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DOING PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION:
from "JAGGED WORLD VIEWS"
to INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGY

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◼ Abstract

The paper will present findings from a Social Science and Humanities Research (SSHRC) funded participatory evaluation conducted over the past four years in the Cree nation of Wemindji in Quebec, Canada. COOL (Challenging Our Own Limits) or "Nigawchiisuun" in Cree, was launched in 2003 as part of a broader program of governance initiatives within Wemindji. As a key component of this new governance program, COOL was to address the need for after-school care within the community for parents, as well as to engage with the recurring problem of low retention rates in school. In consultation with the Band Council of the Cree Nation of Wemindji (James Bay), the Deputy Chief at the time (Rodney Mark) – who was elected Chief in 2006 – established a COOL committee to oversee the design, organisation, implementation and running of the program. Unlike the other eight Cree communities of the James Bay, Wemindji decided to fund and run its own program based on values, customs, and traditions that have been established through consultations with elders, parents, and other interested groups within the community. This has made COOL a distinctly homegrown, autonomous, self-determined Cree program. The paper will not only report on principal themes and issues connected with the establishment and administration of COOL, but will also discuss why a participatory evaluation has been used to assess its effectiveness as a social/educational program.

◼ Introduction

The legacy of colonisation for First Nations and Inuit people by the Canadian state continues to reverberate in their communities. As the research of government commissions, scholars and activists has shown, despite the apparently well intentioned policies of successive federal governments, this legacy has amounted to genocide, racism, expropriation of their traditional lands, and forced migration, as well as the kidnapping of native children and their placement in residential schools. The effects of this pattern of events on Aboriginal people, whether urban or on designated reserves, has had profoundly negative implications for their lived experience of Canadian society and culture. These negative legacies of colonialism are particularly visible in several areas: in education where their children still struggle to meet levels of attainment achieved by their southern peers (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003); in health where many communities are confronted by an emerging epidemic of diabetes (Boston et al., 1997); and in socio-economic status, with growing poverty and its attendant social problems (Wotherspoon, 2002).

Despite the disabling effects of these legacies, there is a growing commitment among Aboriginal communities to constructively engage with these issues by generating solutions that are local, Indigenous and self-determined. Simultaneously, there is also a widening rejection of forms of "assistance" provided by federal and provincial government agencies, typically through private consultants, that have attempted to address these social problems through an agenda that has been fabricated in the south. Historically, this agenda has construed the plight of Aboriginal peoples through program evaluation technologies that have aimed at the better management of these communities, whether in health care, education, or the delivery of social services. While such technologies have apparently attempted to provide more efficient and effective forms of governance of local resources, Aboriginal people have typically experienced them as imposed, alien, and generally oppressive (Jordan et al., 2000). Indeed, as Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) have argued, the forms of social organisation that these technologies have fostered can be viewed as perpetuating the legacies of colonialism in the

way that they individualise and pathologise the social problems that Aboriginal communities confront in the contemporary period.

In countering the technologies of (neo)colonialism and their associated conceptual practices of power (Smith, 1990a; Smith, 1994), Aboriginal communities across Canada are beginning to mount their own locally inspired and developed initiatives in business, health, welfare and education to address needs that they have identified and that are organised and delivered from their particular cultural standpoint and experience of the everyday world as they live it within the broader context of Canadian society. This paper reports on one such initiative that has been recently created and launched by the Cree Nation of Wemindji (in Quebec, Canada), called COOL (Challenging Our Own Limits) or Nigawchiisuun.

The paper will briefly outline the creation, development and implementation of COOL over the past four years and will, most importantly, discuss the theoretical and methodological framework that supports this project and, we will argue, represents a potentially fertile approach to research in Indigenous contexts. In doing this, we have organised the paper into three sections. First, we present a brief discussion and background to the origins, impetus and eventual launch of COOL as a pilot project in 2005. Second, we provide a general theoretical framework situating participatory evaluation (PE) in relation to the broader field of participatory action research (PAR). Third, and perhaps most importantly, we consider the implications and potential of this methodology for Indigenous research. Last, the paper will close with some brief concluding remarks.

Before we commence our discussion of these issues, we want to make clear that this is research in progress. At this point, therefore, the paper presents only preliminary observations and findings from the study we have conducted on PE and its implications for researching an Aboriginal educational program such as COOL.

Situating COOL/Nigawchiisuun

COOL first began operating in the Cree Nation of Wemindji in January 2005. From its inception, it has been a locally funded and administered after-school care program that provides places for children from kindergarten age to grade four (future plans include expanding the program to include older children). The program evolved in response to growing concerns in Wemindji that Cree children and youth were not being served well by existing social and educational programs. Indeed, as the Mianscum report (1999) made clear, these were concerns that were also shared by other Cree communities in the James Bay. Within Wemindji, however, it was at the 17th Annual General Assembly held in 2000 that issues around children and

youth came into sharp focus. In particular, workshops that addressed issues concerning youth and children highlighted a number of pressing concerns, including: the need for more community activities, the lack of parenting skills, vandalism, low retention rates, poor student achievement at the elementary level, negative attitude towards self, others and school, poor study habits and substance abuse. Discussion of these issues at the Assembly led to the passing of a motion that mandated the creation and expansion of social programs and services for children and youth within Wemindji. The recommendations of a report issued by the Principal of the Maquatua School, on alcohol and drug abuse, gave further impetus to a collective recognition that something had to be done within the community.

Despite regional initiatives (such as Mianscum, 1999) and the reports that flowed from them, there was no clear evidence of any concrete action plan emerging to tackle the problems that had been identified within the nine Cree communities of the James Bay. Consequently, Band Council leaders in Wemindji decided to take the initiative and develop their own locally conceived response to the concerns and problems identified in the 17th General Assembly workshops, the Mianscum report and other consultations. Led by Chief Rodney Mark and members of the Band Council a decision was made to generate a vision statement that would both guide and provide a framework for the development of future policy making that expressed Cree culture, traditions, customs and knowledge. The project that emerged from this initiative became known as, "Revitalizing and Strengthening Our Traditional Philosophies and Principles Towards Building Strong Governance, Administration and Accountability Systems". This project, from which COOL was to emerge, aimed to develop a transparent process for local governance that was anchored in Cree language, culture and customs. A key indicator of success for the project was to involve as many of the community's members as possible, particularly in the various rounds of consultations that were envisaged as a key element in generating the particularly Cree orientation of the initiative.

Focus groups were identified including youth, men, women, trappers, Cree teachers, as well as former leaders from within the community, and most importantly, elders. Two questions were posed to participants: "What do you want to see 25 years from now?" and "What is good government?" Focus groups covered a range of themes and issues that were to eventually inform the governance project. However, elders were specifically asked to describe what leaders were like and how a leader was identified in the past. Through stories that they told of particular events and situations that they had experienced, elders discussed what leadership traditionally meant and how one exemplified qualities of leadership. By

carefully listening to these stories, Chief Mark and his colleagues identified a consistent set of values that have become known as the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values*. In particular, *respect* and *relationship* were the main principles identified as integral to all the stories told. According to Wemindji's elders the principles of respect and relationship encapsulated core Cree values of kindness, humility, honesty, conservation, thankfulness, compassion, sharing, caring, dignity, integrity, faith, understanding, patience, equality, and self-reliance. It is these overarching principles and values that have come to define the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values* and that have underpinned the development of COOL.

COOL was, therefore, generated from within a much broader governance project based on locally defined Cree values, customs, traditions and forms of knowledge (Stocek & Mark, 2009). In particular, a series of Band initiatives, flowing from the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values* project, were conducted that eventually led to the establishment of a COOL committee composed of Band and community members responsible for overseeing its design, development, implementation and evaluation. Led by Chief Mark, the COOL committee initiated a consultation process with parents, elders and community members to determine how the principles and values identified in *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values* could be best integrated and made effective within the after school program that was to become COOL. One of the key questions confronting the participatory evaluation we are conducting is how to determine whether or not these principles and values are being realised within COOL through, for example, its organisation, teaching and learning, animation, children's play, or relationship to the local school and wider community.

As noted earlier, what has distinguished COOL within the nine Cree communities of the James Bay is Wemindji's desire to opt out and assert its autonomy from the Cree Regional Authority's (CRA) plan that governs the programming of other after school programs. Although these come with funding from the CRA, they are nevertheless pre-packaged programs that are developed and administered by a private consulting company located outside Cree territory. Leaders and members of the Band Council in Wemindji were clear that they wanted an after school program that was locally funded, administered, research-based and responsive to local needs, initiatives and decision-making processes within the community. In this respect COOL is viewed by leaders in Wemindji as an integral part of an ongoing governance process that is deeply connected to asserting the primacy of Cree culture within a political process of self-determination. It was within this broader context that COOL was launched in January 2005.

The overall aim of COOL was clearly marked out in a presentation given to the Cree Council of Commissioners in June 2004 by Chief Mark. In his presentation, he noted that:

[COOL was] to further enhance the development of our children in their intellectual, emotional and physical wellbeing. Spiritual wellbeing is an outcome of achieving an interconnected, interdependent balance of intellectual, emotional and physical wellbeing (Mark, 2004).

Since this presentation, the COOL committee (established to oversee the program) identified a set of program objectives to guide the future orientation and growth of COOL. These were that the program should be fun and entertaining; developed through community and parental consultation; serve as a bridge between the school, parents, and the community; foster creativity and encourage imagination; provide a nurturing, healthy, and positive environment; foster respect and relationship as well as the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values*; strengthen an understanding of self, family and community; develop proactive personal skills; build a foundation for successful experiences outside of the community; student centered; build a positive relationship with the local school; develop community awareness and leadership; involve parents and children in activities together; foster the confidence to communicate thoughts and ideas in diverse ways; and foster both traditional and contemporary activities based on Iiyiyiuch values. All these objectives are intended to draw on forms of knowledge, understanding and experience that have traditionally constituted Cree cultural customs, traditions and practices.

From its inception, the program has been overseen by a COOL committee, chaired by Chief Mark, members of the Band Council, parents and community members. They are a dynamic group of young people in their thirties who are drawn from a range of professional occupations including: the project coordinator of local health services; the project manager of Twaich Development Corporation; a secondary school teacher; an employment officer; and the Chief and his Deputy. While they are primarily concerned with overseeing the implementation and development of COOL, they are also responsible for closely monitoring and acting on findings emerging from the participatory evaluation. In addition, the COOL committee collaborates and consults with the following partners: Maquatua Eeyou School; the local school committee and council; the Council of Commissioners of the Cree School Board; the Wellness Centre; youth and elders.

While COOL initially began operating in the local school, it was eventually moved to the community's newly constructed sports centre where it still is based. COOL begins at 15:15 and runs everyday until

18:00 throughout the school year, including half and full pedagogical days. At the moment, COOL offers approximately 30 places to children, kindergarten to grade four, but as noted above the program will eventually expand to offer places to children and youth ages 5-17. The day-to-day organisation and administration of COOL is the responsibility of a project manager, who reports directly to the COOL committee, and up to six facilitators and animators who direct children's play and other activities. The core of the program's staff are the facilitators, most of whom are young women in their early twenties (some of them are parents) drawn from the community. Facilitators work closely with the children and do the day-to-day planning of the program, as well as collaborating with and supervising teenage animators from the school who support their work. The project manager and facilitators have all received training in qualitative research so that they can become an integral part of the participatory evaluation. In this respect they have dual roles as educators and researchers/evaluators. We will describe their role vis-à-vis the evaluation later in the paper.

Participatory evaluation of COOL: Mapping a theoretical framework

Before we proceed to our discussion of COOL, we should make clear that participatory evaluation and other forms of participatory action research (PAR) have been and remain a contested terrain. One effect of this is that participatory evaluation is used interchangeably, and often loosely, by researchers to denote any one of a range of research methodologies that have participation of subjects as their focus. This is reflected in the literature where, for example, there is a significant degree of conceptual slippage over terminology. The point to grasp, however, is that there is no definitive or pure model of participatory evaluation, but that there are versions of it across a broad spectrum of research methodologies that have participation as a central principle.

As participatory evaluation (PE) is in many respects a variant of PAR, we will first briefly outline what we consider to be three of PAR's central elements that have guided our thinking on developing a participatory methodology and methods for COOL. We then proceed to a discussion of PE.

Over its relatively short history the development of PAR has been marked by an ongoing debate among its practitioners over what aims, principles, and practices should be used to conduct social research. This debate has not only turned on substantial theoretical and political differences between practitioners, but on questions of methodology and the social organisation of the research process itself. In this respect it is important to remember that PAR consists of an amalgam of methodological approaches that, together or in different combinations, have produced an orientation to social research rather than a distinct methodology per se (Jordan, 2003).

PAR has drawn on a wide array of theoretical traditions within the social sciences including sociology, social psychology, neo-marxism, critical theory, feminist theory, and more recently postmodernism. While these theoretical traditions have been important, the emergence and development of PAR has also continued to be informed and shaped by practice in the field. Such practice has been generated by anti-colonial movements, popular and community struggles, transformative adult education initiatives, and more recently feminism and the new social movements (e.g., environmentalism, gay and lesbian groups, anti-globalisation protesters). One of the defining characteristics of PAR from its beginnings, therefore, is the centrality of this dialogical relationship between theory and practice. Indeed the history of PAR is marked by a reliance on forms of knowledge, skill, and understanding generated within the everyday world that all too often have been dismissed as commonsense by the mainstream social sciences. From this nexus has emerged three key principles that have defined PAR methodology.

The first is that PAR has tended to align itself with a non-positivist approach to research. As Smith (1990b) has noted, this has its origins in a critique and rejection of conventional social science research as a form of cultural imperialism that continues to be shared by a wide range of groups within both developed and less developed countries. The essence of this critique is that traditional forms of social science research, particularly quantitative methodologies, systematically reproduce power relations that contribute to the domination of subordinate groups within capitalism. In particular, the hierarchical organisation of the social sciences, their procedures for data collection and analysis, and rigid adherence to the separation of researcher and subjects in the pursuit of objectivity, are seen to produce forms of knowledge that express the relations of ruling. The underlying positivist approach of quantitative research has historically objectified its subjects for the purposes of manipulation and control by the powerful (Asad, 1986). The effect of this critique is the adoption of methodologies that favour qualitative or naturalistic forms of inquiry. For example, McTaggart notes that:

> Information is collected in the usual naturalistic research ways, for example, participant observation, interview, the compilation of field notes, logs, document analysis, and the like (McTaggart, 1997, p. 37).

In general, qualitative approaches are favoured on both technical and ideological grounds. As a collection of techniques or methods they provide a more rounded and holistic perspective that

produces "thick description" of complex social processes (Marcus, 1998). They are also better suited to small-scale, local studies, that are accessible to participation by the communities in which they are conducted. In this respect they are less susceptible to colonisation by outside experts. Non-positivist forms of interpretive inquiry are also preferred because they hold the potential for marginalised groups to have greater access to – and thereby have a voice in – the research process than do quantitative methodologies. Used within a participatory process qualitative methodologies also encourage engagement in nascent forms of reflexivity, and as well provide the tools to stimulate local discursive practices and group activities that constitute PAR.

A second theme that characterises PAR is that it is openly political. Its politics is evident in several ways. It is political in the sense that its practices have emerged from a critique of Western social science methodologies viewing these in many instances as cultural imperialism (Said, 1993; Smith, 1999). This theme is also expressed through its commitment to work *with* (as opposed to *on*) subordinate, marginalised, and oppressed groups to change their circumstances within society. This stems from the recognition that the social is constituted by asymmetrical power relations in the workplace, the family, education and, more broadly, within politics and civil society that systematically generate inequalities between individuals and groups. The recognition that these inequalities are endemic to capitalist societies has produced a strong ethical stance that research should focus on issues of social justice. Arising from this strong ethical stance, PAR has also been equally committed to democratic engagement, transparency and openness, a strong co-operative and communitarian ethos, inclusion and a clear conviction to issues concerned with development and sustainability. These core values have made PAR a particularly flexible methodology, adaptable across a broad range of issues and contexts.

However, what distinguishes PAR from other research methodologies that share a similar ethics is that:

> ... it has been demonstrated time and time again that the application of the researches of others (especially positivist research, which blithely claims or assumes universal applicability) in new social, cultural, and economic contexts is unlikely to work. *People must conduct substantive research themselves on the practices that affect their own lives* (McTaggart, 1997, p. 26, italics added).

Thus, unlike conventional forms of research methodology where authority is vested in the researcher-academic, PAR aims to shift responsibility for the research process on to individuals and groups who are directly affected by these inequalities. Insofar as professional researchers have a role within PAR, it is to set their expertise alongside the lay knowledge, skills and experiences of people who are the focus of their investigations. In this way the research process is conceptualised as an encounter, where equal partners meet, enter into dialogue and share different kinds of knowledge and expertise on how to address issues of exploitation and oppression. In this respect PAR is unashamedly committed to a politics of equity and social transformation that many other research traditions would dismiss as ideological.

The politics of equity that PAR has historically engaged in has had direct implications for the kinds of theoretical traditions on which it has drawn to inform its practices. Consequently, a third theme that has defined PAR is its embracing of the broad spectrum of theoretical frameworks that now go under the label of critical theory. They include versions of Marxism and neo-Marxism, feminism, Frierian pedagogy, post-colonial critiques, postmodernism, cultural studies, critical ethnography and Indigenous methodology. Critical theory has not only brought political economy to participatory research, it has also yielded some of its key conceptual practices. For example, Friere's (1972) concept of conscientisation, Gramsci's (1974) notion of hegemony, the feminist analysis of patriarchy (Smith, 1990b), or the Indigenous idea of de-colonisation (Smith, 2005) have either influenced or directly shaped the forms of social organisation that PAR practitioners have used to conduct research.

Theory into practice in Indigenous research

These principles (the alignment with non-positivism and adoption of qualitative methodology; its openly political character; the engagement with forms of critical theory and its core values) show how PAR has been driven by a dynamic that has centred on a democratic, critical, and emancipatory impulse quite distinct from conventional research methodologies in the social sciences. It is for these reasons that Sinclair (2003, p. 5) strongly advocates the use of PAR in Indigenous research:

> Participatory research presents a non-directive, holistic approach to community research and action. For Indigenous communities, disempowered by western research hegemony, the crucial concepts of PAR include respect of indigenous knowledge and worldviews, indigenous epistemology, respect and inclusivity in the research agenda [...] PAR combats intellectual imperialism through its grassroots approach to supporting and nurturing the reconstruction of indigenous knowledge, and by operating on the assumption that knowledge and action that originates with the people, will

be the most effective in addressing the problems of the people. These tenets are most closely aligned with indigenous science [...] PAR does not demand the separation of the mind, body, and spirit; rather these are viewed as legitimate ways of information gathering, and coming to knowledge. Problem solving is placed within the hands of those most affected [...] Participatory Action Research, with its emphasis on participation and hence, personal empowerment, can only invoke the life force.

As will become evident in what follows, the PE we have constructed for COOL is indebted to these principles, as it is to the research of others in the field of participatory methodologies (see Patton, 1997, 1999), in an attempt to include Indigenous research agendas. In this paper we are concerned with elaborating on how these principles can be used by Indigenous communities to construct approaches to research that better reflect their needs and aspirations.

Our discussion of PAR, above, has already suggested that PE is one way to conduct social inquiry. Participatory evaluation facilitates improvements and generates knowledge as it asks people to purposefully spend some time thinking about what they are doing and why. PE is concerned with making the research and the results meaningful and useful to the people involved, so that they will be better informed when making future decisions and taking action. PE often includes people directly in the process from beginning to end. Participation of this nature democratises the research process as it is organised in an emerging and on-going manner in order to empower the voices of the people who will be most affected by the programs being evaluated. Most crucially for Indigenous peoples, self-determination and self-governing processes are engaged.

The research agendas are not set by an outside evaluator but evolve through a collaborative process. Grounded in its orientation to research, PE responds to needs, interests and concerns as primary users identify and focus the process on outcomes which they think are important and that matter to the community. The evaluator does not assume the role of the "expert" but instead may be part teacher, facilitator, collaborator and participant in the process. When participants collaborate with the evaluator, establishing the questions to be asked, ways used to collect the information, how to understand what the information means, as well as analysing and understanding the conclusions drawn, participants become empowered in an active sense and begin to take ownership of the PE process.

PE methods emphasise the importance of the design and planning process, viewing it as interconnected and educative within the evaluation process itself. This process encourages participants to be responsible to themselves and their community first. Care is taken to generate and distribute results in ways that can be easily grasped and used to make decisions concerning issues or to improve the programs under evaluation. The goal is to provide knowledge that is based on issues and questions that grow from the groups concerned, focusing on program improvement, not judgment-making. As the process evolves, the participants can assume more control, using the evaluator as a sounding board. However, for this to be effective, the evaluator must be immersed in the evaluation process. To meet these goals evaluation isn't something you do once a year, or every five years, but continually. As the evaluation progresses, changes happen as people reflect on customary or taken-for-granted practices than they might otherwise have done. The evaluation process itself may evolve, changing with the participants.

Unlike traditional forms of program evaluation which impose change from above (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Stronach & Morris, 1994), PE seeks to effect change in organisations and groups that arise out of consensus building processes from below. Conventional program evaluation also differs from PE in its essentially managerialist aims and objectives, typically expressed in the ubiqutous needs assessment analyses that it mandates, as well as promulgating a discourse that is anchored in southern concepts of individualism, private property rights, efficiency, performativity and productivity. It reproduces what Leroy Little Bear has called "jagged world views" within Aboriginal communities (cited in Battiste, 2000). In this respect, conventional forms of program evaluation can be understood as powerful tools of neo/colonisation by exerting technologies of extra-local ruling (Smith, 1994) that either limit or negate processes of decolonisation and self-determination. Drawing on the key principles of PAR outlined above, PE offers not only a profound critique of the powerful technologies associated with program evaluation, but also provides an alternative methodological paradigm within which to construct forms of social inquiry that are compatible with the parallel processes of decolonisation and self-determination. It is for these reasons that we decided to use PE as methodology and method to study the impact of COOL within Wemindji.

From the very beginning, the COOL committee was concerned to ensure that a comprehensive PE process was built into the development of COOL that reflected local needs, aspirations and *Iiyiyiuch Core Values*. With these in mind, and in consultation with the two external evaluators from McGill University (Steven Jordan and Christine Stocek), it established the following objectives for the evaluation:

• To implement a program evaluation of COOL that would engage local Cree facilitators/animators in training and research and thereby build capacity within the community for future programs

- To stimulate a sustained dialogue on community development and social programs
- To develop a collaborative approach to community development initiatives that would reflect the community's *Iiyiyiuch Core Values* by engaging local knowledge networks on social and educational issues
- To develop and adapt innovative research processes used in the PE of COOL for future social and educational programs in the community
- To foster approaches to lifelong learning by training community members involved with COOL in research practices that could be used in other learning contexts
- To provide research opportunities and intensive field experiences for a graduate student (Christine Stocek) from McGill University in Aboriginal research issues, educational programming, and PE
- To enhance the capacity for creating forms of Cree social capital that will contribute to the future development of the community

These objectives, therefore, have informed the development of the PE used to evaluate COOL over the past four years. In line with the alternative and exploratory character of PE we have attempted to construct novel approaches in the conduct and practice of the research that would be flexible enough to accommodate the very different literacy levels and educational experiences of facilitators working on the program. With the exception of one young man, facilitators were invariably young women from the community, a number of whom had not completed high school or any form of post-16 training and education. Nevertheless, they have been crucial to the evaluation as they do not only run COOL on a day-to-day basis, but have been trained as participatory evaluators. Consequently, early on in the process a decision was made to train the facilitators in PE methods that would have three objectives: allow Cree to be used as the dominant language of the research process; avoid reliance on methods of recording data as written texts (e.g., entries to field journals); and create a strong sense of solidarity and team work.

To realise these objectives we decided to adopt evaluative methods that primarily relied on visual, photographic, materials. While facilitators did keep field journals to record textual data, extensive use was made of digital Fuji Finepix cameras (provided to every facilitator) that allow photographs, with attached audio recordings, to be taken. Through a series of workshops that we have repeated on an annual basis, facilitators were encouraged to take photographs of everyday events, activities, objects and situations that they considered represented either a COOL highlight or lowlight (Orlick, 1996). They were then asked to make short audio recordings for each photograph describing their own impressions and thoughts.

The purpose of this exercise was to encourage facilitators to attach their voice and words to the photograph as a way of contributing to and re-framing the actual picture they had taken beyond its purely visual components. Placing the photographer in the picture in this way we hoped to create a self-reflexive awareness of the broader social relations that constituted COOL within the community. These *word pictures* then became the primary source of data that we began to assemble as part of our evaluation. In many respects these *word pictures*, as we call them, have defined the PE process, as they have acted to focus and engage facilitators and external evaluators in a range of activities, from camera use workshops to data analysis seminars that have dissolved social distinctions and created a strong sense of collective identity. They have also formed the basis for a digital archive, which we have used to systematically document the development of COOL over the past three years.

One question we are invariably asked after making conference presentations – usually by mainstream program evaluators – is "How do you measure the success of COOL?", or more specifically, "What are its success indicators?" Needless to say, we can point to a range of such indicators, including: strong support for COOL from parents with children in the program; the fact that teachers in the local school have noticed how children participating in COOL are calmer and better behaved; or the promotion of healthier practices, such as the elimination of junk food from children's diets. However, such questions are typically generated from within a conventional program evaluation paradigm. Concepts such as "measure", "success", and "value" are conceptual practices that are either fundamentally contradictory to the underlying philosophy and methodological orientation of PE, or have to be re-conceptualised in ways that are harmonious with the interconnected processes of decolonisation and self-determination that confront Aboriginal communities in the contemporary era. If these very comfortable concepts are not engaged with a critical eye, however, PE stands to be co-opted and subverted by the relations of ruling (Jordan, 2003).

In addressing these questions, therefore, we have been disinclined to respond with a discourse that draws on managerialist notions of measurement, success, performance, productivity and so on. Rather, our argument is that as conventional forms of program evaluation serve only to reproduce the serrated world views of (neo)colonialism within Aboriginal communities, Indigenous peoples must, in collaboration with other researchers, attempt to generate alternative epistemological paradigms for research that do not only draw on Indigenous knowledge, values, experience and understanding for their inspiration, but are able to challenge and critically engage with the dominant knowledge

producing systems of the social sciences. This would mean, for example, a shift away from the positivist and quantitative concepts we described earlier, to historical and qualitative indicators that are able to capture the reality of Aboriginal life in all its complexity.

Smith (1999) has argued for this kind of approach, with the potential benefits of "researching back" in the same tradition as "writing back" or "talking back", that have served post-colonial or anti-colonial discourses. These processes have involved a "knowingness of the coloniser" and a "recovery" of Indigenous people's knowledge, an analysis of colonialism and a struggle for self-determination. Further, Smith states that "research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized" (1999, p. 7). As we have argued in this paper, PE as a research process can be understood as a counter-hegemonic research methodology, where dominant forms of research, such as program evaluation, can be opened up to provide new spaces for Aboriginal peoples to *research back*. In doing so, they can not only re-negotiate and re-organise the nature of their collaborative relationships with external researchers, they can also begin to assert the primacy of their own epistemological paradigms in the respective context(s) of decolonisation and self-determination that they may confront in Canada. In this respect, we agree with Absolon and Willett that:

> Aboriginal research must have contexts that acknowledge both our cultural and colonial history. Such variables as knowledge of history, culture and contemporary contexts affect process and research outcomes, in turn, affect policy, programming, practice and societal perception. Renewal in Aboriginal research processes and methodology requires strength and pride in self, family, community, culture, nation, identity, economy, and governance (2004, p. 12).

We would argue that, handled correctly, PE constitutes a powerful and alternative research methodology that can – and, we believe, must – be adapted to meet the special needs of Aboriginal communities in dealing with the dual historical processes of decolonisation and self-determination in the contemporary period. The PE we have conducted of COOL over the past three years is, in our opinion, but one example of how this challenge might be engaged.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have argued that participatory evaluation is an appropriate and sensitive research methodology for use in Indigenous contexts. Drawing on principles and practices that have defined PAR – in particular a non-positivist qualitative methodology; an engagement with critical theory (in

the broadest sense of this term); and a commitment to social justice – we have attempted to show how participatory evaluation provides a methodology that simultaneously offers a critique and an alternative to managerialist forms of program evaluation that are typically deployed by external (usually private) consultants in evaluating the value of social programs, such as COOL (Nigawchiisuun). As we have shown, the PE of COOL that we have been developing over the past four years has several key characteristics. First, the training in PE that Cree facilitators had to undergo as part of COOL aimed at building research skills, competencies and knowledge in conducting social research from a standpoint that is respectful of the local community (i.e., that was Cree). Significantly, as a result of participating in COOL, two facilitators have left Wemindji and are now pursuing post-16 education at Algonquin College. Second, COOL is educative in aiming to build awareness among facilitators, parents and the wider community of the benefits of developing an autonomous social program that is inspired by Cree traditions, forms of knowledge, customs, and values. Third, as we noted above, PE deliberately eschews the top-down, managerialist methodologies of instrumentalist program evaluation and the "jagged world views" that it imposes on Indigenous communities. Indeed, PE provides a powerful critique of both the theory and practice of this type of (neo)colonial research. Last, PE provides a counter-hegemonic methodology that not only works against the (neo)colonialist agenda of mainstream program evaluation, but articulates with broader processes of self-determination and decolonisation being explored in Indigenous communities. It is in these respects we would argue, that participatory evaluation can be considered a rich, greenfield site, that has the potential to generate new theoretical paradigms and conceptual practices that articulate with the emerging field of Indigenous methodologies.

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