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Milo Pimatisiwin Project: Healthy Living for Mushkegowuk Youth.

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Milo Pimatisiwin Project: Healthy Living for Mushkegowuk Youth.

Abstract

The Milo Pimatisiwin Project is a community-centred initiative of John Delaney Youth Centre in the Moose Cree First Nation community in the James Bay region, Ontario, Canada. This article describes the creation of this collaborative youth-centred project and how it re-centres Indigenous values and conception of health and wellbeing. The article begins with an overview of the Cree philosophy of *milo pimatisiwin*, “good and healthy living.” This sets the background for the focus of the article, namely the significance of sharing *pimatisiwin* teachings over the local youth radio station and within land-based initiatives. The study includes the project results and feedback from the youth engaged in the project. It also describes the Youth Services Director’s vision and leadership efforts to enhance culturally relevant programming at the Youth Centre. Finally, it discusses lessons learned in the project and suggests best ways to enhance wellbeing in community-engaged research initiatives. The aim is to privilege Indigenous people, their knowledge and experiences, and their critical role in decolonizing notions of health and wellbeing within research practices and community-centred initiatives.

Keywords

Community-based participatory research, Moose Cree First Nation, youth and community wellbeing, *milo pimatisiwin*.

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Introduction

The fact that we have them [the pimatisiwin teachings] is a huge step in sharing traditional values, beliefs, and stories with modern technology. This has helped create a launch pad for future cultural programming at the Youth Centre. The radio allows people to listen and learn anonymously, which can be a wonderful way to start for beginners. (Youth Services Director, John Delaney Youth Centre, Moose Cree First Nation).

Entire generations of Indigenous people have missed out on cultural teachings that were typically transmitted orally through stories, experience, observation, and Elders. Intergenerational stressors, including residential schools and encroachment on land and resources with little consideration for the use of the land for the future are some of the factors that have led to this gap in knowledge exchange. Indigenous Peoples' connection to the land has long played a vital role in sustaining their kinship structures, cultural practices, and subsistence economies. Hence there has been a re-emergence of returning to the land for healing, rebuilding, and remembering (Radu, House, & Pashagumskum, 2014; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Simpson, 2011, 2014; Simpson & Coulthard, 2014; Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, & Coulthard, 2014; Wilson, 2003). The importance of this connection provides the impetus to revitalize land-based practices—in this instance *milo pimatisiwin*, the Cree holistic conception of being well and living well.

This article presents a collaborative (academic–community) project that emerged out of a participatory research with Moose Cree First Nation in Moose Factory, Ontario, Canada. Moose Factory is on an island in the southern end of James Bay. There are approximately 2,500 people who live on the island; 974 are youth under the age of 17. Since time immemorial, the Omushkego lifestyle was intimately tied to the land and to family. The people lived with their environment, making best use of the abundant land and water, food, and material resources. With the profound cultural changes emerging from various factors, the land lifeways also changed, including the transmission of survival skills and knowledge between generations (Flannery, 1995; Long, 2010).

We explored the way in which the *milo pimatisiwin* concept informs youth programming. The purpose is to contribute to the understanding of *milo pimatisiwin* and its practical application to community and youth wellbeing initiatives launched as part of a collaborative approach to research. We begin with background information, including a Moose Cree perspective on the concept of *milo pimatisiwin* and a review of existing literature. Next we present the project context, with an overview of the project phases; methodology; and results, with feedback from youth involved in the project. The Youth Services Director's vision further leads us to the best ways to foster health and wellbeing for youth. Finally, we discuss lessons learned in the project and offer concluding reflections.

We (the two authors) come from different Indigenous identities, places, and professional roles. Yet we both have uniquely experienced and felt the loss of connection to land and life-stage teachings. In our respective journeys, we have started to relearn and to reassert the life-stage teachings in our personal and professional lives. Given our shared passion and understanding of the significance of these teachings to individual and collective wellbeing, we are committed to helping our families and communities acquire the knowledge needed to grow our life-knowledge bundles and to make it applicable in a current social context. We further saw this collaborative project as a part of our life-stage responsibility as adult women.

Background: The Good Life Tapestry

Everything was integrated in the pimatisiwin teachings: governance, justice, spirituality, family, and community was part of it. It was done in accordance to the world around us and the seasons. We did not try to fit the world around us and we fit into it. We cannot schedule fasting until the buds formed around the trees. We worked with the natural cycles. The land told us when to do these things. (Youth Services Director, John Delaney Youth Centre, Moose Cree First Nation).

A Moose Cree Understanding of Milo Pimatisiwin

The Moose Cree concept of *milo* means “good” while *pimatisiwin* translated literally means “life.” “Cree is polysynthetic. This means that a single word in Cree can express complex ideas that would need many separate words in other languages.”¹ Descriptively translated, *milo pimatisiwin* represents the cyclical nature of life and provides guidance on how to live in right relationship with self, community, and nature. The belief is that *pimatisiwin* teachings are a necessary part of asserting sovereignty over one’s right to living and being well. The holistic meaning of *pimatisiwin* situates one’s place of belonging, roles, and responsibilities articulated in the life rites of passages and kinship relations. Connection to the land is central to the cultural practices, rituals, stories, and ceremonies of Ojibwe people.

Literature Review: A Broader Understanding of Milo Pimatisiwin and Its Practical Application

Milo (or *mino*) *pimatisiwin* is often regarded as an interconnected worldview of living and being well (Adelson, 2000; Anderson, 2011; Hart, 2010; Radu et al., 2014). “A worldview is the overall perspective from which one sees, experiences, and interprets the world” (LaBoucane-Benson, Gibson, Benson, & Miller, 2012, p. 5). *Milo pimatisiwin* is respected as a lifelong continuous learning process, in constant motion and interaction with the land (Radu et al., 2014).

¹ Description of the Cree language came from a Moose Cree book launch event in Moose Factory, Ontario, on August 7, 2015.

The term *milo pimatisiwin* is not unique to Cree people. The Ojibwe people also use *pimadiziwin* to describe the central value of health and wellbeing (Manitowabi & Shawande, 2011). *Mnaamodzawin* is equivalent for the Anishnabe people of Manitoulin Island, Ontario. It means a “good, holistic way of ^[SEP]life” (Manitowabi & Shawande, 2011). Despite the different terminology, common values and common understanding weave the good life tapestry. “This is a term used to describe holistic health and wellness, including physical, emotional, mental and spiritual stages of being” (Anderson, 2011, p. 7). Leanne Simpson (2011) explains how the knowledge of *mino bimaadiziwin* [the good life] exists in Indigenous theory, Creation stories, teachings, and experiences. She further explains how living in an identity grounded in the land “propels us towards mino bimaadiziwin” (p. 13).

In the last decade, Indigenous researchers have contributed to the contemporary use of the concept of *milo pimatisiwin* (Hart, 2010; LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2012; Radu et al., 2014). This signals a new relationship between Indigenous and Western worldviews. It is an effort to translate Indigenous knowledge for the purposes of improving the conditions of wellbeing for Indigenous people. *Milo pimatisiwin* is increasingly being applied to various health and wellness initiatives. The verb “seeking” often precedes “the good life.” Seeking *milo pimatisiwin* implies a process of understanding and regenerating Indigenous wisdom, values, ethics, and ways of life. It goes beyond the tired binary of the healthy and the unhealthy, the oppressor and the oppressed, the privileged and the marginalized.

Michael Hart (2002, 2010), of Fisher River Cree Nation, has used *milo pimatisiwin* as a research methodology in social work. His aim—to improve the social needs of Aboriginal Peoples—is presented by an Aboriginal helping approach. The research elaborates on five concepts foundational to achieving *milo pimatisiwin*: wholeness, balance, relationship, harmony, and healing. Not one of these concepts is hierarchical. Rather, these concepts further the goal of *milo pimatisiwin* described as “healing, learning and life in general” (Hart, 2002, p. 44).

The Chisasibi Cree Nation healing model underlines the return to the land as a way to restore community wellness (Radu et al., 2014). Radu et al. refer to *miyupimaatisiin* as their Cree concept of wellness, a way of life. Intergenerational knowledge transfer and experiential learning form the basis of this land-based initiative. Chisasibi Elders guide the program and assist participants to rethink the way they relate to themselves and others. Framed within the broader movement of cultural regeneration and Cree ways of healing and wellness, living a good life means to be “able to hunt and trap and pursue other land-based activities, that he or she has access to good food ... and warmth, and is able to enjoy life and to participate actively within the community” (Radu et al., 2014, p. 95). The program situates Indigenous ways of healing and wellness as an approach to decolonizing the current models of health care.

The Sacred Relationship project, as set out in partnership with researchers and Cree Elders of Alberta, explores *milo pimatisiwin* further in the context of the Canadian government’s current water

policy (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2012). LaBoucane-Benson et al. first examine colonial policies and ideologies of land ownership that have ruptured the good life. They argue for the reparation of Indigenous–Settler relations to create the good life for the benefit of all Albertans. This is done in the context of understanding the meaning of water through the knowledge of *whakotowin*. Indigenous Elders such as Maria Campbell shares the significance of whakotowin principles as it means to honour and to respect all relationships (Campbell, 2007).

Kim Anderson, a Cree-Métis scholar, uses the laws of whakotowin to describe the arteries of the good life. Whakotowin theoretically informs her research on life-stage cycles and Native women. She explains how “story-telling, the use of games, positive role modelling and rites of passage ceremonies” were designed to facilitate the good life in child-rearing practices (Anderson, 2011, p. 68). Rite of passage ceremonies included the values of nurturing, discipline, self-reliance, and interdependence for the entirety of one’s individual and community life. Repeatedly it is said the good life is not an individual goal. Rather it is respected as a collective and shared responsibility mediated through life cycles. This philosophy also applies to community-engaged research.

Milo pimatisiwin holds a critical role in decolonizing notions of health and wellbeing within research practices and community-centred initiatives. Many Moose Cree First Nation people have shared their concerns of how far they have moved away from ways of caring for one another, ways that were essential to a land-based survival. The practical assertion of milo pimatisiwin provides an excellent basis to break down the barriers of social isolation and to restore the Cree practices of wellbeing and values of family kinship systems, including working together to help community.

Within the context of the academy, it is important to remember that Cree knowledge intersects with the language of the people. Milo pimatisiwin is embedded in the Cree language and ways of being, doing, and thinking. For this reason, it is difficult to understand what living and being well from a Western viewpoint. Seeking to understand Indigenous thought from a Western worldview can reproduce a singular truth about health and wellbeing (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). In collaborative projects that have accountability to various stakeholders, the larger issue is attempting to find a language that crosses both the academic and the community. It is important to avoid boxing in Cree ways of knowing using the ways that the Western world desires to categorize. It’s a dilemma to find balance but not impossible with right thinking. It remains also vital to consider the way notions of traditional and cultural knowledge differ within the community (Robbins & Dewar, 2011).

Research has demonstrated the link between paternalism and harmful effects on community wellbeing and research (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). Paternalistic attitudes have supplanted the ways of creating milo pimatisiwin. Such attitudes are expressed and experienced as dominant practices of one over another. *Paternalism* has the Latin root *pater*, “father.” It is devoid of Mother. Yet, as Maria Campbell reminds us, women’s role was to keep whakotowin together (Anderson, 2011). This was adult

women's role and responsibility. Yet paternalism was and is widely practiced by governing bodies, including band councils, and Aboriginal political bodies who believe they know what is better for Indigenous Peoples. This approach has undermined Indigenous views on health and wellbeing.

Health has taken on different meanings throughout history. The Old English word *hæleth* was associated with wholeness, prosperity, happiness, preservation, and safety. Religious doctrines understood health as a divine gift. Those who were not healthy were relegated to the works of evil. In contrast, Greek philosophers gave importance to the environment, lifestyle, and diet. This belief system influenced the way of thinking about health today. It is only in recent years that knowledge production on health and wellbeing has begun to regenerate practices that integrate historical, social, and cultural factors.

Milo Pimatisiwin Project Context

The Milo Pimatisiwin Project was the outcome of a broader doctoral project on Indigenous research methodologies as they connect us to land, life, and wellbeing. The community led the principal researcher (JG) to the main research question and to this very project. The relationship began with a visit to the community during which the principal researcher interviewed six youth working for a summer camp program designed by an outside organization. She also interviewed six full-time frontline youth workers and the Youth Services manager, and had numerous conversations with a broader range of community members. The intent at the time was to evaluate the externally designed youth program with an aim to strengthen recreational programming in the community. The interviews reflected interwoven themes: reliance on knowledge keepers, knowledge of the land, and reconnecting with the beauty of Cree culture. These themes guided the Milo Pimatisiwin Project and the relationship between the researcher and the community partner.

With the advent of Indian residential school systems, a community concern was in regards to loss of trust: trust in youth, Elders, Cree knowledge, one another, and the ability to be self-reliant. The Students for Canada's North Program spearheaded by the Centre for Global and Community Engagement at the University of Ottawa provided an opportunity to collaborate on a project to strengthen culturally relevant programming at the John Delaney Youth Centre (JDYC).

In December 2013, a two-phase project was conceived—Milo Pimatisiwin: Healthy Living for Omushkego Youth. The first phase of the project was designed and implemented from January to May 2014, while the second phase took place from May to August 2015. The community identified two project objectives: (a) to foster intergenerational exchange of knowledge, and (b) to strengthen program collaboration within the community. When the first series of project funding was approved, the Youth Centre staff had changed, as did the leadership and position function. The new Youth Services Director was supportive of this initiative, given that her vision was to strengthen Cree cultural values, traditions, skills, and teachings at JDYC.

Overview of Project Phases and Activities

In the first phase, the JDYC sought to centralize pimatisiwin knowledge within their programming infrastructure. The aim was to bridge the intergenerational learning gap by bringing together various stakeholders in youth programming. This led to the development of the first culturally based youth camp in addition to the first series of online pimatisiwin teachings. The teachings were transmitted over the local radio station situated in the JDYC. Two community youth were hired to work on the project.

The second phase of this project built on these first initiatives. The intent was to enhance the project sustainability and capacity-building within JDYC. The project focused on a community-based evaluation to engage the community in expressing their needs, roles, and vision for youth wellbeing. The principles of the Northern Cree metaphor of the Canoe Trip for conducting research were applied to develop a community evaluation process (Michell, 2012). In addition, land-based initiatives such as traditional walking out ceremonies, youth-centred sweat lodge ceremonies, and fishing trips were part of the project activities.

Land-based initiatives included teaching youth how to fish: how to set a net, use a fishing rod, and clean and prepare the fish for cooking. The youth were linked with Elders and individuals with significant traditional land knowledge. Youth were also given the experience of learning the basics of moose hunting. Youth gained basic knowledge of gathering and preparing Cree traditional food but also the values that were originally taught. This included making an offering for the animals to give thanks for what the land provided, as well as the social aspect of connecting with others and especially Elders, the original teachers of Cree youth and children.

For Cree people, the land, language, family/community relationships, and spirituality are interwoven and not segregated as in Western beliefs. It was expressed that a spiritual connection is gained when Cree people return to the land. This can be hard for individuals to comprehend when connection to the land has been severed. The land provided everything needed to live well. To reconnect provided not just physical nourishment from the food harvested but also nourished the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life.

Methodology

Participatory, reciprocal, experiential, and relational values played a significant role in the project and research approach (Absolon, 2011; Gaudet, 2014; Kovach, 2009, 2010; Michell, 2012). An Indigenous methodology centres on coming to know through relations, cultural knowledge, and social context. These efforts are not isolated from one another as they are rooted in an Indigenous worldview. Reclaiming a place-based and language-based understanding of health and wellbeing informed the approach to community and youth engagement, the data gathering process, and meaning making from the voices of project participants themselves.

Given the reporting requirements to the funders, the JDYC prepared attendance forms to track number of participants. The numbers indicated that 97 community members participated in the project activities that were promoted through the JDYC Facebook page, posters at the JDYC, visiting, and various community forums. The four youth hired to be part of the project were recruited through the JDYC and word of mouth, and some were directly invited by community leaders given their experience and knowledge in previous land-based initiatives. The indirect beneficiaries were the unknown number of community members that listened to the pimatisiwin teachings over the radio. The four community youth hired in the project were mentored in weekly verbal check-ins and exchanges through visiting. They completed a final project reflexive journal that expressed what being part of the project meant to them, what they felt they learned, what challenges they experienced, and what recommendations they had to improve future projects.

Meaning making within Indigenous inquiry (interpreting the youth stories) was congruent with an Indigenous research methodology grounded in the understanding that knowledge is relational and learning is experiential (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009). The analytic lens was holistic given the project aim was to foster and to reclaim the pimatisiwin way of life, to explore lessons learned and community strengths with this community-based initiative. This holistic approach informed the theme of learning with and from the youth and the design of the project along with lessons learned. It further enabled us to situate the youth's input, their experiences, and their concerns and to grow the project vision of healthy living by visiting and learning from one another. Learning by doing is also a method embedded in an Indigenous worldview (Absolon, 2011). The way of visiting is a well-known Métis and Cree way of taking care of our relations and pimatisiwin. We met frequently and discussed our shared learnings and worked closely to ensure the validity of the analysis process, promoting a reflexive dialogue.

The Milo Pimatisiwin initiative supported the JDYC's interests and concerns. Re-centring research to address community concerns and knowledge is central to decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012). Building on existing programming in the community, the Milo Pimatisiwin team engaged four community youth workers, the radio DJ producer, four Moose Cree knowledge keepers, the Youth Services Director, the Project George coordinator, and a University of Ottawa student/researcher. For the duration of the project, the project coordinators, the Youth Services Director, and the principal researcher dialogued with the Centre for Community and Global Engagement and Associate Executive, Moose Cree First Nation Band, to implement the project objectives and oversee activities, reporting, and results. A conversational method ensured that voices were respected and heard (Kovach, 2010). This resulted in fluidity, transparency, and trust and the co-creation of this study. The evaluation of the study was consistent throughout the project. In addition, a formal project report was completed for the stakeholders.

Several different knowledge-gathering methods were applied to ensure mutually benefiting

outcomes for all parties involved (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Visiting, conversations, observation, and experiential learning were methods applied to track the process, results, feedback, and lessons learned. The ethics specific to the knowledge transmission of pimatisiwin teachings were determined by Chris Hunter, Cree Language Educator, responsible for this portion of the project. Again, re-centring ethics to cultural context and protocol is an integral approach to legitimize Indigenous research (Smith, 2012). Academic ethical requirements were also met through obtaining verbal and written consent from participants.

Pimatisiwin Teachings Protocol

One of the first steps to be respected when working within an Indigenous context is cultural protocol (Hart 2010; LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2012). Cultural values should inform the approach of the research and project collaboration. A relational way of being, learning, and doing requires an accountability and responsibility to the knowledge keepers, those who carry the knowledge. Respect for cultural protocols ensures that knowledge is treated in a good way and used in a good way.

It is the act of showing respect ... it is the acknowledgement that learning occurs in the context of relationship ... it is the acknowledgement of the time and effort the teacher has dedicated in the pursuit of knowledge. Observing this protocol, therefore, affirms commitment to—and enhances—the learning process. (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2012, p. 2).

Cultural protocol within both research- and community-centred projects goes beyond the academic ethical requirements of signing consent forms. Within the context of this project, it was important for Chris Hunter to ensure that he received family blessings to pass on his late grandfather John Joseph Chookomolin's teachings before proceeding. Chris explained that he would not have participated in this project of sharing the teachings online or archiving the teachings if he had not received this blessing from his mother. We are grateful to Chris and his family for reminding us of the importance of respecting protocol and the lineage of teachers, and for their lifelong dedication in protecting this knowledge. In reflecting on the results of the project, Chris shared his experience:

My overall experience has given me the opportunity to pass on Mino Pimatisiwin Teachings to the next generation. It made me appreciate the Indigenous teachings of the Cree People, which these teachings has withstood time since time immemorial and has survived to modern era. Bringing back old teachings of the Cree People into the modern era made me proud of who I am. I really appreciate this experience, I always wanted to document, record, and share our Cree teachings that our Elders safe guarded. I honestly believe that in the generations to come after I pass on to the spirit world that our way of Mino Pimatisiwin will be well known, documented, and passed on, for I believe

it is in good hands. (Personal communication, n.a.).

Some of the challenges to gathering knowledge were the time frame, and the ability to capture stories from Elders in other remote communities who still live in accordance to the pimatisiwin teachings. Given that many Elders are not plugged into modern technology, the only way to receive the knowledge of Elders is to go to them and visit. Visiting is an Indigenous way of life and a viable methodology of coming to knowledge. This was not possible within the time frame and limited resources available for travel.

Results: Milo Pimatisiwin Project Deliverables and Challenges

In order to gain trust, we have to give youth knowledge. Knowledge of how to travel on the river, hunting on the land, in the winter and not placing ourselves in harm's way. (D. Dick, Moose Cree community mentor, personal communication, June 2, 2014).

We recognize that the project objectives were lofty, yet much was accomplished with care and consideration of what could realistically be achieved. Both phases of the project involved learning from and with the land. The initiatives were diverse: cultural camps, community feasts, pimatisiwin teachings, and traditional rituals such as the walking out ceremony and youth sweat lodges.

Moose Cree Cultural Camps

The cultural camp activities were typically fishing day trips, trapping and setting rabbit snares, and going out on the land. The purpose was to expose youth to the Cree way of life, land-based ways of learning, and Cree knowledge. The objective—to increase collaborative efforts between other programs—was to nurture capacity from within the community. Silos of information were a constant, ongoing challenge, and bringing together a few service providers was a positive start. The cultural camp component of the project served as a template for future cultural camps. Between Phase 1 and 2, a full-time Cultural and Language program coordinator was hired at the JDYC. This position fostered program collaborations and as such resulted in Fish Week, Spring Hunt Week, and Moose Week.

Modernizing Pimatisiwin Teachings

Another significant component of the project was to record and to broadcast seven modules of pimatisiwin teachings over Youth Island Radio 107.1. These remain part of the radio station's archives and the JDYC. The archives established a cultural foundation and learning tool for generations to come. The radio allowed people to learn anonymously given there is still a fear/distrust of milo pimatisiwin knowledge. The method of teaching through modern technology provided listeners with anonymity and the private space to restore trust in Cree knowledge. With the impact of residential schools, people were taught not to trust themselves; the pimatisiwin way of life was shamed (Gaudet & Martin, 2017).

Community members feel that land-based learning has to happen more quickly, yet it is a lifelong process that involves all generations, and Cree knowledge keepers are decreasing in numbers with every generation.

Given the positive feedback from the pimatisiwin live streaming, the project sought to build on the capacity by increasing the accessibility of the communities' stories of the land. Pimatisiwin teachings were elaborated and translated in Cree for further sharing on the community app.² This component was developed in unison with another JDYC project. The community app allowed youth the opportunity to learn about and to listen to Cree cultural teachings through modern technology.

Youth and Community Engagement

A third project deliverable was to engage community youth to work on the project. The purpose was to create sustainability within the community by providing youth with an opportunity to nurture their gifts and strengths. Some of the challenges for hiring community youth were related to administrative issues, criminal record checks, and conflict of interest, as well as scheduling. Despite these challenges, four community youth—largely young adults—were hired. They provided important perspectives on their experience and valuable insights on ways to strengthen JDYC initiatives.

Learning from and with the youth. The youth helpers felt they learned new skills and strengthened their own skill sets. They felt they were able to connect with the youth, given the similarities of their respective struggles. The Milo Pimatisiwin youth helpers could empathize with the boredom, the isolation, and the lack of guidance for healthy living.

It was a growing experience too especially working with youth. Before I wasn't really good with younger people in terms of talking to them, it helped me to grow personally and to explain and to talk to them in a way that they'd understand. The youth seemed bored at times and we would encourage them. Be more like a friend than an authoritative level. (Milo Pimatisiwin cultural camp helper).

Training with Project George actually made myself more confident, comfortable and also gained new knowledge of the outdoors then I have recently possessed within myself. (Milo Pimatisiwin cultural camp helper).

One youth helper was concerned with the lack of positive role models in the community and the normalized behaviour of the use of drugs and alcohol. She felt the lack of support and coping mechanisms made it difficult for youth to make different life choices. Two youth helpers were

² Visit <http://moosefactorystories.com>

concerned with the lack of planning on the part of the JDYC. Given the project's significance in providing emotional and spiritual support, they felt it was important that more youth and parents be better informed of the projects.

I believe the project would become more successful and known if we would accept a wide-range of youth of different ages and even parents to join us on our expeditions and activities around the community. (Milo Pimatisiwin Project George camp helper).

Activities could have been planned out more ahead of time and lack of communication in terms of location of events made it difficult. It worked out in the end. I think in the future planning stages need to be strengthened. (Milo Pimatisiwin cultural camp helper).

One youth helper expressed concern that the regulations on boat safety and licensing would replace the value of knowledge keepers who grew up on the river. He felt more reassured travelling with and learning from the old men than from someone who just got a boat license. He further emphasized that he'd trust them more than himself:

Some of the challenges are that some of our most experienced men on the river don't have a boating license but now apparently, there is need to have a boating license. The ones who have been doing this for years, their whole life, can avoid any dangerous incident and accident than someone like me who just got a license. I hope they think about this. (Milo Pimatisiwin cultural camp helper).

The voice of youth knowledge brought an awareness of the potential for new boat drivers to learn from the Elders. This would result in another means of fostering intergenerational learning. Book knowledge from the south may not necessarily apply to this remote region. We discussed with the youth the possibility of designing a Moose Cree version of boat safety, and in fact, this is how they prefer to learn. This built on the importance of practical hands-on learning as emphasized by the youth:

Practical hands on approach to learning basic skills is important to get a feel for it. Even basics, like making a fire are important. When you go out to the land with some knowledge, you begin to see what the medicines, what the tools are, what is needed, what is out there. This is important because not much people are knowledgeable about culture and land and just see the surface. I feel people need to be taught more about and do not get much exposure to that kind of cultural activities. I hope exposure brings deeper respect for our

culture. It feels like it is slowly dying ... it just feels like it is really important for people to learn the basics of being in the bush, and how to do certain things to build a foundation for the youth to build on. Expose it to them and see if they like it. (Milo Pimatisiwin cultural camp helper).

Each Milo Pimatisiwin Project helper brought valuable insights, concerns, and recommendations on how to continue to invest in and to improve land-based initiatives. They expressed the ongoing challenge of engaging youth and providing them with opportunities for land-based learning, given the influence of drugs and alcohol in the community. Many of the youth have expressed repeatedly they want to learn and have access to these events, yet turnout can still remain low for some events while others can surpass expectation. Within the community many of the youth feel they are unimportant, or what they would like to see made available is ignored or dismissed by leadership.

The impacts of colonialism inclusive of residential schools are still present. Traditionally the children and youth were at the centre of communities and families. Around the children and youth were the Elders, their teachers and guardians, then the women surrounded them, and then men protected them all. With the multigenerational impacts of colonialism, the removal of the children and youth has altered the learning system and values within communities. Children and youth feel this, live this, and start to believe this. The struggle to shift and return these values is an ongoing challenge. The Youth Services Director seeks to find the balance between providing the activities for youth and ensuring that they are safe when they participate in these initiatives. Finding the balance between Cree traditions and modern-day requirements, laws, and practices is a challenging reality and responsibility.

Cree-specific evaluation tool. In Phase 2, we produced a Cree-specific assessment tool to assist the JDYC in evaluating its own successes and strengths. This was a direct result of the challenges in the first phase of the project as a means to counter the notions of success from a Western-based funder's perspective. The purpose was to reflect the community's indicators of success, in addition to a process whereby Cree values and priorities informed and guided their respective evaluations (Michell, 2012). From this tool, a community-based survey was implemented to provide clarity on ways to strengthen the vision of Youth Services and to grow the use of the community radio station.

Vision of Youth Services Director, John Delaney Youth Centre

The JDYC morphed into what it is today over many years. It was originally constructed to be a business/entrepreneurship centre. It has become a designated space for youth. Originally there were only two staff members that provided drop-in and gym activities for youth. It grew and other team members joined, providing various programs and services for youth. As of 2015 there is a staff of nine with a variety of programs, gym activities, dances, special events, and the newly added Culture and Language worker/program plus the community radio station.

The JDYC has created a space where youth can liberate themselves, even briefly, from home challenges. Given that youth are assuming a lot more familial responsibility at early ages, children have to be adults earlier. This has disrupted the cycle of pimatisiwin. For this reason, life-stage teachings and ceremonies are emerging out of the JDYC as opposed to within a traditional familial setting. The director is seeking to re-instill the cycle of life teachings that taught how to be a good and loving human and how to fit in the world around them. The Milo Pimatisiwin Project has helped to reintroduce this knowledge within this public and community-based setting.

The director believes that in order to reverse the effects of residential schools and colonialism, it is important to make the knowledge and Cree traditions available to the youth. Mainstream school does not provide these opportunities. With the effects of colonization much of this knowledge exists in a gulf. It is a challenge when people do not know where to access the knowledge. A prime example of this took place during the second phase of the project.

Creating Safe Space

The JDYC worked with traditional knowledge keepers and gave young parents the possibility of having a Walking Out Ceremony for their babies. As the pimatisiwin teachings were traditionally practised in the Cree culture, each stage of life and development was marked with rites of passage. The Walking Out Ceremony is one of the first ceremonies for our people as they grow and develop as human beings. The ceremony is normally done when babies are 1 year old. In this ceremony they are introduced to the world (physical and spiritual), and the community honours the little ones' first year of life plus their parents. It is a celebration of each young person's life, their parents, grandparents, other family members, and friends gather. Everyone acknowledges that child and expresses what they wish for that child as the child grows. A commitment is made to support the child through their next stage of life. The ceremony also acknowledges the hard work parents and grandparents do for that child to help them grow. The Walking Out Ceremony that the JDYC assisted with gave many young parents the possibility to offer this for their babies. Six babies had this rite of passage, with their parents and family members present; over 50 people were in attendance that morning. The young parents had expressed they wanted this done for their children and knew it was important but did not understand why. They did not know what they needed to do and all that was involved. The JDYC was able to assist them and bridge that gap.

The Moose Cree community is fortunate that it has a good core of people that have retained the Cree knowledge, knowledge that was forced into hiding due to our land-based practices being outlawed by the federal Indian Act. The mistrust of traditional Cree practices was ingrained into the older generations, and the younger ones and youth know that something is missing. They are starving for the knowledge that is an inherent right. Introducing them to their culture and strengthening their identity can help remedy the social problems that exist.

Filling Our Cree Cup

The Youth Services Director applies the analogy of a cup. Prior to contact, our Cree people had our own cup. It was filled with our traditional practices, connection to the land, spirituality, language, family roles and responsibilities—our Cree ways. The occidental systems that were enforced emptied that cup; they allowed for the negative effects to enter and become normalized. This is the violence, alcohol, drugs, poor health choices, disconnection from the land and our traditional food (the practices of gathering and preparing). All of this compounds itself and manifests in the numerous social problems that exist: poor health conditions, poverty, difficulties with the justice system (disproportionately high incarceration and crime rates), violence against women and children. Our cup has been filled with too many things that do not serve us but rather harm us. Refilling our cup with what was stripped and taken is invaluable to our holistic wellbeing and will provide our youth and people with the core, the solid foundation to being a Cree person in the world today.

Youth have the unique circumstance where they must learn who they are as a Cree person to fit in the contemporary or Western world. Our youth and our people would benefit greatly from learning to walk in both worlds. They need to understand how their life circumstances came to be, that the social conditions that exist are the effects of the “-isms”: colonialism, racism, sexism.

In order for this knowledge to be shared and to counter the negative impacts of colonization, we must make this information accessible in new formats. We must preserve what is quickly being lost, share this information, and learn to trust what our Cree ancestors lived by since time immemorial. Many of our traditional ways have been altered with the use of modern or Western tools. For example, hunting with guns, getting on the land with snowmobiles, motorboats, helicopters, trucks. The values and importance of the activities remain present with the added benefit of the new tools. Sharing the traditional knowledge with tools like the internet, apps, and the radio station can make it accessible to our youth, who are learning to use technology at a rate unprecedented in our history, as well as making it accessible to a broader audience. Given that much of our Cree population has migrated, like the majority of Aboriginal people in Canada, to urban areas, making this knowledge and these values easily accessible is important.

The Youth Services Director has worked in a variety of areas, seeing and experiencing the impacts of the loss of culture, identity, and connection to the land. The traditional Cree values that were once universally understood recognized the importance of instilling pimatisiwin teachings in our people—to prepare them, strengthen them, and ensure that our children are equipped to be strong, healthy Cree beings. Normalizing these traditional practices and sharing the pimatisiwin teachings are vital to the survival of our Cree identity. We must ensure that they are accessible for all who want to learn, to heal, and to grow as human beings. Doing so will help them “fill their cup” and develop an understanding of the current social context they live in. The current social conditions that exist for Aboriginal people today took many years to manifest, since contact and even before the creation of the Indian Act and

residential schools.

The pimatisiwin teachings were once organic and practised daily. To have them brought back will take many years. It is important to start today, and with the children and youth. One traditional healer stated Cree people would use ceremonies and other practises to celebrate, honour, and give thanks for life and seek guidance. Today they are used to heal, hopefully, so that in our future our children and those yet to come will not need to heal for what has been lost.

Discussion: Milo Pimatisiwin Project Lessons Learned

I re-learned the importance of a helper's role. I did not come into the community with answers to questions. They have their own answers, solutions and clear vision of how to create healthy living for their youth, families and community in general. I remembered the importance of unlearning in order to listen and to act from within. When there is equal accountability to the life within and outside, there is trust. (University of Ottawa doctoral student).

The concept of milo pimatisiwin weaves a theoretical, epistemological, and methodological approach to inform youth programming, community leadership, and engaged research. Long-term vision, Elder and youth engagement, knowledge keepers, resources, and commitment are required elements to re-create milo pimatisiwin in a modern context. The collaboration between various stakeholders is critical to the construction of an alternative conception of health and wellbeing along with implications for land-based initiatives. We have captured the following lessons learned in three themes. These lessons could inform potential best practices, guiding principles, and/or policy development.

Outsider–Insider Relationships

Within the context of this project, it was important for the authors not only to facilitate the project but also to live the pimatisiwin teachings. Doing so helped us to understand and to confront our responsibility to address the inadequate system that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities must work with and exist in. It was important to support one another in maintaining an appreciative attitude, taking care of ourselves, and not succumbing to deficit thinking given the challenges.

For outsiders coming into the community, it is important to take time to learn from and with the community. To grasp and to empathize with the concerns regarding current social conditions is not easy. It is important to have one's own wellbeing bundle and to seek support from the community and Elders. This support fosters a deeper sense of cooperation and sense of community spirit. Cultivating the teachings acquired through experience can uplift one's consciousness. This is vital in researcher–community engagement if we are to remain focused on a shared vision for the future.

Consistent three-way communication between the Moose Cree First Nation band council, Centre for Global and Community Engagement, and the University of Ottawa student ensured a mutual influence on each other and shifted power differentials. With this type of attitude and approach, there is room for “outsiders” to assist in supporting the interests of community given the loss of trust from within the community. An outsider can be heard differently, as the associate director explained to the group. It is, however, important for the outsider, in this case a Métis researcher from another community, to be grounded in her own history, identity, and values. This knowing helped to respect the difference in Cree values and ways of being. Critical self-reflexivity is vital to maintain a balance of being a helper and being accountable to academic timelines and project deliverables.

Land-Based Health

Indigenous thought on health and wellbeing disrupts the Western paternalistic ideologies of health and wellbeing. Health is not separate from one’s identity; therefore it does not fit within an ideology of individual responsibility separate from community. Indigenous Peoples’ worldview on health goes further. Health and wellbeing have to do with the balance of relationships with land, identity, and family (Adelson, 2000; Anderson, 2011). Cree thought and consciousness offers a renewed outlook of wellbeing for a diverse generation. Through our shared experience, we further suggest that *milo pimatisiwin* principles served to ground a collaborative research project and initiative from the bottoms of our feet.

Just as there is not only one way to spell *milo pimatisiwin*, neither is there only one way to live the good life. It was important in this process not to become dogmatic about what living and being well means. It is a living concept in relationship with Spirit that ebbs and flows with the seasons of life, experiences, and environment. There is rhythm within nature that cannot always be followed with a schedule and clock. In other words, being flexible and gentle is important. The means to achieving the good life may be altered with time and technology, but the values learned and practised remain the same.

Elder and Youth Engagement

Reliance on Elders’ wisdom, skills, and stories in land-based initiatives is essential to also restore the value of their role and responsibility to community wellbeing and research initiatives (Gaudet, 2014). As one youth leader said, “To involve our Elders is how to bring change.” There also needs to be an understanding that elders are not necessarily Elders when they achieve a certain age. Some of the communities’ Cree knowledge keepers are young and possess a considerable amount of knowledge. Understanding that knowledge can come from everyone, including our youth and children, was one of our greatest teachings.

Reconnecting youth and Elders provides mutual benefits to each demographic. During the project there were many Elders that expressed how they enjoyed teaching the youth, and longed for more opportunities. These interactions provided both Elders and youth with a sense of belonging and purpose. The JDYC observed changes in attitudes for some “problem youth” after they spent several days on the land and water, and learning from the Elders. The youth received guidance, praise, gentle teasing, and humour to create learning opportunities. It is important to consider what the Elders need to be well, and the protocol required to engage their services in constructed land-based initiatives.

Conclusion

This project has provided stepping stones to integrate local resources and land-based knowledge in community initiatives and in the growing field of Indigenous research practices. Both were guided by the ways of the land, context, and knowledge of the people who have learned and lived with the land, as well as people who are learning. The approach intersects hands-on experiential and practical learning, teachings about life, and living in two worlds. We sought to weave several components: emotional, spiritual, physical, and social. The project nurtured the foundations of cultural regeneration within the infrastructure of JDYC. It included many generations, all important for youth wellbeing.

The project disrupted the siloed operation that is not unique to First Nations people but that is driven by a logic that can make it difficult to apply the teachings, given the limited resources and accessibility of youth and Elders. The study challenged knowledge production from an outsider’s gaze and created awareness-based Cree ways of seeing and learning from the knowledge that flows from a connection to the land. The re-centring of land-based knowledge at the JDYC offered a springboard from which to share and to retell intergenerational stories through modern technology, inclusive of academic institutions.

The Omushkego people, like many Indigenous communities, are coming out of a long history of exploitative impositions and paternalistic attitudes (Brokenleg, 2012; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2009). There is a continued fear and apprehension about activities that are culturally relevant. This project has assisted with legitimizing the importance of the work that must come from within the communities themselves. The Moose Cree community has for decades been seeking to address the damages resulting from attempts to break down Cree culture. The Milo Pimatisiwin Project is one of many collaborative initiatives designed to strengthen human relationship, connection to the land, and continuity of cultural practices, values, and skills.

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