

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF ELDERS AND INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITIES OR HOW TO INFORM THE DIRECT CONTRIBUTION OF ELDERS TO THE WELL-BEING OF THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF QUÉBEC

INTERVIEW WITH CHANTAL VISCOGLIOSI, PROFESSOR, ÉCOLE DE RÉADAPTATION, UNIVERSITÉ DE SHERBROOKE
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CONNECTING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AND WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS ELDERS AS A STARTING POINT FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT

As a trained occupational therapist, Chantal Viscogliosi found herself in the field of Indigenous studies as she was preparing to pursue a postdoctoral degree. During a discussion with a colleague, she hears of the existence of the École d'études autochtones à l'Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT). Shortly thereafter, she decides to contact the director of the school to present her intention of undertaking a postdoctoral degree under his supervision. While reading publications on Indigenous realities, Chantal reflects on the definition from an original - and useful! - perspective that would combine occupational therapy with her interest in working with elders to orient her research project.

Of course, based on a strong experience established over several years with this clientele, she had developed a professional practice anchored in the development of strategies focussed on the use of preserved capacities.

For me, it was obvious that I had to work with elders because I had always done that, and I have much in common with people in this age group. I enjoy discussing with elders. I enjoy intervening with them and working from their strengths. With the reading I had done and having had discussions with people around me, suddenly, something flashed in my mind that seemed to me an interesting way of orienting my postdoctoral degree project.

My idea was: rather than approaching the realities of Indigenous elders as services recipients, it would be to see how their specific contributions are able to respond to the different challenges experienced in their respective communities.

A FUNDING OPPORTUNITY AND TIME CONSTRAINTS: THE UNCERTAINTIES OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Shortly after having been admitted for the postdoctoral degree, Chantal and her director see that the SSHRC had launched a call for proposals for projects pertaining to synthesis of knowledge. The parameters of the project are truly relevant to the context of the research project in development and very quickly, it is agreed to apply. However, with the preoccupation of wanting to avoid unnecessary disruption in the Indigenous communities, Chantal and the co-researchers decide to first of all target Indigenous organizations such as the FNQLHSSC and the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, to request their advice about the initial research question and invite them to collaborate.

I had written a paragraph that I forwarded to potential partners. The objective was to determine with them if the project corresponded to their priorities or if they would like to articulate the question differently. The comments received after my contacting them proposed relatively minor changes. The original idea therefore somewhat remained the same. People found it interesting to use the strengths of the elders as a foundation. Therefore, they agreed to collaborate with us.

As a second step, the idea was to begin consultation procedures with a diversity of Indigenous communities, that is, without the time constraint due to the deadline imposed by the SSHRC and ideally after having obtained the confirmation of funding acquisition.

A few weeks later, Chantal receives confirmation that the application was accepted. A new round of discussions begins with new Indigenous representative authorities; the Conseil de la nation huronne-wendat (Wendake), the Conseil des Abénakis d'Odanak, the Mohawk Council of Kanasatake, the Conseil des Atikamekw de Manawan, the Conseil de bande de Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, the Cree Nation of Chisasibi, the Conseil de la Première Nation Abitibiwinni de Pikogan, and the Inuit village of Kuujjuaq were all contacted and invited to collaborate. The paragraph previously summarizing the objectives of the project is then forwarded to them while specifying that the research question could be refined and

revised to better harmonize with the realities of each community. In general, Chantal's invitation was transferred to those in charge of issues pertaining to elders, and whom she would contact afterwards to discuss the project verbally more fully, discuss the research question proposed on the contribution of Indigenous elders to well-being, discuss the partnership considered for the synthesis of knowledge, and answer their questions. Chantal proposed to the participating communities a methodology honouring Indigenous sources and oral tradition. In fact, she proposed the inclusion of written, audio, and video documents suggested by the elders of the different Indigenous nations in Québec. Furthermore, because oral tradition is especially important among First Nations peoples, the intention of collaborating with the communities provided the elders with the opportunity to share experiences that are not necessarily included in the written, audio, and video documents.

In all participating communities, this proposal was enthusiastically welcomed by the elders, who were very generous at the perspective of sharing their knowledge of existing resources describing the contribution of Indigenous elders to well-being, as well as narrate experiences they had heard on the same topic.

After discussing with the elder representatives in each community about her desire to offer as a gift, a summary of the Indigenous elders' contribution to well-being according to scientific

literature as well as the secondary analysis of the data from the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS, 2012), as an introduction to the thematic coffee meetings and due to the interest generated by this proposal, Chantal begins these research and analyses. With the APS (2012) data, she analyses the relations between variables for population well-being and spending time with an elder or while benefitting from the support of an elder.

When interlocutors confirmed their interest in participating in the project, a date was set for Chantal's arrival. During her visit, Chantal was to facilitate the coffee meetings and set up individual meetings, depending on preferences in each community.

Some places considered the coffee meeting formula more interesting for sharing and mentioned that group discussions are stimulating and allow for new ideas to come forth. In other communities, after the coffee meetings, some participants wished to continue individually to further develop certain aspects of the elders' contributions. I adapted to the preference of each community.

Overall, initial contact and subsequent discussions took place between December 2016 and August 2017. The summer period was intensive since the final report was to be submitted September 11, 2017. This was quite a feat which, in hindsight, leaves the researcher happy with the work accomplished,

but wishing the pace for the work had been less intensive to allow for meetings within the communities for which the procedure for the establishment for partnerships requires more time.

It was necessary to work extremely quickly to respect the requirements of the funding. I really did all I could, considering the circumstances, to avoid putting pressure on the communities. But despite this, I would have preferred to have more time to solicit retroaction, integrate more perspectives...



Source: CBHSSJB, 2018.

COFFEE MEETINGS: A FERTILE GROUND FOR THE CIRCULATION OF IDEAS

As agreed with the communities, the coffee meetings organized in each community, except for Pikogan and Kuujuaq, were an opportunity for Chantal to explain her procedure and the objectives of the research, and to solicit from the participants a sharing of knowledge and experiences. After sharing the summary of what was found in scientific literature on the contribution of Indigenous elders to well-being, in turn, the elders shared knowledge and experiences, and proposed written, video, or audio Indigenous sources discussing the contributions of elders to well-being in their communities. The information that emerged from this co-development with the elders was included in the synthesis of knowledge produced subsequently. The elders were also encouraged to share their knowledge about projects pertaining to aspects of elder participation in the community which, this time, had not yet been documented to date.

Seeing the elders' desire that these experiences undocumented in writing be included in the synthesis of knowledge, in respect of oral tradition, I included them, obviously without the claim that the synthesis is exhaustive in this area. When I came back home, I relaunched the search in the search engines to see if there was any documentation on the subject. And in some cases, my search was fruitful!

Those people who participated in the coffee meetings were elders for the majority, but there were also a few political representatives and youth in certain cases.

Through this co-development, I wished to collect a diversity of viewpoints. The small poster announcing the coffee meetings specified that everyone was welcome, but in the end, the elders were the ones who felt concerned the most. They wanted to have their strengths documented. But they also expressed the concern that I come back and for the research to be useful. Yes, this was a very important concern and I have never forgotten it. Upon completion of the synthesis of knowledge, I sent an invitation out to everyone to go back and share the results and consider avenues for action. This is how, during a coffee meeting on the sharing of the results, the idea of the creation of a toolkit on the contribution of Indigenous elders to well-being was proposed by an elder. The elders proposed the production of audio and written versions in French and in English, a Cree version and a drawn version. The latter could subsequently be used for intergenerational activities with children.



Cree elders of Chisasibi during a cultural day where they share their know-how. Source: CBHSSJB, 2018.

TREATMENT AND ANALYSIS OF DATA: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUE

To proceed with the codification of the different types of actions by elders and the benefits generated by these actions, the team's researchers, including an Indigenous researcher, were inspired by the categories of the WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001). Very quickly, the team agreed to modify some categories that were insufficient to describe the contributions of the Indigenous elders.

Hunting, for example, is considered a leisure activity according to this classification. But for Indigenous elders, hunting is not a leisure activity! Hunting is grounded in a relationship to a very specific territory according to their worldview... It is therefore insulting for most of them to be told that the hunting they practice corresponds to a "leisure activity"... It is the same thing with traditional crafts activities. It was therefore necessary to modify and enhance categorization to account for these cultural differences as to the meaning of certain practices within the Indigenous context. Would it be necessary to develop a completely new one entirely based

on an array of Indigenous perspectives? Probably. This constitutes a limit to our research, and we are truly clear on that subject.

Other discussions also touched on the way history is treated, whether oral or in the documentation produced by Indigenous organizations in the synthesis of knowledge. Substantially, where in selected scientific literature the actions are documented apart from the benefits, in the Indigenous sources, the benefits were not often explicitly mentioned. These discussions allowed for the enhancement of the synthesis of knowledge by the promotion of Indigenous knowledge.

During the coffee meetings, the elders mentioned that, in the Indigenous worldview, the learning process, the experience related to the action, is at least as important as the results, if not more. Therefore, rather than prioritizing respect for a scientific methodology, we respected this epistemology. We therefore included the documentation though it did not comply with the predetermined inclusion criteria, that is, explicitly mention the benefits. Thus, contrary to scientific literature, for Indigenous sources, we have included the literature mentioning actions of elders without necessarily always explicitly describing their benefits if they weren't reported by the elders.

The co-development of the synthesis of knowledge was achieved thanks to the contributions of multiple partners, including communities of eight different Indigenous nations (Anicinapek, Atikamekw, Abenakis, Huron-Wendat, Mohawk, Cree, Innu, Inuit). Other organizations also contributed to the development of the synthesis of knowledge, including the First Nations of Québec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC), the Val-d'Or and Sept-Iles Native Friendship Centres, the International Network on the Disability Creation Process (INDCP), the Canadian Medical Association, the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, the Coalition pour le maintien à domicile, the Fédération des centres d'action bénévole du Québec, the Community Health Representatiave at the Temiskaming First Nation Centre, the Réseau de recherche et de connaissances relatives aux peuples autochtones (DIALOG), the Institut du vieillissement et de la participation sociale.

THE TOOLKIT AND ITS DIVERSE VERSIONS: KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION TOOLS REQUESTED BY THE COMMUNITY

Following a first year of meetings and discussions, the second phase of the project consisted of the production of various tools for the mobilization of knowledge, in keeping with the requests expressed by the communities. Two scientific articles and three articles in mainstream newspapers were written, one participation in Chisasibi's

community radio took place, as well as many presentations inviting elders who had participated in the project, including one at the UQAT in September 2018.

Furthermore, with financial assistance from the DIALOG Network, an elder's suggestion for the development of a toolkit was implemented. This toolkit provides examples of elders' contributions to the well-being of their community.

The toolkit is a sort of repertoire of actions undertaken by elders and the ensuing benefits of these actions according to five categories. The first category, the transmission of knowledge, refers to actions where the elders are authors, conference speakers, or go into classrooms to share stories, teachings pertaining to culture, language, knowledge. The second category concerns contributions regarding interpersonal relationships. For example, this could be counseling for couples in difficulty or for children's education, conflict resolution, etc. The volunteer category is quite vast and concerns any non remunerated activities in which elders are involved. The work category is also quite vast. For example, it could be work done at the request of the Minister of Education to orient school textbooks or programs, so they converge with the values of the communities. Finally, the community life category concerns all the contributions at this level: there are actions such as the organizations of cultural days or events, or social mobilization for the protection of the forest, water, or land, for example.



HOME PAGE FOR THE TOOLKIT: WWW. BOAA-IET.ORG

On the website, reference cards presenting highlights may be consulted: which community is involved, what the main action is, what benefits result from these actions, as well as bibliographical references that discuss such contributions. Although much appreciated by the partners, some communities said that they preferred an audio version of the information gathered. The team therefore produced audio capsules of approximately 20 minutes in French and in English. These capsules provide details in story format of examples of elders' contributions to community well-being. At the request of Cree elders, a Cree audio version was produced.

Some communities told us that the written version wasn't ideal. In collaboration with the Wendake community, children and elders completed drawings to illustrate elders' contributions. A grant from the DIALOG Network currently serves to produce this version to be published.

The goal of the toolkit in its version through drawing is to showcase elders' contributions through three different media and in at least three languages, because other Indigenous languages could be added.

SHOWCASING PRACTICES: FROM A WORKSHOP TO THE PROJECT OF A FORUM

Following an initial participation in the symposium organized by the Institut de vieillissement et de participation sociale des aînés du Québec in the fall of 2017, the project was once again presented by the team in June 2018, this time focussing mainly on the toolkit.

We wanted the presentation to be more interactive, in a different format than the one I had proposed in the fall. To get the workshop started, we therefore decided to present audio excerpts of the toolkit. Photos provided by the FNQLHSSC and the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay were projected in a slide show. On these photos, we see elders in action with the youth. People in the room were then invited to reflect on the following question: "In your different contexts and from your perspective, what actions taken by elders contribute to well-being?" The FNQLHSSC, the CBHSSJB, and some researchers and students on the team facilitated the sub-groups. Secondly, we invited them to consider if, from what they had heard in the video excerpts, there were

any actions that inspired them to respond to the challenges in their communities. This was also for the participants to reflect more globally on obstacles to be considered and winning strategies for intergenerational solidarities.

The two-hour workshop was a huge success. The general conclusion of the workshop and that emerged from the ensuing plenary session was that this type of collective reflection concerning the contribution of elders to well-being was also relevant and inspiring for non-Indigenous communities.

People said that there is definitely a deficit of intergenerational solidarity in communities. And that to approach the question from the perspective of elders' contribution was very fertile ground to discuss collective well-being. Many people said that the ideas presented in the excerpts from the toolkit would be engaged to initiate reflection in their respective work circles.

THESE CONCLUSIONS WERE THE OBJECT OF AN ARTICLE IN THE PERIODICAL VIE ET VIEILLISSEMENT, FALL 2018.

An unexpected result through the realization of the activity was the proposal to hold a forum bringing together all the participants of the Indigenous communities of Québec.

A representative from the Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones (SAA) felt that the format would be worth repeating on a larger scale such as a provincial forum.

A few weeks later, a funding opportunity was launched. With the same team, joined by two Indigenous elders and a researcher in knowledge transfer, we presented a proposal for a competition posted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to this effect. The funding mainly covered residency expenses for people coming to the communities. For this new process, we proceeded with the same exercise as at the beginning of the research project. The communities were contacted again with a formal proposal and invited to articulate their ideas to enhance the content of the proposal. This time, the answers led to adjustments in both substance and form. It was interesting to build on this request as a group!

Approximately 60 participants from eight nations met in Montréal. Even though, at the start, the research team thought that it would be easier to hold an event further north, after consultation with representatives from different Indigenous nations, Montréal was chosen as a gathering place for the forum. This forum was a space for reflection on how to encourage transmission of knowledge through intergenerational solidarities, as well as research perspectives to be prioritized within the perspective of enhancing the

transmission of Indigenous knowledge through intergenerational solidarities. It goes without saying that this forum was made possible thanks to many collaborators including Matthieu Fannière, Jimmy Fireman, Naomi Georges, Raymond Gros-Louis, Irene House Bearskin, Matthieu-Joffre Lainé, Julie Martel, Gaëlle Mollen, Nicole O'Bomsawin, Angela Phenix, Audrey Pinsonneault, and Sarah Vassigh.

How should the utilization of Indigenous knowledge transferred orally be considered when research is conducted and in the development of strategies for the involvement of elders? This is one example of a question that was discussed during the forum. Enter into dialogue about the aspects of the transmission of non written knowledge, also reflect on research epistemology. These are other aspects that were discussed. A position statement was developed based on key elements that emerged in the discussions at this intergenerational forum held on February 6 and 7, 2019. It was submitted to the SSHRC and discussed at the national gathering in Ottawa, by an elder and an Indigenous youth, as well as Chantal.

Collectively, the actors involved in the forum provided clear recommendations for future research projects. More specifically, this involves showcasing the transmission of Indigenous knowledge, then applying it in projects to encourage autonomy and active community engagement at all phases, ensuring the perpetuation of concrete results of the projects, as well as creating lasting intergenerational relationships.

If what is past is prologue, many unexpected and inspiring results from this forum can be expected!

