

INTRODUCTION

MAPPING THE ISSUES: HEALING, EQUITY, OPPORTUNITY AND GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES¹

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Special Issue Editor

The papers that comprise this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* are intended to explore issues influencing the future health and well-being of Aboriginal communities. Four of the papers are the result of *MAP*, the Multidisciplinary Aboriginal Program of research developed in southwest Alberta by members of the Blackfoot Confederacy³ and University of Lethbridge faculty⁴. They are joined by Belanger and Newhouse's thoughtful and comprehensive review of events and discourses that influenced the direction of Aboriginal self-government as it emerged over the past three decades in Canada. Both the *MAP* papers and the self-government review situate the well-being of Aboriginal communities firmly in the social, political and cultural contexts of contemporary Canadian society.

The *MAP* projects developed from a series of discussions about mapping health (broadly and holistically defined) and well-being in local First Nations communities. The consultations and subsequent projects undertaken by members of the Blackfoot Confederacy and University of Lethbridge faculty stemmed from mutually-held beliefs that better understanding of the social, cultural and political contexts in which health and well-being develop, including education, employment, economic diversification, and governance, will contribute to better futures. We began by asking what topics needed to be explored to contribute to real action on development of health and well-being, but soon realized that we needed also to address the relationship between Aboriginal community members and university-based researchers. In this mapping exercise, best practice was identified as collaboration on topics identified and prioritized by community members, rather than generated from outside the community. Participants emphasized that these collaborations must contribute to building the capacity of indi-

viduals and local Aboriginal communities to conduct research and apply the results to real-life circumstances. *MAP* was an ambitious endeavour, an opportunity to develop new ways of working together as much as an exercise in knowledge development and knowledge transfer. We recognized clearly that *MAP* was only the first step in a long journey, however.

Among the many topics discussed in the *MAP* consultations, education, economics, employment, culture, and lifestyles emerged as priorities. Accordingly, these are the primary foci of the *MAP* projects. Mueller, for example, examines earnings differentials of Aboriginal peoples compared to the Canadian non-Indigenous population, confirming earlier studies that suggest the largest burden of wage penalty continues to be borne by those at the lower end of the wage scale, with little change over two decades. This disturbing finding is compounded by the association of relative earnings with type and structure of employment, as well as with ethnicity, where Aboriginal origin appeared as a clear predictor of lower earnings. Turning their attention to the employment structure of First Nations communities, Townshend, MacLachlan and O'Donoghue explore the degree to which prairie reserve economies are diversified and integrated with surrounding off-reserve economies. The complex and highly specialized employment profile that emerges from their analyses reveals significant economic diversity among prairie First Nations communities and distinctive patterns of integration and dis-integration ("similar but different") with the economies of local regions. Townshend et al. suggest further that the method employed in this project has merit for planning of local economic development.

Ramp, in a decidedly Durkheimian turn, looks at the question of education. The project with which this paper is concerned was planned originally to examine secondary and post-secondary school drop-out and how people make sense of and decide upon their educational choices. What emerged is an example of the reflective processes we hoped would be encouraged by the *MAP* initiative. Ramp describes how the research team came to 'step back' from the data and re-think their project to explore what it meant to be an educated person from the perspective of Blackfoot community members. In 'stepping back', the researchers were able to situate the meaning of education in the complex and nuanced contexts of historical experiences and contemporary realities. This paper not only clarifies how education is understood and valued among Blackfoot community members, but also demonstrates how the stresses and strains in a community are laid bare in these seemingly simple questions. This paper sends a clear message

for the conduct of action-oriented research with Aboriginal communities.

Gambling is the object of McGowan and Nixon's contribution to this special issue. Proclaimed 'the white buffalo' by its promoters, gambling also consumes significant personal and community resources. The dynamics of Aboriginal peoples' gambling and individual experience of problems related to their gambling activities are not well understood, however. What began as an attempt to map the trajectories of gambling problems became an exploration of the role of traditional knowledge and practices as mediating factors in the contemporary resolution of a problematic lifestyle that has significant impact on the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

Belanger and Newhouse's paper on the emergence of Aboriginal self-government reveals persistent and persuasive themes in Aboriginal thought about the role of governance in promotion and support of community well-being. Gleaned from three decades of writings from Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, the identity politics and discursive sites that have influenced the nature and direction of Aboriginal self-government in this country are revealed. The measured and contested agency of Aboriginal political culture that emerges from this review stands in stark contrast to more common depictions of abject powerlessness in the face of hegemonic colonializing (and neo-colonializing) forces. Reminding us that earlier discussions were grounded in community needs, the authors suggest a pivotal role for community in determining future development of self-government policies that will impact positively the well-being of Aboriginal communities.

Of note, the title word "mapping" is significant and strategically chosen for this collection of papers. Social exclusion—"what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, ...[and] bad health" (Batty, 2002)—is acknowledged increasingly as a critical arena for social policy and action. Rapidly accumulating evidence that social factors have critical impacts on health (Chandola, Bartley, Sacker, Jenkinson & Marmot, 2003) draws attention to the disparities in health and well-being that accrue from even slight gradients in socio-economic status (Marmot & Shipley, 1996) and inequitable social position (Wilkinson, 1996). The relationships are neither straightforward nor unambiguous, however, and we are just beginning to understand, however slightly, the significant roles of spirituality, culture, education and empowerment in health and well-being (Mechanic, 2000, p. 271).

In this mapping project, the authors of the papers in this special

issue attempt to draw some of the contours of the landscape on which the pathways to Aboriginal community health and well-being have been, and will be, constructed. As with earlier map-makers, our efforts reflect the perspectives and tools of our times. It is our hope that we will learn to see more clearly in future.

Notes

1. Translation of abstracts from English to French for the *MAP* projects reported in this special issue was provided by Meghan Forsyth. Translation of the Belanger and Newhouse review abstract was provided by Angie Monique Chenier.
2. The guest editor wishes to acknowledge the collaborative and collegial efforts of the members of the *MAP* Committee as well as members of Blackfoot communities of southwest Alberta who supported and contributed to the development of this special issue. The advice and support of Sam Corrigan, *CJNS* editor, was greatly appreciated as we brought the project to completion. Similarly, this project has benefited greatly from Yale Belanger's thoughtful comments and suggestions. During the course of this project, the author was a member of faculty in the Addictions Counselling Program, School of Health Sciences, The University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta. Current address for correspondence: Addictions Research Centre, P.O. Box 1360, Montague, Prince Edward Island, C0A 1R0. (Email: mcgowanvm@csc-scc.gc.ca)
3. Representatives from the Kainai (Blood) and Pii'kani (Peigan) Nations of southwest Alberta.
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