

## INDIGENOUS WOMEN, COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH, AND DECOLONIZING PEDAGOGY: IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

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The City of Winnipeg is a mid-size city situated in the centre of Canada. It has the largest percentage of Indigenous people of all Canadian cities. While Indigenous people reside in all areas of the city, a high number live in inner-city neighbourhoods where poverty and all of its related challenges are pervasive. Despite the challenges, Indigenous led development is having a transformative impact for many. Indigenous women have long been the quiet leaders in inner-city development and they are increasingly interested in engaging in research to assess the impact of their work. In 2006 I had the privilege of working with a small group of women and together we began a journey doing research together. They were clear from the onset that as Indigenous people for whom research has caused great harm, they wanted to take a different approach. In this article I tell the story of a research process that developed over many months, forever transforming my approach to research and teaching. I continue to learn a great deal from Indigenous women in my community who challenge me to move beyond Western methods and be open to Indigenous worldviews and multiple ways of knowing rooted in experiential knowledge.

### **Our colonial context**

Canada has a tarnished history in its treatment of indigenous peoples. Colonial policies and programs have been likened with a process of cultural genocide (TRC 2015) and have left a legacy of intergenerational trauma and despair. My work with Indigenous women has taught me that it is imperative that non-indigenous people acknowledge the “truth” about Canada’s colonial history as a critical first step toward “reconciliation” (TRC 2015) and healing from the damage caused by colonization and oppression. But this is a slow and painful process. Oppression through racism, sexism, and classism remains systemic and as such, healing occurs in a context of ongoing injury. For this reason, I try to ground my research in an understanding of colonial systemic practices and I aim to privilege Indigenous voices.

### **Decolonizing Research: It’s all about relationships**

In 2006 I was invited to engage in a research process with a group of strong Indigenous women who led organizations providing services to women and families in the inner-city of Winnipeg. Aligned with a philosophy rooted in collaboration, they had formed a collective they named Community-Led Organizations United Together (CLOUT). The individual organizations that

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they represented shared similar values and complementary mandates. They believed that working collectively would make them stronger and more effective. While CLOUT no longer exists as a coalition, several of the women continue to work together in the spirit of CLOUT's mission to “work towards an integrated community-led approach to service delivery that ensures community needs and aspirations are supported through neighbourhood based capacity building solutions.” The organizations the women represent aim to provide non-judgmental services based on respect and openness. They pride themselves on treating everyone who accesses their services as if they were guests in their homes. They prioritize hiring from within their communities offering choices in programming and taking direction for their policies and programs from the communities they serve. Central to my research partnership with CLOUT was a commitment to conduct research in a manner that contributed to CLOUT's goals to:

- Share knowledge and best practices regarding how to support children, youth, and families in an urban environment
- Become partners in the process of change—ensuring that sustainable solutions focused on early interventions, prevention, and support are in place for children, families and neighbourhoods
- Support service delivery partners in creating a system that works for families, building communities from the grassroots up and reducing the need for costly crisis-oriented services.
- Increase individual and family capacities for self-care through strength-based supports and services at the community level
- Share opportunities for decision making and involvement with community members through local community economic development and community development principles
- Celebrate the many successes occurring at the neighbourhood and community level through the support of community-led service providers

For CLOUT, the research process is equally important to the outcome. They have taught me that relationships are important in all the work that they do, including research. They are not interested in conducting research with scholars tucked away in the ivory tower of the academy. They want to work with researchers who respect the importance of relationships. My relationship with some CLOUT members existed before the project however I spent many months with CLOUT as a group to further build a trusting relationship. Together we developed a research framework and methodology that the women believed would help them answer their central research question in a way that respected Indigenous ways of knowing with an emphasis on storytelling. The study titled *Is Participation Having an Impact? Measuring Progress in Winnipeg's Inner City through the Voices of Community-Based Program Participants* (Mackinnon et al 2008) was highly participatory in design and implementation. It embraced the principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP), developed by Indigenous people and now adopted in Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical conduct for Research Involving Humans. This was important because individuals and families participating in CLOUT programs are typically involved with numerous state agencies that hold significant power over their lives. As we worked to design our project, our conversations often centred on oppressive “systems” including child welfare, criminal justice, income assistance, public housing and others. These conversations were important because they reminded us of the importance of establishing trust with our research participants and ensuring that they were well informed about

the scope and limitations. It also reminded us of our responsibility to ensure participants are safe and won't be penalized for fully sharing their stories. We tried to be mindful of these dynamics throughout the *Is Participation Having an Impact* study. We tried to be very conscientious about broadening involvement of the community in the research process, building egalitarian relationships with participants through ongoing collaboration, training and hiring community researchers, sharing findings in various forms, and requesting feedback from research participants. We wanted our project to be as participatory as possible and that meant involving CLOUT members in the selection of research methods. We discussed using quantitative and qualitative methods or a combination of both. We agreed that the process was as important as the outcome, and this meant choosing methods that would engage community residents – to be trained and hired where possible - in the data gathering process and analysis. This was important to ensure a capacity building component that would have lasting benefit for the community.

In the process of identifying research areas that might be of interest to CBOs, several discussions took place around the use of indicators to measure progress. The question 'how do we measure?' evolved into a discussion around 'what' are we measuring and 'who determines what needs to be measured'. We talked a great deal about this and we came to consensus that the best way to determine progress and outcomes was fairly simple—we simply needed to ask participants if and how their participation made a difference in their lives.

Accepting subjective notions such as building capacity as a goal meant that we needed to use subjective measures, placing greater value on outcomes related to participants personal goals, rather than funding agencies goals. For many, participation is an important outcome in its own right. We agreed that we would best understand these kinds of outcomes by listening to individual's stories. Using a methodology that provides participants with an opportunity to have voice through stories is consistent with indigenous research. As noted by Smith (2006,127), "Community action approaches [to research] assume that people know and can reflect on their own lives..."

### **Gathering the Data**

After obtaining ethics approval through the University of Winnipeg, we proceeded to interview individuals using the services of the CLOUT organizations. Each interviewee was provided with an orientation to the research project to ensure that they were fully informed of what the research objectives were and how the final research would be used. Interviewees were presented with an opportunity to review findings before the research report was finalized, however few indicated an interest in being engaged in this manner. A total of ninety-one individuals were interviewed. A full description of our analysis is described in MacKinnon et al (2008).

### **Reflecting on findings and lessons learned**

On final reflection we wondered whether the research project met the transformative objectives of CLOUT— did it contribute to significant social change? It can be argued that the focus of this research project was in reaction to the demands of funding institutions and its aims were narrowly directed and hardly transformative. While this is in part true, we would argue that it contributed to transformation on at least three levels.

1. By demonstrating that progress can be much more broadly measured than is currently favoured, there is potential for funding institutions to understand and accept the resistance expressed by CBOs. It can also be argued that the fact that CBOs are questioning the measurement instruments used by funding institutions and are taking steps to demonstrate their resistance by developing their own measurement models, shows that transformation is already taking place.
2. Training and hiring community researchers to conduct interviews and assist with data analysis, provides an important opportunity to raise awareness and develop capacity, potentially leading to further interest in participatory research and/or anti-oppressive practice.
3. Providing interviewees with an opportunity to ‘name their world’ has the potential to be an empowering experience that can lead to praxis (Freire, 2006).

### **The importance of relationships**

During this project and with those that have followed, I have learned some valuable lessons from Indigenous women about doing research differently. I have learned that CBPR isn’t just about research. Relationships between researchers and community-based organizations must extend beyond the research relationship. It’s simply not acceptable to walk away when the research project is complete. Researchers benefit from the research relationship and they must be committed to giving back to the community. That means supporting community partners in their work as determined by them.

Perhaps the most powerful lesson for me was the importance of process. Researchers all too often get caught in the cycle of meeting deadlines – moving from one project to the next. I have learned that we need to take the time to respect the process. One example of this is Nancy’s story. Nancy joined our research team as a community researcher. She was hired upon the recommendation of a CLOUT member. Nancy had no experience conducting research and was initially hesitant to get involved. After a bit of encouragement, she agreed to give it a try. I got to know Nancy quite well over several months designing and implementing the *study*. As we got to know each other, Nancy openly shared her own story with me. As a Sixties Scoop survivor, Nancy lived through some very challenging times and was committed to a personal healing journey when she joined our project. When I was completing the writing phase of the study I sent an email to Nancy asking her how she wanted to be identified in the report. Nancy, along with two other research assistants agreed to include their personal stories in our report. We asked them to share how they came to be involved with the project and their thoughts about participating in it. Nancy responded to my email as follows:

I really don’t mind if you put my real name on the final report. Our people have been silent for way too long, without a name or a face, which is known as an identity. I’m starting to know my culture and my identity, so without a name or a face, I am not complete or whole. I feel our government and/or other agencies could and will know the real facts. I feel too, we as people need to speak up, and let our voices be heard. I am speaking up for people who don’t have a voice or they’re afraid to speak up. I am giving you permission to put my real name on the final

report. I want to thank you for giving me the chance to speak up, I have learned so much about human beings, including myself.

Receiving this email from Nancy was a powerful moment for me. At this point of the project I was going through the motions of writing up the final study and feeling a bit detached from the findings as I focused on meeting our deadline. Nancy's email stopped me in my tracks and brought me to tears. It was a reminder that in spite of the many challenges we encountered along the way, our commitment to engage community members in a meaningful way was not only beneficial for our project, but it also had a transformative impact on individuals involved, including Nancy and myself. This, I was reminded, is what CBPR is all about.

Nancy and I didn't work together again after this project. She moved on to do other things in the community but we remained in contact in the years following the study. Nancy passed away in 2012.

### **Informing Pedagogy at Urban and Inner-City Studies**

The research model exemplified above is central to the pedagogical philosophy in the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies (UIC), where I work. UIC is intentionally located outside of the main campus in Winnipeg's North End, within the geographic boundaries defined by the City of Winnipeg as the "inner city". Our geographical location along with the participatory orientation of my research has also informed the way that I teach. I am fortunate to teach in the neighbourhood where I do research. I often employ students as research assistants. Some have gone on to pursue graduate studies and others are now working in the community development sector.

UIC faculty continue to develop its pedagogical framework since relocating from the main campus to the North End in 2011. Our evolving model is inspired by our understanding that colonization, including Eurocentric education, continues to fail Indigenous people (Batiste, 2013). We are informed by research and practical experience showing that students who have had a negative experience with education typically find the traditional education trajectory overwhelming (Silver, 2013; MacKinnon, 2015). We believe in the importance of 'small, safe' learning environments for students, especially for Indigenous students, who have been denied the opportunity to access education that is meaningful and respectful of Indigenous ways of knowing. We've learned that bringing students from diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds together to learn in small, safe spaces can be a useful way of 'breaking barriers and building bridges' in what continues to be a city marred by racism (CCPA, 2013).

UIC is committed to decolonization; our curriculum is rooted in critical social theories and we integrate critical and decolonizing pedagogies building on the work of scholars including Freire (2006), Giroux (2011), hooks (1994), and Smith (1999). Our approach is also rooted in placed-based pedagogical theories, especially that of Haymes (1995) who calls for a "pedagogy of resistance" (p. ix) in the spirit of Franz Fanon (1961). Urban spaces characterized by racialized, spatialized poverty can be sites to raise awareness of the sources of oppression (Freire 2006) and universities have an opportunity to engage in pedagogical methods to contribute to a process of decolonization and inspire reclamation of cultures and spaces. In the Winnipeg inner-city

context, a pedagogy of place must be linked to Indigenous oppression, resistance and cultural reclamation. As Giroux (1983) explains, a critical pedagogy has “an important role in the struggle of oppressed groups to reclaim the ideological and material conditions for organizing their own experiences”.

The continued oppression of Indigenous people in Canada and in inner-city neighbourhoods like those in Winnipeg, calls for a critical pedagogy that aims to facilitate processes and create safe spaces for students to make sense of their realities. We’ve seen how this can lead to personal transformation. This is particularly crucial for Indigenous students who have internalized colonization and have come to believe “that we are incapable of learning and that the colonizers’ degrading images and beliefs about Aboriginal people and our ways of being are true” (Hart, 2002, p. 27). For non-Indigenous students, particularly those who benefit from the privilege of being White and middle class, learning in the inner city, with people for whom the inner city has long been home (who have known nothing but poverty and racism as an everyday experience) the true meaning of being an ‘ally’ becomes more than a concept learned from a textbook. Our approach to education is rooted in decolonial reconciliation and the idea that White Settlers need to do the heavy lifting to right past wrongs. Allies must walk beside and in support of Indigenous peoples—challenging the oppressive structures that perpetuate White supremacy and exclusion including within academia.

Situated in a largely Indigenous space — with challenges aligned with the intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism reinforced by neoliberal capitalism, students from diverse backgrounds are inspired to learn “from, with and in” the community and to be actively engaged in progressive social change. We take critical pedagogy out of the ivory tower, into the community, trying to level the playing field for students to learn how the intersections of their experiences shape the way they view and experience the world. In the North End of Winnipeg, this often means White students with privilege stepping out of their comfort zones to study in a neighbourhood they have been taught to fear. It means learning that their classmates who have lived in poverty in the inner city, many who are Indigenous and have experienced the intergenerational trauma of colonization, have much to teach them.

### **Reconciliation and experiential learning through internships**

Many of our students have had little to no paid work experience and they typically don’t have access to the kinds of social networks as middle-class students. Other students bring some work experience with them, but they have not worked in the community sector and some have had few if any interactions with Indigenous people. Internships are an important component of our program. They provide students a safe space to meaningfully engage with students from different backgrounds and experiences. Their social networks are expanded through new relationships and community engagement. Misconceptions of ‘the other’ that can lead to stereotypes and racism are challenged. As stated by one middle class White student prior to starting a course in Urban and Inner-City Studies: “I’m embarrassed to say that I have never had a meaningful conversation with an Indigenous person” and sever students have told us that they have been taught to fear the North End. UIC aims to correct these misconceptions through an experiential learning model that brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together to work and learn.

One example of a UIC internship is our Inner-City Work Study program. In 2016, UIC received a two-year funding commitment from the City of Winnipeg for a unique program developed in the spirit of reconciliation. Twenty students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds spend four months together, working and learning in the inner-city.

As described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, reconciliation requires “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples...In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior.” Our inner-city work study program puts reconciliation into action. It challenges students to reflect on their experiences so they may develop new skills, while questioning the attitudes and beliefs that can serve to perpetuate racial, geographic and class divides. Community organizations also benefit by having a full-time paid employee over the summer months.

It’s been over 10 years since I first sat down with the women from CLOUT. They taught me a lot and they continue to inspire my research and teaching. I’ve also learned that bringing critical pedagogies into inner city, colonized spaces can have a transformative impact on the lives of students from all walks of life. Critical pedagogies are important because they make room for multiple ways of knowing. This includes the knowledge from Indigenous women who are not scholars. They have much to teach us from years of experience and deep commitment to challenging oppressive structures from the ground up. And yes, of the importance of relationships.

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