

## **Introduction: Indigenous Youth, Resilience, and Decolonizing Research**

Caroline L. Tait and Ellen Whiteman

The impact of colonization on First Nations and Métis families has led to an over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system (Saskatchewan Child Welfare Review Panel, 2010, p. 19), and in the youth criminal justice systems (Department of Justice, 2004). Across Canada, Indigenous youth are at significantly greater risk of addiction (Health Canada, 2003b; Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve, & MacKinnon, 2008) and suicide (Health Canada, 2003a) than are non-Indigenous youth.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Indigenous youth are less likely to complete high school (Statistics Canada, 2010). Unfortunately, the opportunities available to Indigenous youth are still limited in comparison to those available to other groups their age, in part because of entrenched structural violence and racism (Waller, Okamoto, Miles, & Hurdle, 2003; Tousignant & Sioui, 2009, pp. 57), and because the general Canadian population continues to think of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth as a growing burden on society rather than as a national resource to nurture and to develop (Libin, 2008). This attitude has prevailed for decades. Unfortunately, in an ever harsher, neoliberal political climate, Canada's government is choosing to build more prisons and to take a "tough-on-crime" approach rather than a "tough-on-poverty" approach in addressing the negative fallout from colonial policies that shape the lives of too many of Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past ten years, there has emerged a literature on resilience that documents ways in which individuals and groups successfully navigate short- and long-term adversity (e.g., Tousignant & Sioui, 2009; Waller et al., 2003). This literature identifies the increased health and social risks experienced by Indigenous youth as they negotiate their place in Canadian society. However, resilience research is not about finding ways to help individuals cope better with adversity (Ungar, 2005). Rather, it focuses on the unifying and positive ways in which Indig-

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1 For a discussion of self-government correlation with youth suicide rates, see Chandler and Lalonde, 1998.

2 The Canadian government's initiatives are included in the omnibus crime bill (Canadian Bar Association, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2011).

enous youth are overcoming adverse situations (Andersson & Leodgar, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

The four articles in this volume discuss innovative, community-driven interventions that are contributing to Indigenous youth resilience. These articles shed light on ways in which community-university research partnerships can be used to identify positive processes and outcomes in order to learn about and to support Indigenous youth. The articles focus on promising approaches to front-line work with Indigenous youth. They also explore issues of Indigenous identity and tradition. The articles cover a range of topics, including culturally appropriate addictions treatment, theatre as a decolonizing tool, approaches to healthy body image, and the importance of physical activity in maintaining a healthy body and lifestyle.

The article by Chalmers and Dell considers culturally appropriate evaluation methods for equine-assisted therapies for youth in solvent abuse treatment. The authors examine the importance of culturally relevant methodologies in evaluating First Nations treatment models that re-engage youth with the sacred through therapeutic work with horses. Chalmers and Dell argue in favour of a shift from a post-positivist paradigm to a methodological approach that incorporates Indigenous ways of healing and more inclusive definitions of health, wellness, and healing. They contend that this shift would provide a more effective way of evaluating equine-assisted therapies for Indigenous youth.

The article by Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, and Schmidt explores games and theatre activities as a decolonizing exercise for First Nations youth living on-reserve. Conceptualizing interactive drama as a rehearsal for life, the authors conducted theatre workshops that enabled the youth to explore spaces of freedom and imagination, and to experience the sharing of power. The authors describe how quickly the youth moved from participants to leaders in the process. This article makes a powerful contribution to a growing body of literature focusing on reclaiming identity, space, and culture through a process of decolonization and the importance of play.

Using photovoice, Shea, Poudrier, Chad, and Atcheynum examine adolescent girls' conceptualizations of what it means to be "healthy" or "unhealthy". Their research focuses on perceptions of embodied health

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3 For a review of this literature, see Ledogar & Fleming, 2008. Key concepts include social capital (community/ecological and individual) and collective efficacy.

and on ways in which adolescent girls link these perceptions to traditional identity, good relationships, and a strong culture. This holistic approach situates the meaning of “healthy” within the context of community. The authors examine definitions of health as a social or collective phenomenon, thus moving away from exclusively individualistic narratives.

The final article by McHugh also focuses on the healthy body through an exploration of the positive impact of physical activity on the lives of Indigenous youth. McHugh finds that Indigenous youth are able to connect to an urban Indigenous community through school-based services and programs, and that this connection induces them to remain healthy by participating in sports, dance, or other physical activities. Promoting physical activity and healthy living is a growing focus in Indigenous health literature because of increased rates of diabetes and other serious health concerns among younger and younger people. McHugh’s research points toward support systems that can be put in place so as to enable Indigenous youth to lead active and healthy lifestyles.

Collectively, the papers in this volume explore decolonization processes through research interventions that engage Indigenous youth. These papers illustrate that, across a spectrum of research projects, geographical sites, and cultures, youth concepts of healthy bodies, healthy relationships, and healthy communities all involve strong links to tradition, community, and culture. A secure grounding in community—either on-reserve or in urban environments—and Indigenous identity is shown by these papers to provide a supportive, and much-needed, buffer for youth struggling with the effects of poverty, marginalization, racism, and structural violence. However, while more community-driven and controlled interventions are needed, the real unifying theme of this volume is the strength and resilience of Indigenous youth. The research and community partnerships involved in these projects have developed creative and culturally relevant ways to engage and encourage youth in processes of identity formation and decolonization. Each of these ways draws upon the inner and collective resilience of Indigenous youth.

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