
# Setting our Minds to It

# Setting our Minds to it: Community-centred Research for Health Policy Development in Northern Canada[1]

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## Abstract

The Tłı̨chǫ Community Service Agency (TCSA) in the Northwest Territories of Canada has partnered with academic researchers to adapt qualitative research techniques to develop local policy that is consistent with cultural values. This community-initiated research project is part of a wider process to develop a unique model of service delivery for the four Tłı̨chǫ (Dogrib) Dene communities. In one workshop, the leaders and community members identified the indicators of healthy living for Tłı̨chǫ people through the analysis of values expressed in songs and stories. This workshop coincided with an intensive effort to negotiate for self-government and land claims, achieved on August 4, 2005. In a subsequent workshop, which included administrators and policy personnel in the local government, the Tłı̨chǫ revisited the research process, confirmed the indicators, and applied them to tangible policy guidelines for social services and environmental management. The research process and emergent models developed by the Tłı̨chǫ are described in this article.


## Introduction

This project was developed and coordinated by the Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency (TCSA), as part of a continuum of innovative programming, now recognized internationally. The TCSA received a United Nations Public Service Award in 2007 for combining health, education, and social services in one department. In 2006, the Institute of Public Administration of Canada gave their award for innovative management to the TCSA. Culture and language are central to TCSA programming and to the Tłı̨chǫ government; this has been fostered through a series of research activities and programs.

In 1997, the Tłı̨chǫ leadership became involved in developing health policy through the establishment of a Community Services Board which combined public and tribal governance, and integrated a variety of community programs and services including education, health, and child and family services. This unique model of service delivery was brought to fruition by the Tłı̨chǫ Intergovernmental Services Agreement signed by the Government of Canada, the Government of the Northwest Territories and the Tłı̨chǫ government. Established on the inaugural date of the new Tłı̨chǫ government, August 4th, 2005, the TCSA is a transitional means of delivering public programs and services from the Government of the Northwest Territories as well as selected programs and services of the Tłı̨chǫ government.

The Tłı̨chǫ have a long history of controlling schooling, health, and social service delivery. A 1982 report of the Special Committee on Education of the NWT Legislative Assembly suggested northern peoples should set goals for education ("Learning, Tradition and Change in the NWT"). In 1969, in Rae-Edzo, an education society was formed which looked to other Aboriginal communities for direction in program development, most notably the Navajo Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona (Martin, 2001). The Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, created in 1989, brought together large numbers of community leaders to set directions for the educational system. As a result, culturally based curricula with language and cultural programs were developed. The Dogrib communities petitioned the Government of the NWT to integrate health programs and child and family services with education, following a directive in two Acts: *Education Act* (1995) and *Child and Family Services Act* (1998). The request was approved and the integrated Dogrib Community Services Board provided governance for education, health care, and child and family services. In short, this First Nation has a long history of the people's assumption of agency.

The new Tłı̨chǫ government, in collaboration with the TCSA, aimed to build processes, models, and institutions founded on Tłı̨chǫ values and principles. Some of the training, thinking, and practice took place in a series of workshops and research/action projects over the past two decades (see for example Rabesca and Siemens, 1989; Martin, 1991). This paper outlines periods in a broader policy development timeline when community leaders, administrators, health workers, and outside researchers worked collaboratively to use research principles as a catalyst for policy development.

Throughout the work, the research partners listened to varieties of stories, histories, narratives, and songs, and participated in a range of workshops and meetings. The researchers from the universities were taught how to listen, but in no way whatsoever did they attempt to show Indigenous people how to listen to traditional forms and elicit meaning from them. The university participants brought a range of research tools to the partners, helping communities to analyze core values that were then systematized and validated through consultation. There was no attempt to document the core values of the culture, rather to contribute operationally to a process of policy formation. The list of core values, elucidated through the group work exercises in a series of meetings, provided a working approach.

## The Tłı̨chǫ Communities and the Research Setting

The 2,927 Tłı̨chǫ (formerly known as Dogrib) live in four communities in the Northwest Territories of Canada, ranging in population from 136 to 1,973. The rich cultural heritage of the Tłı̨chǫ people is well documented (Zoe, 2007). Mining, government, and related industries and services are major sources of employment. The closest economic centre is Yellowknife, a city of approximately 20,000.

Aboriginal communities in northern Canada experience higher risks to their health and well-being for a variety of reasons: the legacy of colonization (Moffitt, 2004), residential school experiences, the trauma of drug and alcohol epidemics, limited access to health services, and limited education and employment opportunities. This is expressed in higher rates of injury, youth suicide, sexually transmitted infections, and other indicators of socioeconomic stress (Northwest Territories Health and Social Services, 2005).

In anticipation of the land claim settlement and transfer of power, the Tłı̨chǫ leaders sought to separate from territorial and federal styles of governance, recovering principles of the past and marrying them to modern governance (White, 2006). This intent led to the following goals:

- Understand with Elders and youth the old forms of governance and principles of relations;
- Determine what kind of governance people wish for the future;
- Connect these forms to modern governance, and
- Adapt principles to the delivery of services in Tłı̨chǫ communities.

The challenge was described by John B. Zoe who served as the chief negotiator for the comprehensive land claim and self government agreement:

> One of the key challenges we face is how to build a strong indigenous system of governance. While our practice in the past was to teach an ethic and spirit of indigenous governance, European models of governance have interrupted the flow of these ideas. We are now ready to build our own institutions, models and philosophies of governance. However, current models serve to filter, fragment and assimilate our people. Since these models are now deeply ingrained in our people, this will take a lot of hard work and thinking.
>
> We don't want to build the Tłı̨chǫ culture into a governance structure. We want to build a system of governance into the Tłı̨chǫ culture. This means we have to recover the principles and ethics of our forefathers. This means we must go to

> our elders to recover the guidance of such historic leaders as Môwhì, Edzo and Jimmy Bruneau, among others. Our system of governance needs to bypass roots that have grown for the past 100 years. For example, we need to establish accountability structures where Chief and Councilors are accountable to the people of our communities as opposed to structures established through the Indian Act where aboriginal leadership only answers to the Crown, and to rebuild our own Tłı̨chǫ worldview and to continue on our path of self determination. (Speech, March 4, 2005, Wekweètì.)

The Tłı̨chǫ government policies create an environment that promotes cultural continuity and resilience, integrates the Tłı̨chǫ communities, and encompasses future generations. This is consistent with literature on resilience (McCubbin et al., 1998). Chandler and Lalonde (2004) give self determination as an explanation for reduced suicide rates. Other literature cites the concept of community readiness as a measure of the ability to make change (Edwards et al., 2000), and identity formation and cultural resilience (Lalonde, 2005) as key factors of adaptive policy for healthy communities. These themes fit well with current discussions around the social determinants of health within the Tłı̨chǫ communities.

## Responsive Research Partnerships

Community-led research is a form of community-based participatory research (CBPR), in a continuum from expert models of research to participatory and advocacy models (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). Now we are learning about community-led research partnerships, in which community knowledge and experience is the starting point. In this case, a team of four academics from the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia responded to an invitation from the community research team, and provided appropriate methodological tools (Jones and Wells, 2007). We built on a strong ethnographic tradition (Helm, 2000), The opportunity for mutual learning has not yet been fully explored in the literature (Chandler and Lalonde, 2004; Chambers, 1983; 2002) nor incorporated into the procedures of university ethics panels (Flicker et al., 2007). As Chambers puts it, "We are facilitators, learners and consultants. Our activities are to establish rapport, to convene and catalyse, to enquire, to help in the use of methods, and to encourage local people to choose and improvise methods for themselves. We watch, listen and learn" (1997:131). This study provides an example of mutual capacity building within a research environment initiated and led by the communities.

There are many ways to work with the various types of text and data that were generated in this project. The data we analyzed collectively with the research team included transcripts of a two-day meeting of Chiefs, leaders, and administrators; a song sung by a prophet; a video of the Tłı̨chǫ Executive Officer, John B. Zoe, describing the cosmology; and transcripts of this video. We chose a method that was practical, easy to explain in a group setting, and helpful for uncovering the values implicit in the data. Content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1997) of each category of data was taught in a workshop setting involving 20 people; the group worked together to assign codes to elements of text from speeches, songs, and stories. The codes that emerged were discussed among the group, which brought a range of codes forward as well as the context for their meaning. For example, the transcripts of the song about Nǫhtà (the grebe—this song is discussed below) were read aloud. The university researchers suggested preliminary codes, which were then discussed and corrected by the workshop participants. These themes were listed in a non-hierarchical list, without any discussion about how a single "value" was coherently linked or related to others, except in the brief discussion of the findings. Sections of data where this code appeared were then read and the group suggested the underlying context for that theme and, finally, the core value. Core values were suggested from each era of history, and then used to tackle problems of governance and policy, such as co-management and child apprehension policies. The process involved:

Playing of song > translation > reading of song > codes > code correction > theme > component of core value

While the method is not theoretically elegant, and does not attempt to penetrate the semiotics of the text or render interpretation of narratives, the process fully engaged a group of 20 people in textual analysis over the course of two days. The core values were then collectively articulated and applied prospectively to policy formation.

A variety of interpretive checks were conducted after each workshop. First, a sample of participants from each workshop evaluated the process and findings of each meeting. Second, each report was sent to workshop participants and key leaders for feedback. The feedback on reports was significant, and they were revised accordingly. Notably, a graphic, designed by researchers to summarize the core values, was the focal point of significant discussion and work. A community-based team designed an alternative graphic and described the meaning of it. Both graphics are included in this review.

The next two sections describe the series of workshops that occurred. Material that was generated during these workshops was the raw data for collective analysis.

## Workshop #1 (February 2-4, 2005): The Leaders and Elders Outcome: Indicators for Healthy Living the Dogrib Way

Elders and chiefs from the four communities have been meeting together frequently over the years, working collaboratively to develop the strategy for negotiation of the land claim and self government agreement. However, this was the first time that academics, Elders, chiefs, and senior Tłı̨chǫ government staff had come together to focus on these questions, framed in this manner, and using this process. The workshop was held in the school in Wekweètı, the only building in the community large enough to accommodate the group of thirty people.

The goal of this workshop was to provide the environment and process for the community to identify indicators of wellness. The project had a capacity building goal as well; the partners from universities provided guidance on methods of structuring the data collection and analysis. As he opened the meeting, John B. Zoe (pictured below) spoke of the Elder sitting near him (Harry Simpson), suggesting that government indicators might paint his Elder as living in poverty, uneducated, in a house of logs without running

*John B Zoe (second from right), Elders and workshop participants in Wekweètì, NWT, February 2005 (Photo: Ginger Gibson)*

water. However, in the Tłı̨chǫ culture, this Elder is deeply respected, holding knowledge of immense value to the culture and youth.

The Canadian government uses various indicators to measure the health of communities, such as divorce rates, crime rates, family violence, suicide rates, and child apprehension (Northwest Territories Health and Social Services, 1998; 2005). These were not the themes raised as key indicators of healthy living during the workshop discussions. Instead, two key themes emerged: language and culture. People raised such questions as: How does one measure the strength of culture? What would it mean to say that there are a certain number of people who hunt and trap on the land, when this kind of activity is about something else? How does one ever measure the sadness a grandfather feels when his grandson cannot speak to him in Tłı̨chǫ?

The workshop began with Elders giving speeches in a roundtable. Elders serve as teachers, passing on knowledge about how to live well on the land down through the generations. They have earned this knowledge through their life on the land, practicing critical skills such as hunting, trapping, and fishing. The Elders spoke of how each Tłı̨chǫ person can earn the right to know about skills and values, if they are in right relation with Elders and other people. One Tłı̨chǫ teacher suggested: "When we talk about values, we're talking about living the right way and doing the right thing." Elders most often speak of specific activities, like chopping wood for others, bringing water, bringing supplies for Elders from Yellowknife, and sharing food harvested on the land. It is through activities such as these that the values of hard work, sharing, and serving others in relationships are learned. At the same time, skills are acquired, such as wood chopping, caribou harvesting, and surviving at extreme temperatures.

While the meeting was about governance and wellness, Elders described many aspects of wellness. John B. Zoe set the tone, suggesting that the Tłı̨chǫ will not emulate the settler government: "When we have Self Government, we will take over the government's place. But we're not saying we will measure our people the same way. We have come this far with our culture and we cannot lose it." According to Elders, there are many expressions of how to live according to Tłı̨chǫ ways.

The two-day workshop generated many tapes, which were then transcribed and translated. The translated text was read by one university researcher (as well as the research partners), and codes were generated around the main theme of wellness. A report was issued which was distributed to

each person. In the report, a figure was developed to illustrate the key ways that wellness is expressed (See Figure 1). This figure, designed by the lead author, was revised collectively. However, when the figure was reviewed in an all Tłı̨chǫ committee, a completely different figure was imagined (see Figure 2). This figure went through different iterations, making sure that the snowshoes were in the Tłı̨chǫ style, as well as the parkas. However, this figure continues to not be quite "right," according to the Tłı̨chǫ visionaries of it. The design of the first figure relies heavily on text to speak about Tłı̨chǫ wellness, whereas the second figure relies on symbols.

Academic roles were to assist with the planning and logistics of the gathering; provide suggestions to the leaders before and after the sessions and during breaks, in terms of achieving the workshop goals. The workshop was conducted in Tłı̨chǫ, with a translator for the academics and a few other non-Tłı̨chǫ speakers. We took careful notes and documented the emerging themes. These themes emerged after coding and analysis of the full transcripts from the workshop. A short report was later distributed to each person who came to the meeting and the themes were confirmed in follow-up meetings.

The themes illustrated in Figure 1 were described in reports and validated through feedback from readers. Elders and leaders explained how to live according to Tłı̨chǫ ways:

*Figure 1.*

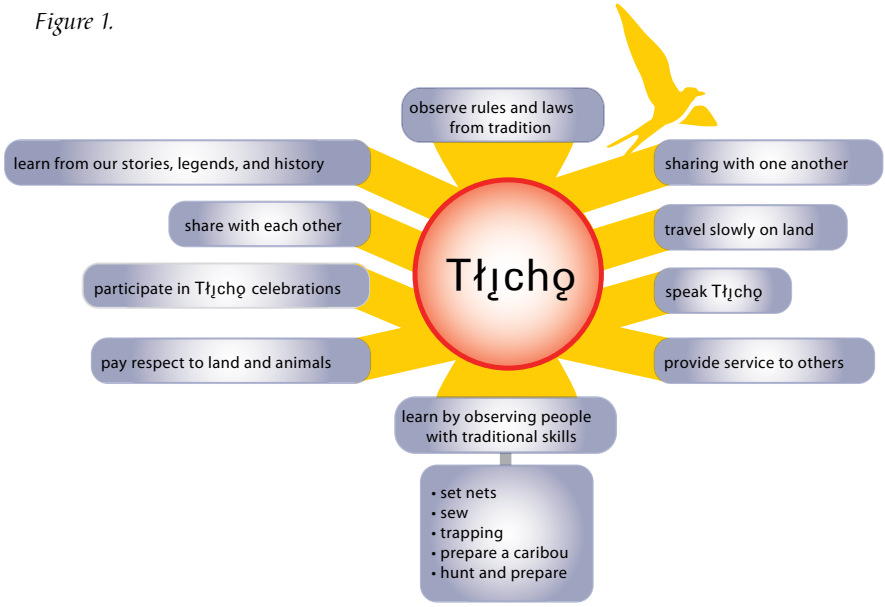
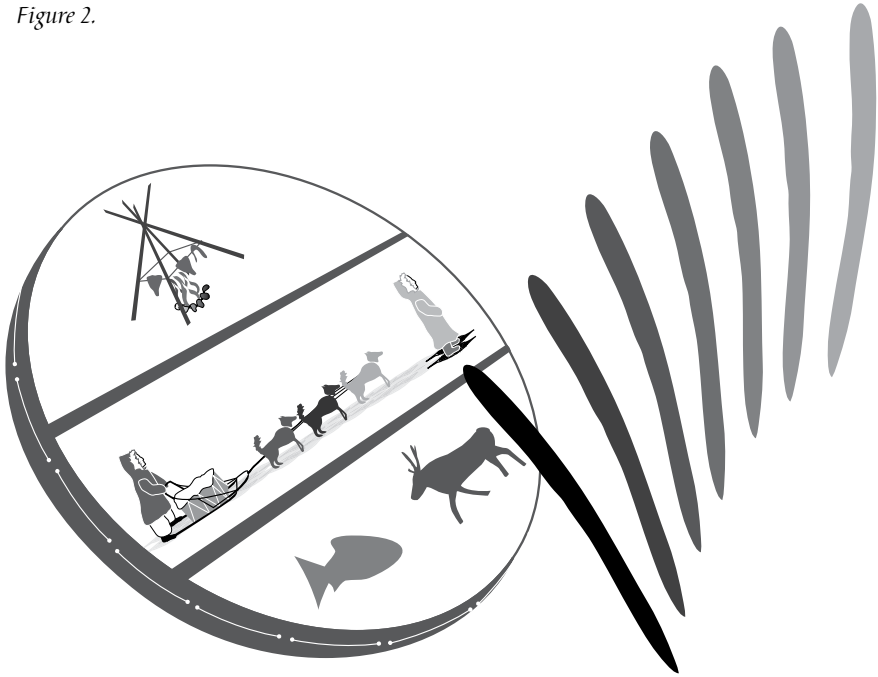


*Figure 2.*



*Designed by Lucy Lafferty, Philip Rabesca, Wendy Mantla and Terri Douglas*

- Listening to the legends and history told by Elders about animals, people and the past. A Tłı̨chǫ wellness worker suggested, "We know people by the stories they tell us";
- Providing Elders and families with help by cutting wood, doing chores, and bringing Elders material they need from Yellowknife. A person that practices these activities learns skills and values that are essential to a good life. Each one of these activities teaches values such as strength, endurance, effort, patience, and humility. Young people earn the right to learn about skills and practices by providing these services to their Elders and families;
- Observing the rules, practices, and laws of the Tłı̨chǫ tradition. For example, many rituals must be observed to respect the land, animals, and neighbours. A central practice is "paying the land," which involves the request of safe passage through the land, after a token has been given to the land and animals;
- Sharing among the families and "drinking tea together." This act involves both sharing and taking time for one another. Leaders and Chiefs, in

particular, are called on to visit people in their homes and to visit key constituents;

◊ Traveling slowly through the land together, learning the place names that guide people from one place to the next and visiting sacred sites. Elders speak of the land as a teacher, therefore they make the suggestion to young people to slow down, observe, and travel by the land's requirements rather than by their own personal schedule. John B. Zoe described canoe trips that are taken yearly by the Tłı̨chǫ.

> Every summer we take canoe trips on the old trails with our people. The elders come along with us, the youth look at the elders and learn from them. They see all the different things we do and they learn from it. The place names, burial sites, old campsite of how people lived, location of fishing areas, location of good wood, how to make a fire and everything else. Sometimes we get lucky with a big game and they learn the skinning and butchering process. They learn how to cook meat on the open campfire. They learn how to set a fish net. They just observe at first, but eventually if they don't do that work, they will not eat. (Interview with John B. Zoe, February 4, 2004).

◊ Learning by observing people with traditional skills; skills that are emphasized by Elders are setting traps and nets, hunting, cleaning animals, and lighting a campfire that will burn properly;

◊ Speaking the language as often as possible, in church, meetings, dances, songs, rituals. A language worker suggested, "We know our language is alive because we speak our language and we use it. We know our language is alive because yesterday when we were singing, we sang in our language. We're all sitting here at this meeting and we are speaking our language";

Raising children speaking the Dogrib language, practicing Tłı̨chǫ rituals, and learning about the land. A language worker suggested, "If we want the Tłı̨chǫ language and culture to be strong, we have to look back to see how our leaders used to help others as parents. How they used to raise children" (February 5, 2005).

◊ Participating in Tłı̨chǫ celebrations, such as feasts, dances, and games;

◊ Valuing each person for what they can do, and

◊ Eating together and sharing traditional foods.

The second figure was described by one Tłı̨chǫ administrator:

> The drum is used as the basis for this figure because it symbolizes celebration, laughter, dancing, singing and healing. The drum represents life. At the top of the drum is a teepee, with meat drying over a fire. Tłı̨chǫ people are known for the quality of the meat they make. As elders make this meat, they teach all the skills that are needed to understand how to live well in the land: they teach youth to watch, to experience, and to practise skills. Below this, a woman leads a team of dogs, as the man rides behind on the traditional sled. Both the man and woman are looking forward, moving into the future with their Tłı̨chǫ nàowo (way of life) and laws guiding them. Separating each of the layers of the drum are strings, which represent balance and harmony. On the lowest level of the drum are the animals that sustain the Tłı̨chǫ: fish and caribou. This area speaks of land, water, air, and fire. The frame of the drum is always made of wood: this is the foundation and strength for the Tłı̨chǫ. But the wood of the drum is pierced with babiche, which pulls the whole drum together. This is Tłı̨chǫ life experience. Hidden behind, out of sight of the viewer, is the "God's eye," where all the strings come together to hold the drum and give the hide tension: this is the strength of the Tłı̨chǫ. In a Tłı̨chǫ song, the drum is beat rhythmically with a drumstick. As the stick connects with the hide of the drum, Tłı̨chǫ traditions and way of life are strong. If there is silence in meetings, with no drum dance, then traditions are slowly fading away. Each drum stick represented in this figure speaks to an element of Tłı̨chǫ culture that is weak — language, spirituality, cultural activities, family, people, respect, and history — each element must be renewed to keep Tłı̨chǫ ways strong.

The collective evaluation of this knowledge was in itself transformative. Together people established that a unique definition of wellness exists: living well, according to the Tłı̨chǫ people of this meeting, involves daily relationships with others, as achieved through speaking the language, eating food together, practicing skills, and learning through observation (see Figure 1). Every aspect of how to live well together is about relationships: a person keeps well through social relationships with others, involving exchange of time, services, and food. In the meeting, measurement, evaluation, and action were connected. The group affirmed and evaluated a concept of collective wellness, and provided the guidance on how to move forward. For example, Elder Harry Simpson gave guidance on language and culture:

> So as we are getting ready again, we have to teach the young people the traditional ways, our language, the place names, names of lakes/rivers and so on in Dogrib. If we do that it will be good. I want you to think about it carefully and do something about it. I have been involved with various boards/committees for many years. I have been on the school board in Gamèti for 14 years. And I've noticed there's always a lack of funding for cultural programs. So we used to take our children out on the land a little ways.

## Tłı̨chǫ people achieve self governance

Shortly after the first workshop, after twelve intensive years of negotiation, the Tłı̨chǫ people successfully completed negotiations for self government and land claims with the federal government. For the Tłı̨chǫ, this meant a huge responsibility. They needed to build the skills of people who will work in the many different administrative units such as education, health and social services and the new co-management boards, among others.

## Workshop #2: The Policy Makers and Administrators Outcome: Draft Policies for Environment and Children's Services

The first workshop was attended by the chiefs and leaders; twenty senior administrators attended the second workshop. The aim was to identify the key values and principles of Tłı̨chǫ governance and to apply them directly to a contemporary governance program. The goal was to build on the concepts of healthy living from the first workshop, applying those principles to the development of tangible policies for environmental, health and social services programs.

The second workshop focused on the connection of Tłı̨chǫ values to modern governance. In this workshop, qualitative analysis methods (e.g., thematic analysis) were used to understand values and concepts inherent in the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology, songs, and dances. These values and concepts were then used to develop policy for Child and Family Services, Renewable Resources, and later applied to other programs.

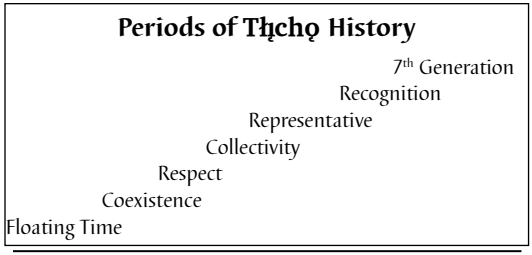



*Figure 3: Stages of Tłı̨chǫ cosmology*

This workshop was held in a lodge with a round, sky-lit room, fashioned somewhat like a teepee. Displayed around the room were symbolic articles of Tłı̨chǫ clothing: soft leather pants and vests with beading; moccasins; blankets; and other items reflecting Tłı̨chǫ culture. The environment supported the goal of drawing values from songs and stories, and moving them into tangible policy statements. The workshop was preceded by a series of small group meetings in which John B. Zoe and other participants discussed the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology (see Figure 3). The cosmology

is the Tłı̨chǫ people's traditional understanding of how they came to be, their relationship to the earth, and how they have developed as a people. It emerges out of the life experiences of a people and is the framework for the development of their culture. These understandings are embedded in stories, legends, and myths. The cosmology falls into seven overlapping periods moving from the early floating time to the 7th generation of the future: associated with each period are specific stories, songs, and legends. In a video, John B. Zoe recounted the cosmology, which he understands from long study on the land and in the houses of Elders. The workshop opened with this video and a song from the period of floating time. After viewing the video, the participants carefully studied selected pieces of the cosmology. Since the cosmology story shifts slightly with each teller, and when transcribed consumes more than thirty sheets of paper, selections had to be made for the workshop. The time of darkness, a period encompassing colonization, residential school, and many corresponding shifts in power and wellness, was chosen for analysis by Child and Family Services group. The coexistence era, chosen as an appropriate period to guide policy for the new Tłı̨chǫ lands and environment department, was a time when peace was made between animals and humans.

The use of the song and the cosmology was intentional. It set the tone for the workshop (as did the display of all cultural items in the room). The academics then illustrated how thematic analysis can be used to find the key themes in these songs and stories. The song that the community chose was traditionally sung at a tea dance; the version we used was sung by a respected Elder, Nick Black. The song was played at least three times before we spoke of it (See Figure 4).

**Song of Nǫhtà: the Grebe**

| | |
|---|---|
| As he chanted this song, he began to dance. The song Nǫhtà came up with lasted until the tea dance ended. He had been traveling from a great distance and so, he was very tired and very sleepy too. After introducing a song for the people, he decided to sit down. While the people danced, he sat down behind them. As he was sitting down, he fell asleep. As he drifted into a deep sleep, the people danced and they danced on his feet and that's why his feet became flat. | *Determination*<br>*Styles of leadership*<br>*Connection to the earth and people* |
| So that was how Nǫhtà came up with this song and that's what the old timers say. | *Importance of elder's knowledge* |

*Figure 4: Song by Nick Black, translated by Philip Rabesca.*

# Applying Values to Tłı̨chǫ Governance: Research in Practice

Techniques of qualitative analysis were taught briefly and then applied to the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology and to the Nǫhtà song. As the themes were identified (see Figure 4), so also were new stories that people thought should be a part of the cosmology. While we focused very strongly on the first period (floating time), and the story of Nǫhtà (the song sung by Nick Black), we also worked briefly on other eras of history. As people watched and read portions of the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology, they were asked to focus on the underlying values and what other stories might relate to this period. At first the group worked as a whole, brainstorming about songs, dances, stories. As before, the university partners coded the material from the discussions during the breaks and in the evening of the first day. The next day, the twenty participants divided into two groups around environment or health and community services to identify core values. Two examples were chosen for this discussion: land management and child apprehension. Workshop participants reviewed the case studies, and then worked to identify solutions and strategies, applying the values of the past to guide the vision of the present and future.

## CASE 1: Environmental Management: The Case of Lands and Environment

The Tłı̨chǫ government now has control over the management of resources, according to the legislation. Two new principles are:

- That the *importance of conservation to the well-being and way of life of the aboriginal peoples* has to be taken into consideration; and
- That the Tłı̨chǫ *government can provide written policy guidance* to the federal minister with respect to any of its functions in relation to the use of Tłı̨chǫ lands.

With these new possibilities of providing policy guidance, the lands and environment group was asked to focus on how core values from Tłı̨chǫ history can guide these two new principles. As we reviewed the period of coexistence, the following values were identified:

- Close relationships of animals and humans
- No ownership
- Youth respect of history

- No difference between animals and humans
- Power to preserve and protect environment
- Protect proper use and unlimited use
- Preservation
- Protection
- Sharing

In applying these values to the case of lands and environment, specific and focused strategies for caribou and wildlife management emerged. These were then taken to the administration as ideas for further discussion, along with suggestions for managing relationships with others, such as requiring consent, permits, quotas, and schedules for land use. For the Tłı̨chǫ, policies such as survival-only hunting and fishing licenses were considered. The overall policy framework of a land use plan was to be inclusive of traditional knowledge research and map-based research of the herd movements. As owners of the land, it was clear to all that the benefits to Tłı̨chǫ people had to be the first priority.

## CASE 2: Child Protection, Community Standards and Social Workers: Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency

Historically in the Tłı̨chǫ communities, many families have had strained relationships with government social workers. Misunderstandings on the part of families and community leaders, as well as by social workers, have led, for many people, to anger and resentment towards child protection work carried out by social workers. For example, a social worker may see bare cupboards and an empty refrigerator in a home and assume children do not have enough nutritious food, although the warehouse outside may be full of meat and fish harvested from the land. Neighbours or relatives who see children taken from their parents may not know that the children need protection from abuse.

Sections 56 through 59 of the NWT *Child and Family Services Act* (1998) allows for the establishment of "community standards" to be used to determine the level of care necessary to meet a child's needs, and whether or not a child needs protection. With this policy possibility, the Tłı̨chǫ now aim to develop new standards. The following questions guided the Tłı̨chǫ working group: What Tłı̨chǫ values, found in stories told by the Elders, can we use to develop culture-based community standards to determine the level of care

a child needs and whether or not a child needs protection? What might the standards look like?

As we reviewed the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology period of recognition, the following values were identified:

- Identity and cultural identity
- Sense of belonging
- Connection to identity and family
- Connection and inheritance of land and culture
- Recognition of what was there before
- Control over our lives (independence and uniqueness)
- Children born with gifts
- Language
- Stories
- Uniqueness
- Strength and power
- Education value
- Respect
- Choices
- Responsibility
- Moral judgment

As the group worked to understand the context of these values within the texts (from transcripts of songs and the cosmology) to develop guidelines for child apprehension, they defined the following principles. Some of these suggestions relate to the Act, others to the process of developing guidelines, and still others to criteria for evaluation.

- Work within existing Act to concentrate on relationships more closely.
- Develop process that reflects community (listening is important).
- Allow time for healing process.
- Rethink and re-discover the lost or buried values (could be out on the land).
- Involve Elders in teaching values to families (re-education).
- Bring group decision making back to Elders' committee.
- Define wellness workers' roles.

- Train own Tłı̨chǫ social workers.
- Change evaluation criteria to recognize culture and lifestyle.


*Nora Wedzin presenting discussion outcomes (Ginger Gibson)*

When the groups reconvened, the process proved itself, as the values identified were consistent across the groups, with each adding some new themes. These results were also consistent with the health indicators identified in the first workshop. Finally, the two groups met again to develop plans for incorporation of the identified values directly into emergent policy.

As the second workshop closed, the CEO of the Community Services Agency offered a list of key initiatives to guide future work. From this process a vision and a work plan for the future have since emerged.

## Reflections

In their extensive work on suicide in Aboriginal communities, Chandler and LaLonde (2004) have identified cultural continuity and self-determination as major indicators for communities with lower suicide rates. Self-determination in the Tłı̨chǫ communities has enabled a process of realizing self-government and the creation of a health, social services, and education body that is unique. One of the progress markers reported by the TCSA is a dramatic increase in high school graduation rates since control has been assumed over education services. There is a clear commitment to cultural con-

tinuity in terms of health, education, and environmental policy, now that self-government is in place.

**Elements of Tłı̨chǫ Success**

Support from the leadership
Committed community members
Desire for capacity-building
Focused issues to address
Community readiness
Self determination

*Figure 5: Elements of Tłı̨chǫ success*

As well as policies, another outcome of the workshops was a new project funded by a national foundation. This project seeks to build on the principles outlined in the second workshop on child welfare, analyzing how they might apply to policy for children and families and revitalize old ways of working together. The key project goals are to:

- Understand with Elders and youth the old forms of governance and principles of relations;
- Determine what kind of governance people wish for the future;
- Connect these old forms to modern governance, and
- Adapt principles to the delivery of services in Tłı̨chǫ communities.

In another follow-on project, the communities are now seeking to address youth resilience around STI/AIDS prevention through a community-based training program. People from each community have been trained to conduct a survey with those nine and older in all four of the communities to identify strategies to increase resilience and reduce risk for the whole population. By training twenty people, including some Elders, community capacity for survey research is being developed, and can be applied to evaluation of the process a year later, and any other health issue for which evidence is needed to support program and policy development.

The university researchers began learning to listen through this research. In most of the sessions, the researchers participated in methodological discussions but were not workshop leaders or facilitators. The process of validating the findings proved to be instructive for both researchers and the partners. The graphic representations of wellness (Figure 1 and Figure 2) illustrate the different ways used to conceptualize and symbolize the concepts that emerged through textual analysis. The first figure, which was largely textual, was supplanted by a second figure, which was entirely graphic and symbolic. Ultimately, the interpretation of the data was much stronger and more accurate through this collaboration.

While these projects sought to connect research with policy, the outcome of new policy is not so direct. First, the translation of the materials from workshops and meetings has taken up to four months. As a result,

the memories and knowledge of the workshop have begun to fade. Second, we have had a tough time engaging all the people who actually may inform policy in the research and workshop process, due to heavy workloads. With this time lapse and personnel challenge, we have had slow progress in actually designing new policies and programs. Other challenges certainly have made the connection of this research to policy sluggish.

Still, this community-led research process has far reaching consequences for both the Tłı̨chǫ government and the Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency. The method is a tool that can be used to develop community programs and services that are true to the values of Tłı̨chǫ culture. In sum, the application of Tłı̨chǫ core values from the Cosmology allows culturally appropriate shaping of modern policy, programs, service delivery, and organizational design in these communities.

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