western “ways of knowing” (worldviews) worked alongside one another with respect and balance. Along these lines, Kovach (2009) underlines our responsibility as researchers to go beyond the binaries of Indigenous-settler relations “to construct new, mutual forms of dialogue, research, theory, and action” (p. 12). This two-eyed seeing framework proposed by Mi’kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall was a means to bridge Western science and IK; an approach that recognizes the benefits of seeing from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and finally to use both of these ways of seeing simultaneously (Iwama, Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009; Martin, 2012).

For our research team, this two-eyed seeing framework made space for open discussions regarding the crucial roles of both “ways of seeing.” In reflecting on this process and the complementarity between the two systems of knowledge (Martin, 2012), what we have come to understand within our project was that the Western perspective was largely concerned with the “what” of the research process, whereas the IKs were often informed by or focused on the “how” or “why” of the process. The what here often involved a concern for “valid” or “reliable” empirical data that would generate insights into processes of resilience among Indigenous youth within inner-city contexts, data we could share with funders and community partners through appropriate forms of analyses and knowledge translation or exchange. This Western lens also involved a very specific concern for university ethics and protocols—such as signing consent forms and anonymity—and with consideration of findings from the Youth Resilience Project within the context of existing knowledge present in the academic literature.

In our various conversations as a research team, it became clear that the Indigenous lens was not so much concerned with these specific aspects of the research, but more generally with how these research processes were carried out and the why or the intentions behind the actions and exchanges with youth and community partners. Practically speaking, this complementarity between knowledge systems ensured specific values and qualities governed the research process. Bringing Indigenous or spiritual values to the forefront of the research process—that is, qualities like respect, humility, reverence, kindness, or compassion—ensured that what was being done to generate knowledge about Indigenous youth resilience and wellness (i.e., research methodology) was being done in a good way, thereby safeguarding community relationships throughout the research process.
Working with IK often requires an understanding that relationships follow circular patterns and processes, repeating many cycles throughout the life of an individual and in nature (Hanohano, 1999; Hart, 2002; Rheault, 1999). To accent this perspective, we acknowledged the four seasons in this project by giving thanks for the gifts each season has to offer. With this idea in mind, and with the encouragement of community partners and youth collaborators, we employed the photovoice methodology and interviews across all four seasons (Wang & Burris, 1997). During each season, youth were given cameras and invited to take pictures of aspects of their lives relating to resilience and wellness. After each season, the youth were invited to participate in talking circle style interviews to share their stories and experiences based on their photo images. Additionally, we recognized that previous Indigenous scholars highlight interconnections between human developmental stages and each season (Hanohano, 1999). This is often captured in the teachings of the medicine wheel where each of the four quadrants represents an aspect of the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual parts of a human person, which, in turn, also reflect each of the four seasons, fall, winter, spring, and summer (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1984; Nabigon, 2010; Rheault, 1999). In addition to the research methodologies occurring across the four seasons, therefore, we explored interview questions with the youth across the seasons that pertain to each of these four human domains. These are examples of how we blended knowledge systems together, that is, by utilizing a photovoice research methodology and interviews in ways that were informed by and grounded in IK systems, we were able to add an Indigenous lens to a methodology that was developed from a non-Indigenous worldview.

In our experience, youth needed to be heard in safe environments, which are not always available to them. By creating a safe and “ethical space” during the talking circle interviews, photovoice activities, and research meetings—and by specifically bringing IK and methodologies into these spaces—we were able to promote knowledge exchanges which examined current and past assumptions about the status quo of urban Indigenous youth (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004), such as their role in society or their willingness to contribute to a knowledge generation process. These spaces also enabled the youth to ask questions they may not have felt comfortable voicing otherwise, for instance, around notions of ceremony, IK, or the role of elders in society. In many ways, these spaces and strategies made this project “transformative” (Mertens, 2009), in that we opened safe space for the youth to gain insights into resolutions to problems they face by creating opportunities for positive reflection and empowerment. These transformative spaces also involved exchanges in typically Western ways of knowing and sharing by providing opportunities for youth to present their stories with others in an academic manner at various conferences, by building skills in photography, and by enabling participation in aspects of data collection and analysis. Through the knowledge exchange activities, there were also opportunities for youth to interact with and potentially “transform” wider public assumptions about youth and their role in society through community presentations. Having a “transformative” vision of research is crucial to ensuring the project meaningfully engages with and can have direct benefit to the youth collaborators and was central to our intentions of carrying out research that would have a direct benefit to the youth involved.

It is important to acknowledge that working in and with different relationships simultaneously in research can be challenging, does not always go as planned, or may not always be a positive and fruitful experience (i.e., needing to change research meetings last minute to accommodate community events such as funerals or changes that occur among staff at local community organizations). This article intentionally reflects on insights gained about maintaining positive relationships while engaging youth collaborators, their communities, and local organizations in their environments throughout our project. In so doing, we do not intend to gloss over the “messiness” that can characterize much of community-based research, and the many challenges that building strong relationships with community members and youth can pose. Rather, we hope that some of the insights shared here can inform future scholarship of a similar nature to practice ceremonies of relationships with various groups, thereby minimizing, to some degree, the struggles and challenges that can naturally arise during meaningful engagement with youth research collaborators.

Engaging Methodologies: Ceremonies of Relationship

The following sections outline our approach and the insights that emerged while working with and engaging urban Indigenous youth in Saskatoon. Although several insights could be mentioned in this section, length constraints necessitate that we focus on three central aspects of Indigenous youth engagement that we feel are either relatively new to the existing literature or offer guidance for integrating Indigenous and Western forms of knowledge into research.

Connections With and Visions of Youth

One approach to engaging youth was to adopt a conversational or talking circle method that recognizes youth as collaborators in the research project and contributors to community knowledge. The conversational method is inherently relational and “aligns with an Indigenous worldview that honours orality as a means of transmitting knowledge and upholds the relational” (Kovach, 2010, p. 43). Moreover, this approach is capable of incorporating decolonizing methods that break down the power hierarchy between researcher and “participant” and enable both parties to engage in examining their storied experiences in the context of life, culture, society, and institutions in ways that challenge dominant perspectives (Bishop, 1999). Among Plains Cree communities in Saskatchewan, storytelling is a common way of disseminating knowledge intergenerationally (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Storytelling is a means of
engaging youth and “involves a dialogic participation that holds deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others” (Kovach, 2009, p. 40). Following this perspective, our project used the photos produced by the youth collaborators as a means to explore, elicit, and assist reflections toward potential hidden meanings identified within their photos, stories, and experiences. This approach is referred to in the literature as photoelicitation (Harper, 2002) and purposefully focuses on the images as a point of conversation, rather than centering on the youth themselves, in order to allow them to be more comfortable and open. The conversational method ensures that relationships are formed between the roles of storyteller and listener and become stronger as each role is affirmed through the dissemination, transfer, and exchange of knowledge (Bishop, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Bustamante et al. (2015) clearly summarize how integral the inclusion of youths’ voices is by stating the following:

Youth appreciate research projects that welcome their voices in processes that are fun, transformative and rewarding, and researchers learn at least as much as the young people do in the process… the point is to honour youth choices in framing individual and shared life events and conditions—nothing about us without us—without adopting tired scripts that serve adult agendas. (pp. 37–38)

Bull (2010) claims that the values used in a study must be foregrounded when a storytelling approach to engaging youth is utilized. As mentioned previously, our study framework was based on the spiritual values and moral frameworks present in IK, such as reciprocity, humility, reverence, and compassion. These values played a vital role in all talking circle conversations, ensuring the ceremonies of relationship formed centered on respect for the knowledge exchanged and the words, attitudes, and actions used by the research team. Building respectful relationships with youth also required our team to use empathy to ensure that oppressive or denigrating language often modeled to us through our colonial Western education was avoided. We recognized that we must be freed from patronizing attitudes, language, or actions, upon which colonial environments have often been established, to strive to meet and relate to the youth where they are at. Additionally, safe spaces were co-constructed by being proactive in four following moral domains:

1. Trust: We needed the youth to trust that we were not there to “fix” them.
2. Transparency: We shared all collaborator transcriptions and the intent of our actions and words.
3. Caring: Each story was considered “sacred” in nature.
4. Honesty: Open with the vision and goals of the project and its limited ability to create positive lasting change.

These values and morals, often referred to as “soft” or “interpersonal” skills, are becoming more central to all areas of research, education, and development, especially with youth (Gibb, 2014; Hatala et al., in press). We suggest that these values or interpersonal skills are ultimately spiritual in nature. They emerge from a spiritual attitude, which Hanohano (1999) identifies as oftentimes central to Indigenous ways of seeing the world. They were informed by our choice to view the youth collaborators throughout this project as little elders, as our brothers and sisters who may one day become or already are community leaders. The term little elders comes from the idea that our team acknowledges and respects that youth are stewards of their sacred stories, stories filled with insights into paths that lead to resilience and wellness. Finally, we argue that researchers in this field must reflect on and develop awareness of assumptions about Indigenous youth they carry, as that vision shapes their reality and could inform their engagement with youth in contrary ways.

There are many theories and assumptions of youth—and especially Indigenous youth—upheld by the wider society and community. The stereotypes of youth that persist in the minds of adults often involve images of rebellion, irrationality, or frivolity. The media plays a defining role in shaping misperceptions of Indigenous youth held by the wider society (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010). Media representations and images of urban Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan are all too often littered with an overrepresentation of gang participation, drug use, illicit sexual activity, and excessive lawlessness and violence. Unfortunately, the way youth are portrayed by media in society can create the conditions for undesirable patterns of behavior (Mertens, 2009). Our project’s use of two-eyed seeing ensured that negative assumptions or overgeneralizations about Indigenous youth—those involving an overemphasis on a state of “crisis” or delinquency as necessary developmental conditions—were viewed with a critical lens. We were also critical of any conceptions of Indigenous youth that may have emerged from Western frameworks, which can focus narrowly on class, race, and gender identity, neglecting insights from IK that uphold concepts of nobility, spirituality, and resilience as inherent aspects of youth and their day-to-day experiences (Brokenleg, 2005). As a research team, we also actively reflected on our own assumptions about what resilience entails, especially in analyzing youths’ strategies for overcoming challenges. Through reflexivity and dialogue with youth, we were able to examine our own biases and values about what characterizes a healthy or “risky” behavior, which ultimately enabled us to better understand youths’ resilience strategies for exactly what youth presented them to be.

It is doubtful that efforts inspired by negative or pessimistic visions of youth can do much more than help youth become adjusted to the oftentimes negative norms present in today’s dominant Western society, a society where materialistic and racialized outlooks tend to destroy spiritual susceptibilities and inherent strategies of resilience. Thus, the concept of youth we chose to embrace throughout our project was informed and strengthened by our Indigenous lens and considered the holistic aspects of human nature as primary (i.e., body, mind, emotions, and spirit). Through consultations with our youth collaborators, it became clear that under the appropriate
nurturing and supportive environmental conditions, Indigenous youth demonstrate an inherent nobility and altruism, spirituality, and self-sacrifice. As such, the concept of little elders shaped our visions and interactions with Indigenous youth collaborators throughout the project and provided a framework for creating a safe space where knowledge of resilience and wellness could be exchanged through ceremonies of relationship.

Community Ethics and Cultural Protocols

In addition to fostering relationships and holding a sacred vision of youth, our research team made a succinct effort to follow ethical protocol for research involving Indigenous peoples. We adhered to the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP), which offer guidelines for our ongoing commitment to the youth collaborators and the community of inner-city Saskatoon (Baydala et al., 2006; Schnarch, 2004). The OCAP principles provide specific directions to researchers for appropriate ways Indigenous community members and individuals should be involved in a research process.

OCAP highly recommends knowing the treaty territory where the research is being engaged. In this case, our research was done in Treaty 6 territory and, as a result, it was decided that the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) would become the stewards and owners of all emergent “data.” They are thus in a position to decide, through community consultations with youth and the research team, the appropriate means of access and possession (see Appendix). In saying this, however, it was also acknowledged that the youth collaborators have the final say in what happens with their stories of resilience and wellness. Ultimately, the youths’ perspectives and voices carry special significance and value during such consultations.

Our research team also upheld Plains Cree Indigenous cultural protocol throughout the engagement process, which was another recommendation shared by the community consultants, elders, and youth collaborators. Adherence to Cree cultural protocol meant project team members offered tobacco when knowledge and advice was sought from elders. Tobacco was also given to the little elders in exchange for their stories, at team meetings, and when broader conversations were shared. Tobacco offering is an important protocol among many Indigenous communities in Canada, and particularly important among Plains Cree communities in Saskatchewan. According to McAdam (2009), a lawyer and longtime activist working from a Plains Cree perspective, tobacco establishes a communication link between individuals and the spiritual worlds. Tobacco is therefore a sacred medicine, and its many uses are revealed over a lifetime of its use for traditional knowledge purposes and cultural ceremonies. Offering tobacco to the collaborators in this study—youth and elders alike—ensured that meaningful and respectful ceremonies of relationships were fostered and that cultural protocols and ethical guidelines were upheld (McAdam, 2009).

Another medicinal element of smudging with sage or sweet grass was also present throughout this research during consent processes, before every community meeting or gathering, and at each talking circle interview. According to McAdam (2009), the Plains Cree smudge ceremony is generally understood as an act of prayer and of purifying the mind, body, spirit, and physical surroundings. Smudging is utilized as a preparation for individuals and groups to enter into sacred communication, to receive spiritual knowledge, and when entering processes of collaborative learning. In most Cree cultural ceremonies experienced by members of the research team, smudging precedes all activity so that individuals and groups are cleansed by prayer and prepared to co-construct communication with the creator and the ancestors. By observing Cree Indigenous cultural and ethical protocol, we offered youth collaborators a choice to engage in spiritual ceremony as part of the constructions of the relationship. Not all youth chose to smudge, and having the power of choice also established a layer of trust. The rationale for using the medicinal element of smudge arose from community consultations with the CARC and from the notion that research is ceremony (Wilson, 2008).

These medicines also help establish a safe “ethical space,” which provides a haven where Western science and IK can meet (Ermine et al., 2004). Each youth collaborator who engaged in this research process was free to exchange their ideas using their distinct worldview, with opportunities to acknowledge the voice and intellect of both Indigenous and Western thought. The choice to not engage with the smudge, for example, or any other form of IK utilized was respected just as much as those who chose to participate. Thus, the use of medicines was optional; however, we acknowledged the importance of sharing aspects of Cree culture openly in Treaty 6 territory (McAdam, 2009). These efforts had positive impacts on our project, as the youths’ identities as Indigenous peoples were recognized and honored throughout the research process, even if they chose not to participate.

The National Aboriginal Health Organization (2002) writes that when “ethics is not respectful of Aboriginal perspectives it will then be inherently unethical and likely damaging regardless of the character of the intent of that system” (p. 7). Part of this process comes in the form of authenticity, as Bull (2010) states, “Authentic research involving Aboriginal peoples requires attention to ethical conduct throughout the research process,” as such, “ethics is not a stage of research completed at the start of a project by filling out a generic form and receiving approval from an institution” (p. 17). Instead, ethical practices are seen as ongoing participatory processes and opportunities for further relationship development in the embodiment of Indigenous methodologies, values, and spirituality. We therefore sought to elevate the consent process to that of a “ceremony” to echo Findlay, Ray, and Basualdo (2014), who state, The ceremony of consent was a protracted social process of building relationships, of giving and receiving gifts of food, fun, and friendship long before and after signatures were secured on written consent forms (or oral assent given to readings of the forms). (p. 40)
Moreover, when it came to utilizing an Indigenous research methodology, we recognized that it is the quality of the how and why of the process that is most relevant. As such, it was openly shared with youth collaborators that their stories are seen and heard as holding a sacredness. The consent process was as much about undergoing university ethical processes as it was about an opportunity to build relationships by offering tobacco to youth collaborators in honor of their words and intent to assist with the project.

Wider Community Engagement

Valuable input, concerns, interests, and ways to be of assistance to the youth and the wider community were insights acknowledged through our CARC meetings. Youth voices were central in these consultations, ensuring the project evolved in a way that was reflective of their needs. Additionally, the CARC identified a need for the team to be involved in the wider public community, to meet in person, and to invest in careful consultation so our intentions for the project, as well as the processes of the research itself, could be shared. Smith (1999) argues that reciprocity in education and research implies establishing ways of collaborating that emphasizes a shared journey, rather than an accumulation of knowledge. Thus, our project established a research dynamic of empowerment by building community connections and relationships that resisted antiquated hierarchical research power dynamics. For example, the photovoice aspect of the project drew on Indigenous leaders within the inner-city community to provide, once per season, capacity building workshops for youth to develop their practical skills in photography. In these moments, youth also had the opportunity to articulate their reflections on the research project in general and what they are learning about the processes of and strategies for resilience in particular. These safe spaces were opportunities to rehearse their reflections and visions of how to shape and improve their community. These spaces and rehearsals also became central to the later knowledge exchange activities when youth engaged the community more directly by sharing their photos of resilience and well-being at a 3-week public art installation and at academic conferences in the hopes of fostering wider processes of social transformation regarding perceptions of Indigenous youth (Mertens, 2009).

Community engagement can and should be done in creative ways that foster healthy relationships and encourage youth to freely express themselves. In addition to the talking circles previously mentioned, regular meal sharing, such as guardian appreciation feasts, barbecues on the riverbank and lake, and reflections or storytelling by the fire, were some of the welcoming environments we co-constructed with youth and elders throughout this research process. To further support our building of safe and positive spaces with the youth, our team organized the following optional engagement activities: attending sacred fires out of the city, a local ceremonial sweat lodge, and a 2-day excursion and overnight camping. We honored the youths’ power of choice in selecting the activities, which they wanted to participate in. Ryan and Robinson (1990) argue that “the ultimate goal of research is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of lives of the people involved” and that “the beneficiaries of the research are the members of the community itself [rather than researchers]” (pp. 57–71). Thus, throughout the engagement activities with youth, healthy ceremonies of relationships were fostered by allowing the youth to feel welcomed into a co-constructed research environment, established by the community, where a principle of respect for the contributions of all was upheld. These spaces encouraged further relationship building among the youth collaborators, their families, and the research team. These activities further supported the effort for wider community engagement and provided direct and positive lived experiences to the youth and research team.

The unique combination of our interdisciplinary team allowed us to strengthen the mission statements of the community organizations working within inner-city Saskatoon. The first author has experience and training in conducting sharing circles to provide a safe space for youth and young adults who face challenging and even severe living environments. His sharing circles were and are being held in the comfortable meeting room on Friday evenings within inner-city Saskatoon. This author is also involved with STR8 UP, a local community organization in Saskatoon that aids and supports ex-gang members and strengthens men, with the help of women participants, to become nurturing and present fathers. The third author has previous training in archaeology and used her contacts with the Saskatchewan Archaeology Society (SAS) to help run Archaeology Fridays in the afternoon at the White Buffalo Youth Lodge. Groups of children between the ages of 6 and 13 years came to various events for seven Fridays over the summer. This included field trips to local sites such as Eagle Creek, two afternoons at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, and the Grace Adams site located at St. Mary’s, a core neighborhood elementary school. The SAS contributed by explaining some sites located near Batoche, and brought the Archaeocaravan filled with interactive games and activities that explain precontact and contact history of the First Nations and fur-trading Europeans. These involvements of the research team members lending their talents to community partners enriched the services already in place for youth in the Saskatoon core neighborhoods, instead of creating unnecessary work or being a burden in the endeavor to deepen the relationships with the community partners and youth participating in the Youth Resilience Project.

Regarding the knowledge translation and exchange aspects of our project, communication with local Saskatoon media helped prepare the youth-designed art exhibit, “Four Seasons of Resilience,” which culminated into the photovoice project. The exhibit was showcased for 3 weeks at a youth-run art gallery in downtown Saskatoon. This art exhibit was an opportunity for youth to share their perspectives and visions of resilience with a wider audience. The youth decided which stories, pictures, and mediums to showcase and designed all aspects of the show. The encouragement of local media to cover this art exhibit was important, as it communicated a message of inner-
city youth as empowered, worthy, and validated with the wider community witnessing, acknowledging, and celebrating their leadership. In addition, several youth in the project participated in multiple media interviews on both radio and television to share their stories of resilience and empowerment and to build healthier perceptions of youth among the wider community. As Diamantopoulos and Usiskin (2014) point out, “Community-based research becomes a place where community partners build analysis and voice, journalists build stronger sociological sensitivity and connection to the community and academy” and where “academics ground themselves in the community and enhance their ability to address a democratic public and its press better” (p. 85). Overall, helping to create spaces and opportunities where youth collaborators in research projects can meaningfully engage with the wider community is crucial, not only to facilitate capacity building and transformation for the youth but also to foster changes in negative perceptions of Indigenous youth that may be held by members of the wider community.

Conclusions

The objective of this project, as identified by Indigenous youth participants, was to discover sources of resilience and positive health strategies that can inform early intervention theory and policy to promote wellness in Saskatoon and other Canadian urban contexts. In collaboration with community partners, youth, and local elders, the operating principle behind this study was that the resources, knowledge, and capabilities required to support the health and well-being of Indigenous youth are already present within inner-city contexts and young people themselves.

Throughout this process, several new perspectives and positions that fostered positive engagement with the urban Indigenous youth in the project were elucidated. These included (1) building relationships and positive visions of youth, (2) approaching a community using their ethical standards and cultural protocols, and (3) opening safe spaces for our wider community and civic engagement. These perspectives and positions together allowed us to foster an “ethical space” (Ermine et al., 2004) and what we have come to see as ceremonies of relationship, wherein the embers of youth resilience and well-being could be fanned into vibrant flames. Although these insights emerged from a project with urban Indigenous youth in a Canadian context, we also hope that many of these ways of incorporating IK and a two-eyed way of seeing into the research process could be valuable in many other Indigenous and Aboriginal environments or more broadly with those youth experiencing marginalization or discrimination of various kinds within inner-city contexts.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada recommended that the federal government “establish multiyear funding for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation, and establish a national network to share information and best practices” (p. 8). We argue that the principles of ethical engagement with Indigenous youth and their communities as well as the incorporation of IK-based methodologies and ways of knowing will be central to this initiative. In the end, it is hoped that the reflections offered in this article can add strength to this ongoing process of reconciliation, resilience, and social justice among Canadian Indigenous communities in general and Indigenous youth living in urban contexts in particular.
Appendix

Letter of Collaboration

February 6, 2015

Mr. Andrew R. Hatala
1120 20th Street West
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7M 0V8

Re: From Embers to Flames: Identifying strategies of resilience and mental health among inner-city Aboriginal children and youth

Dear Mr. Hatala:

Saskatoon Tribal Council is pleased to offer our support in the work of establishing strength-based strategies to address First Nations’ children and youth mental health challenges.

The research takes an innovative and inviting approach to engage young people, yet leaves them with life-long tools and skills. In addition, the community is invited to truly “listen” to the voice of the young and support their development and growth.

This letter of support is premised on two very important elements:

- It is imperative that the young people involved are able to lead in “telling their story”.

Therefore, the inclusion of the youth in all aspects and tasks outlined in the proposal (particularly presenting at research conferences) is imperative.

- The second element is that of the Saskatoon Tribal Council being the data stewards for all raw/record-level data collected through the research project and ensuring the full application of OCAP® to First Nations’ data collection activities.

Further, the Saskatoon Tribal Council will be end-users of the findings to assist us in developing even stronger and more beneficial programs for the youth of the Historic Neighbourhoods of Saskatoon which we currently serve.

In closing, we offer a strong recommendation for support of this project. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (306)222-7435 or at the coordinates above.

Sincerely,

Cael Tourney
General Manager - STC Health & Social Development
STC Privacy & OCAP® Officer

cc: Felix Thomas, Tribal Chief
STC Chiefs
Wilma Isbister, General Manager responsible for WBYL
STC Senior Executive Management Team

Kinistin Mistawasis Muskeg Lake Muskoday One Arrow Whitecap Dakota Yellow Quill
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Note
1. As this article focused primarily on the processes of engagement with youth throughout the research process, we do not comment specifically on their strategies of resilience that have emerged. These various strategies will be described and presented in forthcoming publications.

References


