

# PROMOTING FROM WITHIN THE COMMUNITY; EMPLOYING LOCAL RESIDENTS IN CULTURE- BASED INNER-CITY FAMILY SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Many culture-based family service organizations are operated by the community for the community. However, the ways in which residents become involved in these organizations has received little attention in the research literature. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 44 staff of community-based Aboriginal organizations providing nonmandated social services to families in high poverty urban neighborhoods. Individuals participated in an individual interview that included the question, "How did you get connected to the agency?" Responses were analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Five themes emerged and included: cultural life path, job opening, volunteering, came for service, and through family and friends. An important difference between the experiences of participants in the current study and the existing literature was that participants described the importance of cultural values including sharing, family and community and the expression of these values through involvement with the organization.

**Keywords:** community-based, culture, employment, education, family

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## INTRODUCTION

Over half of the Aboriginal population of Canada resides in cities and there is a great deal of mobility between city and reserve (Clatworthy and Norris, 2007). People move to urban centres for family, employment, and education reasons (Distasio and Carter, 2003). The largest centres for urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada include Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver making up 10%, 5% and 2% of the total population of those cities respectively (Statistics Canada, 2010a). Unemployment among Aboriginal peoples in Winnipeg is nearly 3 times the rate for non-Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada, 2010b). Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented in Winnipeg's inner city population and among those living in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2009). Over one quarter of households in the inner city depend on social assistance and very little of this money is retained by local residents (Janzen et al., 2004).

Community economic development (CED) can be described as a theory of community change (Banks, 2002). CED also refers to a process that includes specific strategies to improve the retention and circulation of economic resources within a community. All strategies for local development must be consistent with values of the community to be effective. In Winnipeg's north end inner-city neighborhoods, criteria for CED known as the Neechi Principles (Neechi Foods Worker Co-op, 2010) are a guiding framework for development efforts, including local skill development, service delivery, and employment for a healthy and stable community.

In Winnipeg's inner city, Aboriginal community initiatives are not the only ones in operation, but several, usually led by women, have emerged and been sustained through difficult economic times (Silver, 2004). These efforts are based on traditional values of community and sharing and have led to several strong, culture-based family services organizations (Ghorayshi et al., 2006). The contributions the organizations make to the community are far greater than providing service *to* inner city residents. An underrecognized function is their effort to provide service *by* inner city residents. Because it is essential that culture-based family service organizations continue to be operated by the community for the community, the ways in which residents become involved in these organizations are important to understand.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Employment among individuals residing in high poverty communities has been the subject of considerable national and international research. The

literature identifies a number of factors that motivate residents to connect with local, potential employers. These motivating factors include meeting a resident's own service needs as a client of the organization, meeting the requirements of a formal program of study, employment to meet basic economic needs, meeting needs for social and health support, and the desire and intent to help others. These factors are briefly reviewed in this section.

## SERVICE

Local residents often initially make contact with organizations that are also potential employers for the purpose of obtaining a service offered by the organization. Among human service organizations in high poverty communities, these services may include information as well as goods to meet specific, basic needs (Reschke and Walker, 2006). In relation to information, some research has identified the need for residents to link with other residents through organizations to pool their resources, such as for child care (Cantillon et al., 2001; Ficano et al., 2006; Gennetian et al., 2004). Residents also approached organizations for services that meet basic needs such as food and clothing (Ruben and Van Den Berg, 2001).

## FORMAL EDUCATION

The connection between education and employment has also been described in the literature (Abu-Bader and Gottlieb, 2008). Residents in high poverty neighborhoods made initial contact with local human service organizations as a required, optional, or self-initiated component of their formal or informal education. Residents also made the contact for "experience" as a requirement for entry into a program of study (Murry et al., 2002) or after they were already enrolled in a program of study (Bankole and Eboiyehi, 2003). Some residents made the contact to learn skills for a particular job they wanted in the future (Holloway and Mulherin, 2004; Mascaro et al., 2007). Some sought to become involved in a local organization for their own self-directed learning and for the training opportunities presented by the organization (Peck and Segal, 2008).

## ECONOMIC NEED

Many local residents make contact with a human services organization to meet basic personal and family economic needs through employment. However, while employment is a primary motivating factor for many, the specific or sole job being sought is not necessarily with the organization approached. Some individuals contact human service organizations with the

goal of developing skills to make them more employable (Lanjouw, 2001), to help them find more stable employment (Bezuidenhout et al., 2007), or to find a better job to improve their earnings (Alatas and Cameron, 2008). It should be noted that mothers in particular have the greatest employment related needs, face the most employment related barriers, and have the most difficult time finding work (Albrecht et al., 2000; Baker, 2009; Lichter and Crowley, 2004; Loprest and Davidoff, 2004). Women with children most often report contacting human service organizations to meet personal and family economic needs through employment.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT

Opportunities to make connections with other people in the community are a motivating factor for residents to make contact with local organizations (Brown and Riley, 2005). The organization offers some structure, including a physical location to attend and meet others (Randolph et al., 2004). The connections established at local organizations help people feel included (Peck and Segal, 2008), lead to supportive relationships with neighbours (Brisson et al., 2009), and local activism (Todd, 2004). Another significant benefit of these connections is an enhanced sense of personal safety (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

### PERSONAL HEALTH

The availability of primary health services varies dramatically between nations, Canadian provinces, and within cities. Residents of high poverty urban neighbourhoods face barriers related to the availability and access of health services. Residents of these communities often have a relatively greater need for primary health care than those in more affluent communities (Danis et al., 2007). The need for access to physical and mental health services can motivate local residents to make contact with human services organizations where the process may be facilitated by referrals and advocacy. Health service, in addition to meeting basic physical needs, can also promote personal well-being and productivity benefiting self, family, and community (Gyamfi et al., 2001).

### HELPING OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY

An additional factor motivating local residents to make contact with organizations is the desire to help others in community (Hess, 2005). After joining the efforts of the organization in an informal or formal helping capacity, opportunities for employment may be presented. Helping out for the

betterment of all in the local area may not start as, but can become a paid activity (Heemsker, 2003).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

Although a number of factors influencing residents of high poverty communities to contact local, potential employers have been identified in the literature, more research is needed in this area. Existing research has focused on the employment experience of individuals from a variety of ethnic groups but there is a paucity of research specific to Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian context. This study sought to explore these factors from a mixed methods approach to research, where the participants collectively determine the issues and define the conceptual structure.

## METHOD

The study was conducted by the investigators as part of a larger study with local organizations, and had been approved by the university ethics board prior to any data collection. All organizations consented to participate and allowed researchers to make contact with potential participants in their work. Four steps in the concept mapping procedure outlined by Trochim (1989) were followed in this study. The first step was to identify participants and collect responses to a focal question. The second step of the concept mapping procedure was to ask participants to group together all of the responses. In the third step, the groupings were analyzed with multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. The final step of the procedure included the representation of the groupings by participants in the form of a concept map.

### STEP ONE

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with staff of community-based Aboriginal organizations providing nonmandated social services to families in high poverty urban neighborhoods. The partner organizations for the study were the three largest and longest serving culture-based agencies in the north central portion of Winnipeg's downtown core. Each organization had a formal commitment in place to hire from the local community. Advertisements for the study were placed throughout the three partner agencies, and interested participants were invited to contact the researchers directly to arrange an interview.

Individuals participated in an individual interview that included the question: "How did you get connected to the agency?" After five consecu-

tive interviews with no novel responses across participants, data collection ceased. Responses by males and females were initially kept separate, but as there did not appear to be any differences between their responses, they were combined.

Participants were residents of the local community and employed by a local human services agency. A total of 44 individuals were interviewed. At the time of interview they had been employed in the same agency from 1–21 years. The average length of employment was approximately 5 years. Participants ranged in age from 16–67, with an average age of 41 years. The majority (31/44) were female. Including their current positions, participants had collectively held 108 different jobs within their current agencies. Positions ranged from casual to part- and full-time, including janitorial, secretarial, community development, teaching, casework, program coordination, and financial and managerial positions. Together these staff worked with the children, youth, adults, and Elders of the community.

## STEP TWO

The combined total number of responses was 82 and as recommended by Trochim (1989) these responses represented the domain of interest. Responses were edited for clarity and essential meaning in the study using an inter-rater agreement process. The authors independently reviewed the responses to identify those that were unclear or redundant. After editing for clarity and essential meaning, redundant responses were removed, leaving 49 for the analysis.

Participants were asked at the conclusion of the interview if they would be interested in participating in a grouping task at a later date. All expressed interest, and were informed of the dates and times for one of four meetings held at different locations in the local area. Participants at the grouping meetings were asked to examine the responses to the question, and to group them together into concepts that they perceived captured some shared meaning. A total of 16 participants grouped together responses to the question.

## STEP THREE

The grouping data were analyzed by two statistical procedures including multidimensional scaling, which placed the statements spatially on a map, and cluster analysis, which placed the points into clusters representing higher order aggregates of the responses. The Concept System (Trochim, 1987) was used to perform the statistical analysis and construct the concept map.

Multidimensional scaling is a multivariate analysis that takes a table of similarities and represents it as distances between each of the original items. Values from each participant in the grouping task were placed on a similarity matrix, and the values in the individual matrices were added together to provide the total frequency for each response grouped together with every other response. A two-dimensional solution was used to represent the data and placed the points in a distribution plotted on an X-Y graph. The result of this analysis was a point map. Responses closer together on the map were more frequently grouped together by participants. Those far apart were less often grouped together by participants. The bridging index was a value between zero and one that indicated the relationships between each response and others on the map. The closer the value was to one for a particular response, the more often that response “bridged,” or was grouped by participants with responses in other areas of the map.

Cluster analysis of the multidimensional scaling values was used to group the responses on the map into clusters that represented similar concepts. At the beginning of the analysis each response was its own cluster. At each stage of the analysis two clusters were combined until all responses end up in one cluster.

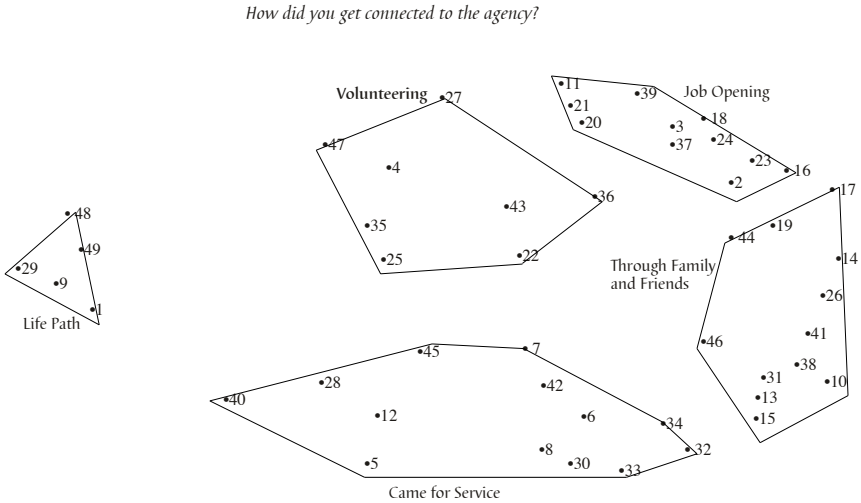
#### STEP FOUR

Based on the conceptual fit of the responses within the various cluster solutions generated and the items contributing most to the uniqueness of each cluster using the average and individual bridging indices, the researchers made the decision about the most appropriate number of concepts for the final map. Maps with 8, 7, 6, 5, and 4 concepts were reviewed before deciding that the 5 concept solution fit the data best. The researchers labeled the concepts. In each case, labels suggested by participants during the grouping task were considered and the final labels were selected to best represent the meaning of responses within each concept.

## RESULTS

The concept map appears in Figure 1. Each number, identified by a point on the map, corresponds to a numbered response in Table 1. Participants grouped the 49 statements into 5 concepts. Participants reported that they became connected to the agency in which they were employed through coming in for service, volunteering there, knowing people who worked there, applying for an advertised job opening and following their own life path.

**Figure 1: Concept Map of 49 Statements**



**Table 1: Responses and Bridging Indices for Concept Map**

| <i>Concept and Response</i>  | <i>Bridging Index</i> |
|--|-----------------------|
| <b>Concept #1 — Cultural Life Path</b>                                   | 0.85                  |
| 29. part of my healing journey   | 0.73                  |
| 1. was introduced to my culture  | 0.80                  |
| 9. ex-gang member, ex-addict and wanted to change my life around         | 0.81                  |
| 49. life experience  | 0.92                  |
| 48. wanted to change views of the community and make a living as well    | 1.00                  |
| <b>Concept #2 — Job Opening</b>  | 0.09                  |
| 3. applied a few times then got hired                                    | 0.00                  |
| 18. got an interview and was hired the next day                          | 0.02                  |
| 23. was in a job preparation program at a nearby agency                  | 0.03                  |
| 24. was looking to change jobs and applied here                          | 0.04                  |
| 37. part-time position opened up   | 0.05                  |
| 16. full-time job opened up  | 0.09                  |
| 2. another student was working at the agency                             | 0.13                  |
| 21. got a university degree  | 0.14                  |
| 20. had worked in government and knew about this agency                  | 0.15                  |
| 39. saw the opportunity in the paper                                     | 0.17                  |
| 11. finished college program and came looking here for work              | 0.21                  |
| <b>Concept #3 — Volunteering</b>   | 0.39                  |
| 22. started out as a member of a community advisory board for the agency | 0.14                  |
| 43. through a board member   | 0.22                  |
| 36. was on assistance myself and looking for work                        | 0.28                  |
| 25. went door to door canvassing to get this centre started              | 0.44                  |
| 4. asked to drive van and stayed on                                      | 0.47                  |
| 35. staff came to me and told me to be here next day to volunteer        | 0.48                  |
| 27. went to the orientation  | 0.49                  |
| 47. agency reps came to my class asking for volunteers                   | 0.62                  |



| <i>Concept and Response</i>                                     | <i>Bridging Index</i> |
|---|-----------------------|
| Concept #4 — Came for Service                                   | 0.28                  |
| 34. as a kid I came here for a dance                            | 0.14                  |
| 32. my kids used to come here                                   | 0.15                  |
| 6. brought grandchildren to this program                        | 0.15                  |
| 42. started volunteering and then started working here          | 0.17                  |
| 33. my kids used to go to school in close by                    | 0.19                  |
| 7. came here to access services                                 | 0.25                  |
| 8. came with sister and sat around and checked everything out   | 0.29                  |
| 30. lived down the street                                       | 0.38                  |
| 45. very well known throughout the community                    | 0.49                  |
| 12. first got connected when originally opened                  | 0.51                  |
| 28. in order for kids to stay in day-care needed to volunteer   | 0.56                  |
| 5. been in the community the last 15 years                      | 0.60                  |
| 40. sense of family and sense of community                      | 0.91                  |
| Concept #5 — Through Family and Friends                         | 0.27                  |
| 46. visited the drop-in with other community people             | 0.15                  |
| 31. met somebody who worked here                                | 0.17                  |
| 19. had to do a practicum and I asked to be here                | 0.19                  |
| 13. friend of mine told me to come here and have coffee         | 0.21                  |
| 44. through work with another local agency                      | 0.21                  |
| 15. friends in the community                                    | 0.27                  |
| 41. sister used to work here                                    | 0.27                  |
| 14. friend told me to put in application                        | 0.28                  |
| 10. family works here   | 0.35                  |
| 38. right across the street from home at the time               | 0.37                  |
| 17. got a job with them as a casual worker                      | 0.37                  |
| 26. went to the drop-in centre when my mom started working here | 0.39                  |

## DISCUSSION

In the following section the results of the study are described and compared to the available literature.

### CONCEPT #1 — CULTURAL LIFE PATH

Responses in this concept referred to making a connection with the organization as a step on participant's pathway to a good life. They described their experience as being "part of my healing journey," and that they were led by "life experience" and "introduced to my culture." They also described coming from the place of being "ex-gang member, ex-addict and wanted to change my life around." Participants noted that they "wanted to change views of the community and make a living as well."

The topic of culture is not well represented in the literature as a purpose for making connections to local agencies. According to one classic definition, culture is the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired" (Taylor, cited in Poundstone et al., 2004, p. 23) as a member of a society.

Cultures vary considerably among Aboriginal peoples in Canada in relation to language, geographic location, traditional ways of living, impact of contact with European settlers, and contemporary community factors such as size, remoteness, dispersion, and experience of employment and poverty. However, there are some similarities in the importance of connection to the land, value placed on Elders, families, youth, and children, oral traditions, and living a good life (Hart, 2003). These topics have not been explored in relation to the connections that local residents make with culture-based family services organizations in their communities, but responses grouped within this and other concepts indicate the significance of culture.

### CONCEPT #2 — JOB OPENING

In this concept responses focused on making contact with an organization for employment purposes. Participants “had worked in government and knew about this agency” or “saw the opportunity in the paper.” The work of the organization was connected to their studies, which for some “was in a job preparation program at a nearby agency” and others “got a university degree.” Some participants “finished college program and came looking here for work” and knew “another student was working at the agency” who told them about the opening. For others, the connection came as “was looking to change jobs and applied here.” Participants who knew of the organization and its reputation in the local community, waited until a “part-time position opened up” or “full-time job opened up.” They “applied a few times then got hired.” Some “got an interview and was hired the next day.”

This concept was consistent with education and economic literatures. Different forms of education — formal and informal — have been recognized in the literature as pathways that lead to employment (Murry et al., 2002; Bankole and Eboiyehi, 2003; Peck and Segal, 2008), and involve connecting with prospective employers or organizations where related training and experience can be obtained (Holloway and Mulherin, 2004; Mascaro et al., 2007). Making connections with local agencies to change jobs (Bezuidenhout et al., 2007), or to enter or reenter the workforce (Baker, 2009; Albrecht et al., 2000) is associated with need for income (Alatas and Cameron, 2008).

### CONCEPT #3 — VOLUNTEERING

Many participants first became connected to the organizations by making unpaid contributions. Some “went door to door canvassing to get this centre started,” while others “started out as a member of a community ad-

visory board for the agency.” They learned about opportunities with the organization through “staff came to me and told me to be here next day to volunteer” and “through a board member” who was a volunteer with the agency. Some also learned about the organization when “agency reps came to my class asking for volunteers.” Some were asked to help in specific ways, for example, “asked to drive van and stayed on,” and others learned about possibilities in a more general way, such as “went to the orientation.” Consistent with this concept, the existing literature identifies volunteerism and helping others in the community (Brisson et al., 2009; Heemskerck, 2003; Hess, 2005; Todd, 2004).

In addition, sharing, caring, and helping others may be considered cultural values (Battiste, 2000). A Western interpretation of the concept of sharing may include the notion of volunteerism. A major distinction between sharing and volunteering is the location of power in the relationship. In volunteerism, power is given from one who has more resources to another who has less. Sharing is done between equals, and power is shared between people or families and resources are directed based on their benefit to the community (Battiste, 2000).

#### CONCEPT #4 — CAME FOR SERVICE

In this concept, responses referred to the connections with agencies made by being in close proximity and a client of the organization. For participants, who “lived down the street” and “my kids used to go to school close by” the organization was easy to get to. For some, they “first got connected when originally opened.” For others, it was also important that the organization had “been in the community the last 15 years” and was “very well known throughout the community.” They stayed connected to the organization because of the “sense of family and sense of community” they felt there.

Some recalled the organization from their own childhood, adulthood, and as a grandparent: “as a kid I came here for a dance,” and later “my kids used to come here” and I “brought grandchildren to this program.” Participants also described their first contact as “came with sister and sat around and checked everything out.” Over time, there was a change in their role with the organization from initially “came here to access services,” and then “in order for kids to stay in day-care needed to volunteer.” After having been to the organization for service themselves, participants “started volunteering and then started working here.”

There are multiple references in the literature to local residents making connections with human service organizations to obtain service (Reschke

and Walker, 2006; Cantillon et al., 2001; Ruben and Van Den Berg, 2001). While issues such as proximity to the organization have not been the subject of a large body of research, references to “local” in the literature do imply that closeness and ease of access are attended to. A slight difference between the literature and the experiences of participants in the present study is in relation to the generational nature of “service” identified by participants to include grandparents, parents, and children within the same organization. The approach is consistent with the cultural value of generations having different roles and responsibilities as well as the value of keeping families together (Bennett et al., 2005). These are additional aspects of culture, which have not been attended to in current research.

### CONCEPT #5 — THROUGH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Responses in this concept referred to the connections made with the organization through friends and family who were already involved with the organization. For some, the organization was “right across the street from home at the time,” and they “met somebody who worked here.”

Participants indicated that “friends in the community” “visited the drop-in with other community people” and had positive experiences. For another participant, a “friend of mine told me to come here and have coffee.” Later, that “friend told me to put in an application.”

Participants noted that they had family who were involved with the organization. Because of their family relationships and “through work with another local agency,” some, already connected to the organization through a family or friend and enrolled in a school program “had to do a practicum and I asked to be here.” For some, their “family works here,” and one had a “sister used to work here” and they first “went to the drop-in centre when my mom started working here.” After making contact through the drop-in, they “got a job with them as a casual worker.”

Community ownership and investment are not reflected in the literature. A fundamental difference between the literature on motives for making connections with human service organizations in high poverty neighbourhoods and the responses of participants in this study is the presence of the community, including neighbours, family, and friends in the organization. Although existing literature describes the importance of making connections to organizations for social support, the emphasis is on separateness between community and organizations — that organizations serve the community but are not of the community. This model is consistent

with colonial practice, where those from outside of the community were given sanction and a role to serve those within a community (e.g. residential schools, 60s scoop). Successful culture-based organizations have existed and expanded despite increasingly challenging funding environments, with a community-based approach and local staffing. The literature has not caught up to these practices.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, there are both similarities and differences between the findings from the present study and the existing literature. The similarities lend credibility to existing findings that have not been generated from research with Aboriginal peoples in an urban Canadian context. These similarities include the motives for making contact as economic and educational, as well as helping others in the community and coming for service. The main difference between the literature and the experiences of participants in the present study concerned the important role of culture, including the value of sharing and connection to family and community. We found ample evidence throughout our involvement with the organizations and their staff, local cultural leaders, and teachers in the community of the importance of culture and connections between family and community to preserve the ties between family members and generations that had been stretched or severed through assimilation efforts by those outside of the Aboriginal communities. The need to work with entire families and be of the community in order to serve the community are reflected in the practice of staff within successful family services organizations who participated in this research. However, there is no attention to this in the available literature.

While there is considerable attention in the research literature on the reasons that connections are made by local residents in high poverty communities with human service agencies, there is virtually nothing from an indigenous perspective. From the perspective of individuals employed by successful culture-based family services organizations, the importance of sharing, family, and community are expressed in how local people are made to feel welcome in the organization, how they move into roles with greater involvement and responsibility, who is hired, how individuals are trained, the purpose of the organization, and how it is reflective of the local community it serves.

Future research may benefit from capitalizing on the life experience and practical wisdom of individuals working for their communities in success-

ful culture-based organizations to document the culture of the organization and its consistency with the culture of the community it operates within, as well as to substantiate the important role that community-based organizations make to their local communities as they provide “service” to residents as “clients” and eventually, as “employees.”

## LIMITATIONS

The study had several limitations including those related to the sampling and concept mapping method. Individuals from within a specific geographic area or agency self-selected to participate in the study. Therefore, no claims regarding generalizability of results beyond the sample can be made. In addition, the concept mapping procedure was a community-led process which led to results that were difficult to interpret conceptually in some cases. The authors, relying on the context and their interpretation of the intent of participants during both the interviews and grouping tasks, incorporated the data into concepts that fit the data best. It should be noted that the formulation of concepts is a quantitative procedure, and to remain true to the process, required the inclusion of responses that may not have neatly fit within the resulting concepts.

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