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Cree Perspectives and Data Collection in Moose Factory, Ontario

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Historical Background

Moose Factory, Ontario is a small, largely Cree inhabited island whose community is located on the southern tip of James Bay. The community has a population of 2,500 residents comprising Cree people (majority) and non-Cree (minority). Over two centuries, Moose Factory's Cree history has included various relationships with foreign influences. These influences have included economic (fur trade/Hudson's Bay Company), religious (Christianity/Catholic/Anglican Church), political (Canadian governments), and educational (residential school) activities with each party arriving with its own specific agenda. Consequently, Cree society as reflected in our community today is a complex, eclectic blend of these former relationships and processes that I might add are still ongoing in different expressions. Currently, Moose Factory is a unique, post-colonial community that is re-thinking its colonial past by transforming its religious beliefs, nation-building concepts, and educational philosophies attempting to integrate traditional Cree world-view with non-Cree pedagogy.



Moose Factory, Ontario

Community Context

As Moose Factory grew from its earliest beginnings as a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) colonial, trading outpost for gathering furs and barter with Crees, so did the overall health, social and cultural dimensions of Cree society

begin to change. We are a people whose historical trajectory has integrated and internalized many things European along our path to the 21st century. Diverse influences such as Scottish/English music (fiddle/square dancing/Christian hymns), food (bannock/tea), and religious belief (Catholic/Anglican/Pow-wow practices) — to name a few significant facets — currently characterize contemporary Moose Factory Cree lifestyle.



Within this historical sense, Cree people's health at various points over 200 years has also been affected by outbreaks and epidemics of various diseases such as tuberculosis, whooping cough, and measles (Preston 2000: 4). Since World War II (1945), Indigenous peoples worldwide are thought to have become more sedentary and live less active community lifestyles (Pan American Health Organization 2002). In this perspective, Cree people of Moose Factory are one Indigenous example of a group experiencing the effects of global, community lifestyle, belief, attitude, and behaviour changes that influence everyday eating patterns and diet.

Our hunting society is one that is characterized by increasing numbers of people participating in the community wage economy with seasonal, tradi-

tional, hunting practices in one sense, that lie on the periphery of contemporary Cree lifestyle. We are a hunting group who once ate moose, goose, duck, fish, and other wildlife in large quantities; whose daily diets today often include food high in sugar, cholesterol, and fat content (soft drinks, powdered juices, french-fries, beef, pork, processed foods, deep fried frozen foods). Therefore, there is a serious concern among Cree leaders, Cree researchers, non-Cree social scientists and health practitioners that diabetes is now one of the major chronic diseases affecting the Cree youth, adult, and Elder populations of Moose Factory as well as those of other Cree communities in James Bay (Abonyi 2001: 57, Kraus et al. 2003: 1-2, Louttit 2005: 4).

Research Context

In 2001, the nascent Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) began funding broad interdisciplinary research projects that approached their subjects from the perspectives of all four of CIHR's pillars: a. biomedical; b. clinical; c. health services (including health systems); and d. population health (including the social, cultural and environmental determinants of health). One of these inaugural Interdisciplinary Health Research Team (IHRT) projects is Dr. T.K. Young's Diabetes in the Aboriginal Population: Defining, Understanding, and Controlling an Emerging Epidemic. The population health ("fourth pillar") component of his project is a close examination of two long-standing community-based diabetes prevention projects, the Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Project (KSDPP) and the Sandy Lake Health and Diabetes Project (SLHDP). The goal of the Interdisciplinary Health Research Team (IHRT) is to document the development and trajectory of each of these projects, then take the lessons learned from these unique experiences and introduce diabetes prevention and research into a third Aboriginal community. To this end, Moose Factory came into partnership with the IHRT project in 2004 as the pilot third community.

Diabetes, Culture and Community Research

In 2004, I became involved with the Interdisciplinary Health Research Team (IHRT) and the Moose Cree Health Services (MCHS) of the Moose Cree First Nation (MCFN) that were collectively conducting physical activity and nutrition research about the food pathways in Moose Factory. There had already been discussions concerning the nature, method, and process of conducting data collection in Moose Factory. At that time, I was just beginning

the field research portion of my M.A. degree into Cree youth, culture, and diabetes in another James Bay Cree community. I was approached and asked by both stakeholders in the Moose Factory diabetes research to become a member of the IHRT; to assist with data collection, food inventory, analysis, and dissemination of results to the community.

As a Cree studying Indigenous health issues such as diabetes and the history of its origins in Aboriginal communities, I believe the IHRT project will be of tremendous community value to Moose Factory. Similar to this project, my MA thesis discusses a Northern Quebec Cree community's youth population and their perspectives on diabetes, diet, physical activity, and culture. At the community level, Cree communities in the James Bay coastal and inland regions all have access to virtually the same food products, mainly supplied through Northern Stores (formerly HBC). Many of these food products are high in sugar and cholesterol. Sedentary lifestyle, changing diets, attitudes, behaviours, and other social patterns due to wage economy and community development have, in many instances, created various health risks for Cree people in the communities of James Bay. With these Cree lifestyle changes, chronic disease such as diabetes has emerged as a major health concern, among others, in the Cree populations of James Bay.

From a holistic perspective, Cree communities in James Bay have relatively the same political, social, religious, psychological, and cultural dimensions that connect them to "outside" influences (government policy, education policy, health policy, "southern" goods and services). In this larger context, I continually find it a great learning experience discussing, analyzing, and researching the diverse changes that have affected the Cree people's diet, lifestyle, history, culture, language, spiritual beliefs, and health status with non-Crees and with Crees themselves! I believe the problems and some of the solutions to our health issues for Cree populations will come from non-Crees and Crees participating together.

As a Cree researcher, there is an interesting emic/etic dynamic that emerges when I work with "southern" researchers who, at times, may not understand that we (Cree) are simultaneously "the subject" and the "cultural consultant" for research goals and objectives. This delicately complex relationship is an emerging experience for many Aboriginal individuals in contemporary Indigenous societies who must operate in two worlds — Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Historically speaking, Aboriginal people must also understand the colonial past in order to come to terms with the post-colonial present. We must do so not to lay blame for our predicament, but strive to find new

directions to the future in new environments of thought and action. We need to develop new relationships with "outsiders" as well as between Cree communities.

In my position as a community research assistant, being situated at the community level while in contact (via email/conference call) with the IHRT in Montreal was continually challenging in switching "gears" between the language of academics and understanding the everyday lived experience and communication styles of Moose Cree community members. Moreover, this research experience was challenging in understanding, translating, and interpreting different research perspectives/objectives to each group's members and stakeholders. For example, at one point in the research process, I found that local stakeholders could not understand why the IHRT team would not, at this time, conduct interviews or focus groups among Moose Factory elementary school students. I believe that the local stakeholder and the IHRT team researcher had different views on the bearing and importance of conducting elementary school focus groups. At times, the discussion seemed to be stalled on this issue. In my view, it was difficult to explain to one local stakeholder that focus groups were an important strategy but that the main IHRT concern was in conducting focus groups among the mothers who generally cooked and provided the daily meals in a household. It was challenging to operate as a Cree researcher who could be perceived as taking the "outsider" position on a specific point or issue. In the end, the local stakeholder decided to conduct elementary school focus groups and interviews as part of their own local initiatives.

It is essential that professors, researchers, MA students, and First Nation parties realize that the language and communication styles of different cultural groups have particular ways of communicating and understanding within each group's own environment. Geographically and community-wise, urban/rural systems are embedded with their own sense of objectives, perspectives, time management, organization, and the manner in which projects emerge and ultimately, how they will be carried out.

For instance, Moose Factory is a small island community that is surrounded by the Moose River that empties into the vast James Bay ecosystem. The Cree community lifestyle of Moose Factory is very much accented by the changing seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter). These seasons are very clearly marked and it is to these seasonal changes that the Cree are very much attuned. The community virtually empties of many people during the annual fall and spring hunts. Therefore, any community research project and

its team must take into consideration the number of participants who will be available in the community for completing questionnaires or participation in focus groups.

In this respect, a northern community project is, in a larger sense, very much linked to the natural world. Patterns and time periods of geese migrations determine the actual time frame that the fall and spring hunt commences. Moreover, geese migrations fluctuate seasonally and may provide a very narrow "window" in which to participate in the hunt. One can never be exactly sure to the day or week when the geese will fly north. Any planning for community research during these times in a Moose Factory study are at the mercy of the geese who operate on nature's time schedule. Local community cultural-consultants in this context are very valuable in understanding a community's energy, mood, and anticipation of traditional activities. Therefore, outside researchers should attempt to understand the northern communities, environmental seasons, and the migratory patterns of certain wildlife as deeply as possible whether through local narratives or the appropriate literature on the subject.

In terms of climate, rising and falling temperature levels may also influence a research project. For instance, climate and temperature affect the river-ice conditions and play an important role in the degree and extent of river travel on the Moose River by Moose Factory residents and any outsiders who may wish to research in the community. During the fall freeze-up of the Moose River, depending on the season's temperatures, ice may/may not quickly form presenting dangerous ice conditions for travel by boat or ice by snow machine or motor vehicle. Likewise, the spring thaw of the river is either fast or slow and at the end stages, precarious enough to induce alternative travel accomplished by helicopter between Moosonee and Moose Factory or the goose camps. The high cost of helicopter travel during these times is a major economic consideration for Moose Factory residents and, certainly, for the overall costs of any research projects conducted during these seasonal periods.

From my perspective concerning the data collection, the spring goose hunt presented the most challenging aspect to undertaking and completing the collection process in Moose Factory. As my "southern" colleagues were anxious to begin the data collection process, it was always with a cautious attitude that I advised them of the best possible time for the IHRT team to arrive in Moose Factory. Moreover, I attempted to consult local residents and Elders who have much experience and knowledge of the climate to de-

termine and gauge the spring thaw conditions. However, it is important to note that even local residents and Elders may not always have a specific time period in mind but will rely on the previous year's climate.

In any event, we decided that early April would be a good time for the IHRT to arrive in Moose Factory, as travel by ice was still relatively safe. In addition, many Moose Factory residents were largely present in the community waiting for the geese to fly. In terms of food supply, the Moose Factory Northern Store manager also informed me that all food products would be available in the store. Therefore, the river conditions would not compromise the amount and variety of food products available for residents and the local diet would remain the same. Consequently, the store shelf inventory would not be negatively affected in the variety of foods offered to customers and our study would be accurate. Foods would either arrive by vehicle, snow machine, or helicopter during the spring thaw.

Communicating the project to Moose Factory residents was to be carried out by a small publicity campaign utilizing the local radio station and community bulletin boards to inform the public of the impending questionnaire tables, focus groups, and the prizes to be won by local participants (if participation occurred). Due to the local radio station's broadcasting of an important First Nation issue locally during the week leading up to the questionnaire tables, our radio ads could not be run. However, the posters that were created for the bulletin boards were more than adequate in getting the message out and we collected over 150 questionnaires filled out after three days of table set-up at the Northern Store.

It is important to note that, in a small community like Moose Factory, oral communication is not something of the past but very much in use. We learn of events (community fires, break-ins), funerals, weddings, dances, tournaments, power outages, etc., largely through speaking with other community members. Culturally speaking, extended family networks provide an important communication route for many families in Moose Factory, either through direct person-person contact or by telephone. In my opinion, the oral tradition in Moose Factory is still very much alive and well.

Regarding the questionnaires, the questionnaire table and two additional community research assistants were located just outside the main entrance to the Northern Store (Moose Factory) to capitalize on the community traffic, shopping activity, and conversation during prime times of the day (usually coffee break [10 am]; lunch [12 pm]; school out [3:30 pm]; workday completed [4:30-5 pm]). In addition, it was decided that the table and

store-shelf inventory be carried out during peak shopping periods usually on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. The reason for this is that the train arrives every Wednesday in Moosonee with fresh food products that are distributed from that point of arrival to the stores. Food products and other goods travel to Moose Factory by water, ice, or air and are usually present on store shelves by Thursday afternoons. It should be noted that the local Northern Store Managers in Moose Factory and Moosonee were very much interested, helpful and open to the IHRT research project from the beginning. The manager in Moose Factory even let one researcher arrive at the store before opening hours to complete store-shelf inventory in a quiet environment.

Concerning the focus groups, there was relatively strong interest by local residents in signing up to participate in a focus group. However, possibly due to the weekend and nighttime scheduling of the focus groups, many individuals did not show up for their particular focus group. Again, as a cultural consultant taking into account school days, bingo nights, and other community weekend activities (hockey tournaments, dances, travel "south" to other communities), one could not be absolutely certain that individuals would be present at focus groups. This uncertainty was likely not a welcome experience to the researchers who would run the focus groups, but one could only advise them as best as one thought. Ultimately, three focus groups were adequately attended, but the last focus group was re-scheduled because of poor participant turnout. The last focus group took place at a local restaurant on a very quiet evening with three participants who graciously agreed to meet at the restaurant.

Overall, I was a little disappointed in the focus group turn-out as I wanted to make sure each group provided enough data for the MA student to return to Montreal with. However, research objectives in the North do not always run according to plan. Indeed, as a relatively new individual working in community research, I'm still exploring and discovering new ways of interpreting our local Cree culture to "outsiders" and for that matter, to "insiders" (Moose Factory Cree members).

One thought I have had during this project is that cultural identity and collective identity concerning the Cree of James Bay is not a simple matter. As a group we've changed in so many respects over 300 years of contact that, I believe, we've become a very complex, yet dynamic and eclectic people in our cultural and social expressions. In this sense, many of us are in a process of discovering ourselves individually and our collective culture in new ways that

may not sit well with "outsiders" if they want quick responses and answers to their questions and research inquiries.

In conclusion, I perceived the IHRT and the research goals as positive in conducting and contributing more knowledge on nutrition concerning our community. We have a high incidence of diabetes in the community and the more research projects we direct to the diabetes problem, the more we can learn and understand what individuals in Moose Factory can do to adopt healthier lifestyles. Importantly, I believe these lifestyles must include a healthy balance of both Cree and non-Cree foods.

Throughout the study's lifespan, I have felt that I was a valued cultural consultant for the IHRT team in Montreal. I always believed that my participation and opinions during conference calls and meetings were important to the lead investigators concerning how the project would be conducted in Moose Factory. In this context, I believe the IHRT took the necessary steps in building a positive, participatory relationship with me as a community member with a particular perspective that was sought as a member of the team.



Stan Loutitt in Moose Factory

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