



Evaluation methodologies in multisector community change initiatives: The missing role of indigenous knowledge systems

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Abstract

Comprehensive or multisector community change initiatives (CCIs) represent a promising approach to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in Canada's child welfare systems. However, such initiatives are difficult to establish and sustain – in part due to the difficulty of evaluating their impacts and outcomes using standardized Western evaluation methodologies. Consequently, over the past 20 years there have been extensive efforts to develop evaluation principles, methodologies, methods, and tools that are more able to illustrate the benefits of these kinds of initiatives. A systematic review of the CCI evaluation literature found that while many of these principles, methodologies, methods and tools show considerable promise, there has been limited attention to or incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing or approaches to research with Indigenous peoples. This paper presents two examples of Indigenous led multisector community change initiatives to enhance Indigenous well-being and notes the importance of evaluating their impacts. It argues that collaborative research is needed with participants in Indigenous led multisector collaborations to advance knowledge of culturally relevant approaches to their evaluation.

OVERREPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE

Despite a lack of consistent measurement between and within various jurisdictions, it is widely known that Indigenous children and families are significantly overrepresented in statutory child protection systems and that this trend is international in scope (Australian Institute of Health and Family, 2010; Bennet & Auger, 2013; Delfabbro, Hirte, Rogers & Wilson, 2010; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; Thoburn, 2007; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). One Canadian study noted that Indigenous children

constitute approximately 5% of the total Canadian child population while comprising anywhere from 40 to 80% of the children in foster home, group home, or institutional care (Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004). A more recent Canadian study noted that rates of investigation of Indigenous families are more than four times that of non-Indigenous families with substantiation of child protection concerns and rates of out of home placement also significantly higher for Indigenous children and families (Sinha et al, 2011). Furthermore, studies have reported that the overrepresentation of Indigenous children increases as they move deeper into child protection systems in Canadian (Blackstock, Trocmé & Bennett, 2004), American (Carter 2009; Harris & Hackett, 2008), and Australian contexts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010; Tilbury 2009).

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families is reflective of a complex social problem. Complex social problems have multiple, inter-related causes that make them extremely difficult to ‘solve.’ Analysis of ‘pathways’ to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families suggests multiple inter-related and overlapping factors at individual, neighborhood/community, and societal levels (Carter 2010; Lavergne, Dufour, Trocmé, & Larrivée, 2008; Trocmé et al, 2004; Sinha et al, 2011). In Canada, as in other countries with a history of colonization, Indigenous peoples are over-represented in almost all negative measures of wellbeing. They are proportionally more likely to suffer mental and physical health problems, be unemployed, live in poverty, experience interpersonal violence, have poor housing, and dropout of school. Indigenous people also constitute proportionally higher percentages in juvenile justice, and adult prison populations. These issues are linked to colonization and systems of residential schooling imposed on Indigenous peoples and all of them have profound impacts on child and family well-being.

Indigenous peoples have lived on the land now referred to as Canada for thousands of years, raising generations of children without the use of statutory systems of child protection (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). Children’s welfare was sustained through rich and vibrant socio-cultural lifeworlds consisting of spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, identities, roles and relations that placed a high degree of value on children, nurturing their physical, spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual growth (Duran, 2006). European colonization attacked Indigenous lifeworlds; traditional lands and lifestyles were taken

away and First Nations were confined to ‘reserves’ and made subject to federal government jurisdiction. Cultural traditions were outlawed by people who believed in their own innate superiority and the inferiority of the ‘savage.’ But the most significant assault on Indigenous lifeworlds occurred through the imposition of the residential school system which forced the removal of children from their family, community and culture to government funded, church run ‘schools’ where they were forbidden to speak their language or practice their traditions. In addition to the many instances of physical and sexual abuse, children suffered severe emotional abuse. They were encouraged to believe in their own and their people’s inferiority, to reject their culture, to identify as ‘Christians,’ and to ‘fit in’ to a white society that simultaneously prevented them from doing so.

The destruction of a people’s socio-cultural lifeworld has profound impacts on individual and collective well-being. These include loss of traditions and collective identity, destruction of social roles and relations, and of individual identity, motivation, and self-pride. Interpersonal violence, depression, addictions, alienation, and suicide become common. (Duran, 2006). All of these situations have been experienced by Indigenous peoples and are well documented by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and various reports of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015b, 2015c).

Yet, many Indigenous people and communities survived and resisted these assaults on personal and collective identities maintaining cultural traditions and positive social relations, while many others are reclaiming and revitalizing them. This is a testament to the strength of individuals and groups, and to the power of these Indigenous lifeworlds. Nonetheless, the consequences have been and continue to be severe, and the many inter-related issues underlying the overrepresentation of Indigenous children within child protection systems are evidence of this.

Addressing these many inter-related issues underlying the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families requires creating changes on multiple levels, and is beyond the purview or capacity of any one agency or organization. Thus, while the Calls to Action of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015a) begin with the need for changes in Canada’s formal child welfare systems, the reality is that formal child welfare systems will not and cannot solve the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in

isolation. Child welfare systems typically focus on the deficits of individual children and families with interventions geared to ‘fixing’ these deficits. Even early intervention and prevention approaches maintain the focus on deficits ascribed to specific ‘at risk’ individuals, families, or groups, attempting to address these deficits without attending to broader contributing social relations and dynamics. The over representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems is unlikely to improve as long as problems continue to be defined within this narrow focus. Broader approaches are needed that address the social and structural issues impacting Indigenous child and family well-being, and that acknowledge and draw on the strengths and resilience embedded in Indigenous cultures and traditional knowledge (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Gillespie, Supernault, & Abel, 2014).

MULTI-SECTOR COMMUNITY CHANGE INITIATIVES: A PROMISING APPROACH

Multi-sector community collaborations or comprehensive community change initiatives (CCIs) facilitate such an approach. These initiatives are grounded within communities and engage individuals and organizational representatives with knowledge of local conditions and local resources across a wide range of sectors in the promotion of social change within a specific community or region. In coordinating change efforts across multiple systems and multiple levels, they break down the barriers and silos that have come to characterize many communities (Bradford, 2005; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Torjman & Leviton-Reid, 2003). CCIs appear to be more capable of addressing complex social issues – such as Indigenous child and family well-being – that cannot be fully addressed by any single organization (Kania & Kramer, 2011). In fact, arguments in favor of community development as a key component in child protection systems – Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous – are longstanding in Canada as well as other countries (Hudson, 1999; McKenzie, 2002; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009).

An example of an Indigenous led multisector community change initiative is the Peace River Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC), a committee with a twenty-plus year history in the Peace River region of northwestern Alberta. Originally begun as an information sharing forum between service providers, over time the group has become

more action-focused, engaging in a range of social change activities to address the well-being of Indigenous people. It is asset-focused, drawing on the rich culture and traditions of the diverse Indigenous groups whose traditional territories encompass this area and is made up of individuals and organizations that span a wide range of community sectors (Abel & Gillespie, 2014).

An example of one of its many social change activities is the coordination of Sisters in Spirit Vigils within the community. Developed by the Native Women's Association of Canada, Sisters in Spirit Vigils draw attention to violence against Indigenous women, honor the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and support and assist in healing for families who have lost loved ones to violence (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2012).

Interpersonal violence is one of the most common reasons for child protection referrals and Indigenous women in Canada are heavily overrepresented as victims of interpersonal violence with forms of violence significantly more likely to be the most severe and potentially life-threatening (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2011). The intergenerational cycle is a vicious one – children are traumatized by the victimization of their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and other female family members; yet, if this trauma remains unresolved and unattended by the larger community, the children may grow into adults who perpetuate the cycle of violence. Promoting awareness and healing at a community level is therefore critical. In 2006 the Peace River AIC was one of only eleven communities across Canada to coordinate a Sisters in Spirit Vigil and they have continued to coordinate these every year since. Analysis of this coordination has highlighted how the Vigils have brought together knowledge and resources across a wide range of community sectors (Gillespie, Supernault, & Abel, 2014, 2014).

The presence of cultural assets, and preservation of and participation in cultural traditions has been identified as important aspects in promoting bonding and fostering child and family resilience (Lalonde, 2005; Filbert & Flynn, 2010). In 2018, the Peace River AIC organized and hosted its 22nd annual Indigenous Gathering and 14th annual Pow-wow. The event brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and groups across the region in organizing, volunteering, donating, and celebrating the areas' diverse Indigenous identities and cultures. The AIC also worked to secure land

and funding that resulted in construction of an Indigenous dance arbour. In addition to a permanent facility for hosting the Indigenous Gatherings and Pow-wows, the structure communicates Indigenous culture as an important part of the regional fabric.

The barriers often encountered by Indigenous peoples to health care, housing and other basic services, and the ways in which they are disproportionately impacted by cuts to services have also been identified as underlying factors in Indigenous overrepresentation in child protection systems (Trocme, et al, 2004). The Peace River AIC engages in social planning and advocacy at multiple levels such as addressing dental services for First Nations children and challenging cuts to local transit services.

In the central Okanagan, *Suxkenxitelx kl cecamala* (Those Who Care for the Children), brings together the Westbank First Nation, the Métis Community Services Society of BC, the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society, Success by Six, and the United Way. This multisector group is involved in a variety of community change initiatives. In 2018, the group hosted the eleventh annual Indigenous Family gathering, bringing community members together to celebrate the early years of childhood with games, cultural activities, storytelling and a light dinner. Similar to the Peace River AIC, the group works towards community level change, combatting the destructive effects of colonization, drawing on and building on cultural knowledge and traditions to enhance social relations, programs, and services for Indigenous families, with a particular focus on the early years.

These two examples illustrate efforts to advance Indigenous well-being through coordination across multiple community sectors to achieve community level change. While not denying the importance of prevention, early intervention, and protection, multisector coordination of community change constitutes a “missing link” in a full spectrum of approaches to child welfare, and one that may assist in addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in formal child welfare systems.

CHALLENGES OF CCIS

Despite their potential for achieving change in many complex and seemingly intractable social problems, CCIs are difficult to enable and even more difficult to sustain. There is reluctance to fund community change initiatives and the strong preference continues for investing in single organizations to address social problems, and for

maintaining the ‘top-down’ and individualized focus of most programs and services (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Provan, Veazie, Staten & Teufel-Shone, 2005). One reason for this is related to the challenges of evaluating the impacts and outcomes of multisector CCIs. Governments and funding organizations such as United Ways are increasingly looking to empirical evidence of impacts and outcomes to guide policy making and funding decisions. Evaluation is viewed as a way to measure outcomes and establish evidence through generalizable associations between specific outcomes and specific services, programs, or policies. Evaluation is often built into programs or policies from the outset, typically as a condition of funding (Bradford & Chouinard, 2009).

However, community change initiatives are difficult to evaluate through traditional evaluation methods (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012; Berkowitz, 2001; Cabaj, 2014; Connell, Kubisch, Schorr & Weiss, 1995). Their multifaceted approaches and high degree of contextual sensitivity defy linear cause and effect studies and generalizability. Bradford and Chouinard (2009) note the federal government’s increasing emphasis on evaluation to provide outcome- and results-based information for policy development and funding decisions and highlight three problems for the evaluation of CCIs. First, CCIs are driven by community-based participants with intimate knowledge of local conditions and issues as well as local capacities and resources; this makes CCIs highly flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. However, government evaluation standards typically require objectives and outcomes to be defined ahead of time with little or no flexibility or adaptability. Second, CCIs are long-term projects; results are often incremental and viewed narratively, against this longer time frame. Government evaluation strategies emphasize shorter time frames with an emphasis on quantifiable results. Accomplishments significant to community participants but difficult to quantify may be dismissed. Third, the emphasis on short-term, quantifiable results can undermine the community dialogue and learning that is so necessary to addressing complex, inter-related problems. Collective learning and creative problem-solving are sacrificed for top-down “command-and-control” approaches (Bradford & Chouinard, 2009, p. 54).

Over 20 years ago, a U.S. Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families struck a Steering Committee on evaluation to address the lack of fit between CCIs and traditional methods of evaluation and to contribute to the

development of alternate approaches to evaluation of community change efforts (Connell et al, 1995). At that time, two purposes for evaluation of CCIs were identified that remain relevant today. First, evaluation should enable assessment of community change that goes beyond aggregate measures focused on individuals or families (such as rates of school dropout or numbers of children in care) to include ‘upstream’ or social and structural measures of community change. Second, evaluation should enable experiential learning, helping participants in such initiatives to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts, to see what is working and what needs to be improved, and to enhance methods of effective change (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012; Cabaj, 2014; Connell et al, 1995; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Since then an array of alternate methods and approaches for evaluation of community change initiatives are being developed across a range of social science disciplines, governments and NGOs (see for example Brown, 2010; Cabaj, 2014; Farrow and Schorr, 2011; Fiester, 2010; Kelly, 2010). .

In 2017, supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on evaluation of multisector community change initiatives was undertaken. A major goal of this review and synthesis was to identify the contribution of Indigenous knowledge to principles, practices, methodologies and methods in evaluation of multisector community change initiatives. Relevant literature was chosen through a three-stage process: First, the criteria for inclusion was established, a list of search terms was generated and the literature was searched. Second, an initial review of abstracts and/or methods sections was conducted and third, the final articles were reviewed and coded for relevant themes. A total of thirty-four documents from both academic and non-academic (grey literature) were synthesized into a final report (Gillespie & Albert, 2017). Analysis of these documents highlighted a range of methodologies, principles, challenges, methods and tools for evaluation of community change initiatives; however, none incorporated Indigenous ways of knowing or research methods.

Despite the excellent work being done to develop evaluation approaches that resonate for participants in community change initiatives, the failure to incorporate Indigenous voices or to examine the distinct role Indigenous knowledge systems might play in such evaluation constitutes a serious gap in knowledge. Evaluating community

change initiatives through approaches that ignore Indigenous knowledge systems undermines this knowledge and forecloses meaningful evaluation with and by Indigenous community participants (LaFrance & Nicols, 2010). Indeed, participants in Indigenous led CCIs have noted that evaluation approaches often seek or rely on methods that have little or no meaning for their community change efforts.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN EVALUATION OF MULTISECTOR COMMUNITY CHANGE INITIATIVES

Three aspects of Indigenous knowledge systems are essential considerations in evaluation methodologies for CCIs focused on enhancing Indigenous well-being:

1. Indigenous Ontology (ways of being)¹: interconnectedness, circularity, balance and harmony are core aspects of Indigenous ontology. Interconnectedness is part of a broader spirituality that includes the interconnectedness of humans to one another as well as to past and future generations, but also includes the interconnectedness of oneself with animals, plants, and all parts of the land and larger cosmos. This interconnectedness to both people and places is core to personal and collective identity, values and beliefs and relationships are equivalent to interconnectedness, circularity, balance and harmony. These are the foundational components of an Indigenous worldview. Circularities is viewed as part of the natural order of creation and is a fundamental spiritual aspect; the cyclical nature of life is seen in the seasons of the year, the cycles of the moon, ocean tides, etc. With no beginning and no end, the circle signifies transformation and movement as well as continuity and interconnectedness. Circles also represent tension and flow between each individual and the whole. Communities are circles of individuals within a whole. Balance and harmony are closely related to one another and to each of the principles of the Indigenous worldview. As everything is interconnected, related to a whole, each part has a role in the creation of balance and harmony for the whole. If one component is out of balance or harmony, it will struggle to fulfill its role and the

¹ See Martin, K. & Mirraboopa, B. (2009). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for indigenous and indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76).

- whole will be out of balance and harmony. For example, if one relationship is out of balance and harmony, the balance and harmony of the whole is impacted.
2. Indigenous Epistemologies (ways of knowing)²: The ontological components identified above have numerous epistemological implications. First, knowledge is relational. As everything is interconnected, knowledge only develops within these interconnections – indeed knowledge is these interconnections. Second, knowledge is personal. Congruent with the perspective that each of us is a unique part within the whole, is the belief that each of us has particular, specific knowledge such that there is no one ‘truth’ but rather many truths. Third, knowledge is developmental. Learning, or knowledge, like everything else, is cyclical and is a process rather than a product; over time, within relationship, and by paying attention to balance and harmony, and being guided by the spiritual, knowledge and understanding grow. Fourth, space is viewed as more important than time; the ‘here’ matters more than the ‘now’ and knowledge represents learning to live well in this place so as to contribute to the balance and harmony of the whole.
 3. Indigenous Methodologies (ways of doing) ²: Four interrelated terms are consistently present in the literature on Indigenous approaches to research: Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Relationship. Respect entails respecting the knowledge that each individual has to offer to the research process but also respecting the whole community, its values, traditions, and beliefs as well as its ideas and aspirations and ensuring that research is meaningful to the community. And while each participant is viewed as equally important, there is particular respect for the knowledge and insight of Elders. Respect also requires honesty and transparency by all participants in the research process. Reciprocity requires a mutual exchange of benefits; those in the role of researcher both give to and receive from the community and its members. Benefits should not flow only one way. The CCPA Manitoba (2018, p. 14) notes that reciprocity can mean many things from mutual sharing to giving gifts to participants. Responsibility encompasses accountability; researchers are accountable not just to the immediate community or

² See Martin, K. & Mirraboopa, B. (2009). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for indigenous and indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76).

participants, but are engaged and accountable to a much broader constituency. Wilson (2008) states that responsibility and accountability extend to the relationship the researcher has with the world around him or her; it requires researchers to be accountable to ‘all my relations’ – past, present, and future; land, plants, animals and human. Responsibility also extends to research participants and encompasses trust, honesty, and openness. Ultimately, research must honor and respect the interrelatedness of researcher and researched. Engaging in research with respect, reciprocity, and responsibility is the relationship. Indigenous methodologies reflect the above perspectives and implications. As asserted by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2001), “Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology” (p. 15). However, rather than relying on a prescribed set of methods, Indigenous methodological approaches are organic, guided by practices and protocols grounded in specific places and cultural traditions and practices. There are however, three approaches to research methods that are worth noting: talking circles, the medicine wheel and ceremony.

Talking circles: The circle is a model used for group interaction in both the symbolic realm (to convey teachings and promote the development of individual and community values) and on the practical level (to use as a structure for ceremonies, discussions and problem solving). Talking circles allow everyone to get to know each other on a deeper level, co-constructing knowledge. This method of sharing is a traditional and sacred ceremonial, means of learning, gaining knowledge and establishing relationships and has proven successful in Indigenous societies for generations. As a research method, talking circles reflect the equal relationship of each participant to the process of knowledge development within the whole (Wilson, 2008).

The circle is a ceremonial space that brings with it particular rules of conduct and enacts the seven sacred teachings. Opportunities to reflect and making meaning in the circle can be a transformative expression that can add depth to an evaluation. (CCPA Manitoba, 2018, p. 16)

The Medicine Wheel: While not universal, the Medicine Wheel is considered one of the oldest symbols of First Nations spirituality (Kovach, 2005).

A circle divided into four quadrants, the Medicine Wheel can represent Indigenous worldviews, illustrate the human journey through life, and explain relationships between various aspects of creation, both seen and unseen. Within research, the Medicine Wheel can serve as a framework for gathering information, organizing, or representing knowledge.

Ceremony: While Shawn Wilson (2008) states that research is ceremony, it is also important to note that Indigenous approaches to research typically incorporate ceremony. Such ceremonies may include engaging in land based activities. As noted by the CCPA Manitoba (2018, p. 16), “Our connection to land is often neglected within an evaluation process. A shift of space, new experience, out in the land connects to the holistic nature of Indigenous evaluation.” It is through ceremony that connections are made with the spiritual world and this enables stronger relationships and truer knowledge. How can we learn and understand if we are not fully connected to all the sources of knowledge that surround us?

THE WAY FORWARD

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in child protection systems is unlikely to change without approaches that address the broader community systems that impact child and family well-being and that recognize and build on the resilience and capacities inherent in Indigenous culture and traditions. It has also identified how an emphasis on evidence-based policy renders such initiatives difficult to enable and sustain without evaluation of their impacts and outcomes. Yet evaluation of community change efforts is challenging and while principles, methodologies, methods, and tools for such evaluation are being developed, there is little to no incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and research methodologies.

To correct this, research is needed that brings Indigenous led multisector community change to enhance Indigenous well-being together with researchers interested in evaluation approaches to community change initiatives. Such research should be grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and the four principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationship and include participatory methods such as

sharing circles, and traditional, locally relevant ceremonies that engage participants in designing and implementing evaluation approaches and reflecting on their value. The guidance of Elders will be central to this research. Inclusion of more than one initiative across multiple sites could enable sharing of research tools, strategies, and insights in a process of ‘learning, action, and reflection’ that is central to participatory – and Indigenous – research methodologies (CCPA, 2018; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchison, & Sookraj, 2009;).

At this point there is no evidence that community change initiatives hold promise in addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in child protection systems. But there is considerable evidence that the issues confronting Indigenous children and families are complex, highly inter-related, and need to be addressed on multiple levels and across multiple sectors. To support such efforts requires developing principles, methodologies, methods, and tools that aid in evaluation of such efforts – the participation of Indigenous peoples and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems is critical to such efforts.

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