

# EXPLORATIONS IN URBAN ABORIGINAL NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

The findings outlined in this paper emerged from a culturally-based neighbourhood planning exercise carried out by a non-profit housing organization in Winnipeg's inner city. In this research, Aboriginal residents conducted an ethnographic study among their own neighbours to explore cultural orientations that might be important in setting direction for neighbourhood development. They found that local residents felt "distant" and "disconnected" from the housing program and from other programs that might significantly benefit them. The reasons for the distance were both interethnic and intercultural.

Les résultats présentés dans l'article proviennent d'un exercice d'aménagement de quartiers à caractère culturel qui a été mis en œuvre par un organisme de logement sans but lucratif dans le noyau central de Winnipeg. Dans ce secteur, les Autochtones constituent le groupe démographique identifiable le plus important. Dans le cadre de l'exercice, des résidents autochtones ont mené une étude ethnographique en questionnant leurs voisins afin de connaître les éléments culturels qui pourraient être importants pour l'orientation du développement local. Les chercheurs ont découvert que les résidents locaux se sentaient « éloignés » et « déconnectés » du programme de logement et des autres programmes dont ils pourraient profiter de manière importante. Les motifs d'une telle distance étaient à la fois interethniques et interculturels.

William Whyte is an inner city distressed area in the city of Winnipeg. Average family incomes in the neighbourhood are less than half those for the rest of the city (Winnipeg, 2002a). Unemployment rates are three times the city average. Sixteen percent of the housing in the William Whyte is in need of major repair. The community is on the border between the two highest crime districts in the city (Winnipeg, 2002b). Thirty-eight percent of the population of William Whyte is Aboriginal. (Winnipeg, 2002a)

Many would take exception to the above description of this neighbourhood as disproportionately negative. They would argue that no community is without its redeeming qualities (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1999), and William Whyte certainly has its own. Some see this neighbourhood as "friendly" and "accepting," and say they would not want to live anywhere else in the city (Social Planning Council, 1995). As one informant for this study stated

I grew up here. I understand this community. I feel good being in it.

The William Whyte residents who were co-researchers in this study have lived in this community most of their lives. They know its territory intimately and they feel secure on any of its street corners. Each has had to find strategies to survive in this harsh environment. One was a "bouncer" in one of William Whyte's toughest drinking establishments. Another is a single mother. In the midst of this research her refrigerator broke down and she lost a week's worth of food supplies before the landlord came to fix it. Her rented house was deemed beyond repair by a nonprofit housing project.

In the conversations outlined in this paper, these researchers do not minimize the stresses of growing up in poverty. They talk about their aspirations for themselves, their families, and their neighbourhood. They are acutely aware of being Aboriginal in a society where stereotypes are prevalent, where the legacy of colonization is painfully present, and where social distance cuts off access to the city's opportunity structures.

As Jason said,

Everything in our community is inadequate.... Back when all those houses were getting burned, I think people were crying out for adequate housing. They didn't realize what they were doing.... People were giving you a message.

This research was a response to a situation in which the North End Housing Project (NEHP), an inner city nonprofit housing renovation program, was attempting to make neighbourhood development a

participatory process. NEHP had renovated ten houses on two blocks in the William Whyte neighbourhood, and was contemplating renovating 25 more in the locality. This renewed housing was made available to local residents on a lease-to-purchase basis. The organization was also interested in developing playgrounds, community space, and specialized residency. NEHP's vision was to create a kind of urban village. The organization was asking local residents to express their wishes in the design of this renewed neighbourhood environment.

NEHP had gone door-to-door inviting community residents to attend consultation and planning meetings. The gatherings were reasonably well attended, and the discussions were lively. On further reflection, however, it became evident that those present were not completely representative of neighbourhood demographics. Some at the meetings were local residents who were employed in social agencies. Others were members of a community foot patrol, a vocal and mobilized group who took a somewhat adversarial approach on many community issues. Some were present almost *ex officio*, such as the community police officer and the pastor of the local church. Not well represented in the meetings, however, were those less comfortable speaking in public, those who felt marginal to the process of planning and delivering neighbourhood programs, and those whose struggles with daily living did not often permit them to attend meetings. Noticeably absent were many residents who were Aboriginal.

It seemed from this experience that if the housing organization wished to hear from those for whom neighbourhood redesign was primarily intended, then it needed to engage in a different form of consultation. Particularly, if there were a unique cultural perspective to be gained from Aboriginal residents, the process of gathering such input must be adapted to Aboriginal cultural preferences. Preliminary discussions with Aboriginal board members of NEHP, and other Aboriginal acquaintances, suggested that this was a likely hypothesis.

The project, therefore, engaged two Aboriginal residents of William Whyte and an Aboriginal former resident as Indigenous researchers. One researcher had significant familiarity with social research, taught in an inner city program of the University, and had worked for many years with local Aboriginal social agencies. He had written on the subject of culturally-based community development (Morrissette, Morrissette, and Mackenzie, 1992) and had given considerable thought to issues of social and cultural development. The other two researchers had little background in social research. They were known to the first researcher through kinship and friendship ties, and through participation in community youth programs. In other aspects of their lives, however, they were typical of

most William Whyte residents.

The research was partly an exercise in participatory neighbourhood planning. However, it was also, in part, a formative ethnographic exploration. The organization was interested not just in the physical renewal of the community, but also in helping to build social capital, and in enabling residents to draw together to access needed resources for collective attention to social needs. An ethnography would be helpful in understanding culturally-based aspirations in the community, and in bringing to light any obstacles about which a mainstream organization may be unaware because of cultural distance.

Here, the term "ethnography," is used advisedly. It refers not just to the in-depth qualitative methods that were used in the study, but also, as Wolcott (1999), Fetterman, (1998), LeCompte and Schensul (1999), Creswell (1998), Shweder (1996) and others have insisted, to an approach in which the central research question is cultural description. As Shweder (1996) says "a true ethnography is about something called a culture."

Fetterman, (1998) provides two very broad definitions of culture, one that is ideational, and one that is materialist.

The classic materialistic interpretation of culture focuses on behavior. In this view, culture is the sum of the social group's observable patterns of behavior, customs, and way of life (Harris, 1968, p. 16). The most popular ideational definition of culture is the cognitive definition...according to the cognitive approach, culture comprises the ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that characterize a particular group of people... although neither definition is sufficient, each offers the ethnographer a starting point and a perspective from which to approach the group under study.

Similar definitions are found elsewhere (Creswell, 1998; Goodenough, 1994; Harris, 1988; Keesing, 1981; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). While the study was conceived with such definitions in mind, the concept of culture was left open for Indigenous researchers, and their informants, to define. One objective of the research was to explore what the term "culture" may mean to inner city Aboriginal respondents. Since the study wished to identify a cultural basis for community development, it seemed important to allow the significance of the concept to emerge from the informants themselves.

## **Epistemological Issues**

The design of this study, its content, analysis, and findings, and its use and dissemination, were influenced by paradigms that have been critical of traditional ethnographic methods of the past. Such criticisms

are grounded in epistemological, political, and ethical concerns, many of which were distilled in a collection of essays edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) entitled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Other critical approaches have emerged in circumstances of underdevelopment in the former colonies of the Western World, and in circumstances of oppression in industrialized countries (Harrison, 1997; D'Amico Samuels, 1997; Tandon, 1986). As a methodology, these approaches have come to be referred to as Participatory Action Research (Fals Borda, 1992; Hall 1986; Lather, 1986; Tandon, 1986; Rahman, 1993).

The essays in the collection by Clifford and Marcus, and its companion volume by Marcus and Fischer (1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, are widely seen as reflecting a turning point in the practice of ethnographic writing. Denzin (1996) referred to their impact as "a profound rupture" in the practice of ethnography. James, Hockey, and Dawson (1997) called the volume "a watershed in anthropological thought." Feminist anthropologists (Behar and Gordon, eds., 1995) have said that *Writing Culture* presented "a double crisis" in anthropology, one that underscored questions of epistemology and representation at a time when feminist researchers were grappling with issues of gender bias and domination in anthropological research.

## Epistemology

This study attempted to take into account some of the main criticisms raised by *Writing Culture*. These were outlined by Clifford in his introduction to the volume. In it he argued that ethnographic research was partial. By this he meant that ethnography was neither neutral nor complete. He argued that cultural writing was based on a series of "systematic—and contestable—exclusions" (Clifford, 1986:6).

Clifford's strategy for dealing with such systematic exclusions was to become "rigorous" and "serious" about partiality. He argued that ethnography should become self-reflexive.

"Who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical constraints?" Clifford asks (1986:13).

The present study attempted to take these critiques of ethnography seriously and to incorporate some of these strategies into its methods.

## Participatory Action Research

While Clifford and Marcus subtitled their volume *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, some have argued that the authors have focused more on poetics than politics (D'Amico Samuels, 1997; Harrison,

1997; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Mascia-Lees, 1989). In discussing reflexivity, D'Amico Samuels writes

it will take more than thinking about thinking to make subject and object fuse...the sleight of hand here is that the ethnographer...alters the way he/she chooses to present information as if actual relations within the field work experience are actually altered. (1997:76)

As Rajesh Tandon (1986) argues

research in social settings has always been political. It either maintains, explains, or justifies the *status quo* or questions it....

Issues surrounding the relations of production of ethnographic knowledge involve far more than epistemology. Social research is often conducted in situations of material deprivation, racial discrimination, gender oppression, and colonial domination. In such situations ethnography that simply builds theory, or merely adds to cultural knowledge, may be found wanting. Human needs are far too immediate, and human relations too inequitable, to allow for casual investigation without engagement in change. Research is too valuable a commodity in terms of the time and labour of community participants, and in terms of its power in securing resources, to serve mere speculation. Many would argue that the only appropriate use of the scarce resources of research is to advance an agenda for concrete social change. (D'Amico Samuels, 1997; Harrison, 1997; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Paine, 1991; Rahman; 1993).

If research, then, is simply one step in a process leading to tangible change, then a further ethical question must be raised. Whose prerogative will it be to define community betterment?

While community participation and control have important ethical and political dimensions for research, they are also highly significant in terms of epistemology. Colorado (1988) points out that authentic Indigenous knowledge in Aboriginal communities is accessible only when particular conditions are achieved. Traditional people are able to disclose traditional knowledge only when the correct attitude, balance, and holistic conditions are created. Relationship, place, and time are critically important. Elders are not permitted to share information unless properly approached. Those who do not know the protocols cannot acquire desired information. Tuccaro (quoted in Colorado, 1988) emphasizes the importance of prayer, reciprocal feelings of trust, the need to share a joke, and to choose the right time and place before intimate or traditional knowledge can be shared. If researchers cannot create a relationship of mutuality, respect, and shared purpose with their subjects,

then it is unlikely that they can acquire authentic information. In this study, then it was considered highly important for Aboriginal cultural concerns be investigated by Aboriginal persons themselves, and for them to determine appropriate methods.

This report will attempt to be self-reflexive and multivocal. It will give voice to Indigenous researchers who have exercised a determining role in the study's purpose, design, analysis, and interpretation. These researchers will continue to exercise control over the use and dissemination of its results. The subject of the research was the cultural underpinnings of local neighbourhood aspirations. It was important, therefore, for Aboriginal community researchers to conduct this study in a manner that was culturally grounded and acceptable to others in the community. The study was one component of a larger agenda for community and social change.

## **Description of the Research Process**

The research in the William Whyte community was conducted by a research team of four individuals. Two researchers were current residents of William Whyte. Jason Bousquet and Samantha Bruyere had grown up in the locality and were well acquainted with many of the residents. A third researcher, Larry Morrisette, had also grown up in the locality, but moved away when his son was threatened with violence. Larry continued to work in William Whyte in Aboriginal social agencies, and had done so for over twenty years. The fourth researcher, Lawrence Deane, was a doctoral student from the University of Manitoba. Lawrie was also a member of the Board of Directors of the North End Housing Project, and served as its Treasurer.

## **Research Method**

The researchers visited nine families and two individuals over the course of the study. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for information gathering, but the researchers were also free to probe and explore issues that local residents felt were relevant (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). Notes were taken of all interviews. The data were then debriefed verbally among all four researchers, and the debriefing sessions were tape recorded. Since three of the researchers were community members, the debriefing sessions served both as reporting sessions, and as occasions for Indigenous interpretation and analysis of the data. Valuable discussion and synergy developed around perspectives and ideas during the debriefing sessions. On two occasions other community members participated in the debriefings and contributed to the analysis.

One debriefing session was a report to the Outreach Committee of the Board of Directors of North End Housing Project. The session began with a structured presentation of the findings of the study, and was followed by questions from board members, and an in-depth discussion of the material.

### **Culturally-Based Design**

The importance of involvement by local residents in the design and conduct of the study was evident right from the beginning. Some items in the interview schedule were contributed by the non-Aboriginal researcher, and despite the fact that the wording was adapted by community researchers to be more understandable to residents, respondents consistently found these items difficult to answer. The typical response was "no answer."

Examples were the following:

NEHP is planning to fix up some buildings and vacant lots on the street. If you had some input, what kind of cultural uses would you like to see (for the structures)?

"no answer"

If space were available, how could you see it being used for cultural activities?

"no answer"

As Jason put it

It's like they know what it is, but they don't know what it is.

On the other hand the neighbourhood researchers contributed items to the schedule which would likely not have occurred to the non Aboriginal researcher. These items appeared to have immediate relevance to community members, and elicited lengthy responses. Examples were the following:

Do you have a spirit name?

How important is your culture to you?

What type of traditional ceremonies have you been to?

Later Larry commented

They know right away what you're asking.

### **Appropriate Process**

One of the first changes the researchers made to the approach of the study was to urge that tobacco be shared with each of the families interviewed. The community researchers also proposed that we distribute pencils and candy to the children, or simply give them a loonie (\$1 coin) when the family was visited. The researchers felt this was necessary to be respectful of the time respondents were giving to the pro-

cess, and the personal knowledge and insight they were being asked to share.

As Larry expressed it

One of things we used within the survey was we gave tobacco away...

they know what tobacco means. It's a gift. It's a way of respecting what you have to say to me. If you said something to me that I believe, and it will help me with my life, I'll give you that tobacco, and you take it and you understand. It's like a medium...then all the ideas that everybody has about other things, they become more natural.

Samantha's comments were similar.

What they really like is that we're giving out tobacco. They really, really, really like that, eh, Jay? (Jason). It's like you know we offer it and it's like "come in," you know, and giving us a drink, (and) being comical with us.

The issue of sharing tobacco, and the interpretation of its significance, were the first instance of the importance of reciprocity in the study. This value was to be emphasized repeatedly throughout the research. Had community members not been involved in the design of the study, this important social value might have been overlooked. Since most urban Aboriginals are bicultural, they might have accepted a non-Aboriginal approach to asking for social data, but the impact on the quality of information can only be imagined.

## Themes

When the researchers presented their findings to the Outreach Committee of the Board of North End Housing Project they chose to highlight two main themes. The first was that Aboriginal community members felt a "distance" or a "disconnection" from the housing program. Secondly, the community indicated that they wanted space for recreation programs for young people, and some means through which Aboriginal young people could learn their language, retain their traditions, and maintain a greater closeness to parents and Elders. There was a concern that young people were leaving the community to find recreation and friends elsewhere.

## Disconnection

In presenting the first theme, Larry stated the following

All the people we spoke with (including some [that Jay spoke to] on his own) there's this feeling among the people of the area—the Aboriginal people, Native people, whatever you

want to call—us. There's a real distance between this program and the possibility of ever being a part of it.

It's no reflection on the work you've done. It's no reflection on the work you're attempting to do. (But) there's a feeling that—with any program—there's this distance that always evolves and creeps up. We've heard that among some of the old people and the other residents.

Jason put the concern another way.

Like Larry was saying, Aboriginal people in the community they don't feel like they can be connected to the idea of the program

They feel like it's far-fetched, and it's like not possible for them to achieve the goal of actually owning their own house or having their own property.

On another occasion Larry put the issue more surprisingly

What we've heard so far is that people don't feel connected. They're telling White people they feel connected. But they're not telling the truth. They don't feel they can go over here and then apply for housing. Even if they know that it's there, they don't feel they could apply for it.

The theme came up repeatedly in various debriefing sessions throughout the study, and it was reflected in the comments of a number of informants.

Some of the staff found this difficult to accept. They felt the need to defend the inclusiveness of the program. They produced data to show that 17 of the 25 houses in the project had been rented to Aboriginal families, and five out of twelve Board members were Aboriginal. The program, they argued, was reaching Aboriginal families.

How, then, were the researchers to explain the findings? Perhaps they had imposed their own biases on what they heard. But quotations from key informants were numerous and quite clear in their intent. It appeared that some Aboriginal residents felt they could take part in the program, but many felt that they could not.

Samantha says

To everybody we go and see they notice that there's White people getting the houses.

Jason: (That older man) he thought it was just for the White folks. Yeah, that's what he said. He believes it. Native people couldn't be involved in something like that, eh? Like he was kind of shocked when I told him his daughter can own a place like this.

Some board members were quite concerned by these reports. One

asked the researchers to help her understand the problem. She said

It disturbs me that the Aboriginal community finds a program like this—ownership of housing—unobtainable.

I've heard about a culture of poverty, where even if you had an opportunity to better your position in the world, it's hard to make a mental switch to break out.

I guess my question is – this whole program is tailored for poor people who wouldn't be able to go to the bank and have collateral to make a down payment to get a mortgage to own house. If the Aboriginal community is entrenched in a culture of poverty—that makes even that unattainable—then I wonder what we can do.

Larry's response was not to engage in theoretical questions about the validity of the culture of poverty concept, but instead to propose concrete steps to address the situation.

I guess - from what I've heard - (what we should do is) do a few tests. Involve a few Aboriginal people. And walk them through the process.

This phenomenon of the disconnection and withdrawal from material opportunities has been documented elsewhere in studies of Aboriginal communities near Winnipeg. Georg Lithman (1983; 1984) studied the Sagkeen Reserve which is one of the largest and closest reserves to the city.

Lithman described the repeated collapse of development opportunities at Sagkeen. He indicated that residents of the reserve repeatedly withdrew from opportunities for material advancement such as education, employment, or community economic development. He characterized the withdrawal from these opportunities as an inter-ethnic interaction. He used this term to emphasize his view that culture played little part in the interactions.

Lithman argued that withdrawal behavior follows fairly predictable patterns and he developed a six-part typology to describe them. The interactions varied according to the extent to which Aboriginal people felt they could control the outcome. Withdrawal from economic opportunities, Lithman believed, was due to stereotyped beliefs on the part of White people about Aboriginals and their behavior. Aboriginals withdrew to avoid "the indignities of most interactions with White men" (1983:151). Lithman argued that this pattern explained the preference of Aboriginal people to live in poverty on a reserve rather than obtaining "the seemingly infinite advantages connected with joining the mainstream society" (1984:58). It is this view that gives the book its title, *The Community Apart* (1984).

Lithman went to some length to argue that "Indian culture" was not a relevant factor in explaining these patterns. The pattern that he describes is similar to that observed in William Whyte. Aboriginal people withdrew from economic opportunities. These included chances to obtain renovated housing and to qualify for home ownership, offers of employment, and free food at a food bank. Unlike Lithman's analysis, however, this research suggests that these interactions had a very significant cultural element. The interactions were to avoid indignity, certainly, and by coincidence the context for this was often inter-ethnic, but the indignity did not necessarily involve avoiding racial stereotypes. Often participants withdrew to avoid interactions based on values that were incompatible with, or perhaps even offensive to, their own value orientations. In some cases the interactions were intra-ethnic rather than inter-ethnic. Withdrawal in these situations was from interactions with other Aboriginals, most of whom were themselves residents of William Whyte. The pattern of withdrawal indicates that social services, employment opportunities, training programs, and housing initiatives may need to be offered through an alternate value system from mainstream models, if they are to be embraced by a broad spectrum of Aboriginal people. In fact the entire context of service provision may need to be altered through the development of culturally-based community institutions.

The clearest indication of the cultural element in the phenomenon of withdrawal appeared in the solutions proposed by Larry, Jason, and Samantha to the problem of disaffection. They suggested that NEHP hold a giveaway.

As an organization—as the North End Housing Project—there are ways of bridging gaps, or closing those gaps, between Indian people and the organization itself. And one idea we talked about was like the give away. The Board maybe could get some funds...(and) buy some school supplies, and have a giveaway on the street.

What it does is, within the Aboriginal community, there's always been a standard. You go to a pow-wow – you see a giveaway. You go to somebody's birthday – you see a giveaway. So you're creating a situation where you're developing a line of respect with people in the community and involving them.

Larry is arguing not only that the ceremony of a giveaway is commonly practiced and understood by the community, but that the force of its ethic is also keenly felt among Aboriginal residents. The value system of reciprocity, according to Larry, is still compelling, even among Aboriginals who have had long exposure to mainstream society.

Because at one point or another they need to return that gift. That gift you give isn't charity. It's an extension of who you are as an organization, to people who understand that kind of communication. And it's been successful. We've done that (before).

The concept is new to non-Aboriginal board members, and they have a number of questions about how it should be done.

Lorraine: How do you invite people?

Larry: You just let people know by talking to them...that it's to help the community out a little bit with school. It's in the approach, eh? You know it's not charity. You're demonstrating that from the work you've done as a Board...the houses you've given to other people, that you're prepared now to give something back to the community. You know what I mean? It's like almost bordering on being proud of what you've done, and demonstrating your accomplishments to the community. So it's not like a charity thing, like people don't see it that way. Indian people in particular don't see it that way. They just see it as, well these guys are giving back.

And that's a ceremonial expression of the reality that people had to live, they had to give-and-take in order to survive.

Moore (1993) documented extensive contemporary practice of give-aways and reciprocity among the Plains Indians of Oklahoma and neighbouring states. Weibel-Orlando (1991:281) indicated that such a system "characterizes the distribution of resources among Indians to this day" in Los Angeles.

According to Moore (1993:249-50), reciprocity is celebrated publicly at Pow-Wows and giveaway ceremonies in small towns and urban centres across the plains. His study shows that 541 such events occurred in the State of Oklahoma over a two-year period (1978-80). He argued that such public events were symbolic expression of an underlying material reality.

If one explores behaviour in modern Plains Indian communities on a day-to-day basis through the year, as an ethnographer, it is clear that there is a real material system for distributing the means of subsistence which underlies and parallels the symbolic system exhibited at the simple giveaway.

The most usual requests made by needy families which I have observed over the past twenty years are as follows: (1) food, (2) gas money for travel, (3) fuel for the home, (4) telephone calls, and (5) air fare.

Moore (1993:268) indicates that patterns vary with tribal traditions,

but there is a basic unity to all such practice.

the most significant and most fundamental aspect of the giveaway and pow-wow complex is the redistributive function. It is fundamental because it keeps people alive, providing them with the means of subsistence—food, money, heat, medical care.

This phenomenon of equalizing exchange appears subtle to non-Aboriginals, but can be very compelling for Aboriginal participants. The community researchers argued that much of the indignity that Aboriginal people wish to avoid in their interactions with social services pertained not so much to the interethnic nature of the interaction, but to the terms on which the services were provided. Charity and handouts were viewed as demeaning because they offered no way for recipients to reciprocate the giving. Because a pattern of mutual expectation of giving and receiving had not been established, there was a corresponding absence of trust. Interactions where trust was not established were avoided. Some Aboriginal people in William Whyte endured material hardship rather than receiving assistance that did not occur in the context of trust and reciprocity.

Samantha: Yesterday I was at the Family Resource Center and the (food bank) delivery was just coming in, and there was not one Native person going there to get the food. It was all White people.

Lawrie: So why is that?

Samantha: I don't know why that is.

Lawrie: Why do you think? People are not coming out for something that could obviously benefit them? Would you, yourself, go for food?

Samantha: No

Larry: No.

Jason: No. I don't mean to insult it or anything, but I wouldn't.

Samantha: I would call Larry at home 'I have a problem. Come on, you can help me out' I wouldn't go to no food bank.

Jason: I guess that's about as close to the truth as you can get. Native people are like that, they're really stubborn. Sure they're poor and oppressed, but they have some pride.

Larry: It's a trust thing. You know if I came up to you and asked to borrow—a pack of smokes—and you told me 'no' it would break the trust. Because it takes a lot to even ask somebody for help. It does, eh? Like when you're going through a hard time. (To) ask for diapers. (To) ask for money for milk. And if you like brush me off, and say 'go to a food bank' It

breaks the trust.

One individual who had experience with Aboriginal street gangs articulated the issue this way:

Joe: That's where gangs come in. You have a hard time, bang, they're there to help you. That's what they do. Bang, they help you with what you need. That's why the gang thing is so big now. They know what you need.

That's why people go to gangs. They take care of you – they do. They don't let you go without, you know what I mean.

The element of mutual obligation, however, is also extremely powerful.

They know what you need. (But later on they say) "Well come on, man. We helped you out ...

I just got offered \$2000 last week to go break someone's legs.

Jason: (laughs ironically) There's work in the community, but it's not the work we want to do. Do you know what I'm saying?

Joe: See I've been raising my kids for the last six years, eh?... I went to work and all that other stuff, and all my friends started coming back around in the summertime, and they said let's (hang out. I said "I have to go to work").

(they said) I'll pay your wage. Two people gave me minimum wage just to hang out.

The next thing that happened they said - Hey can you give me \$40?

Jason: Like, we got friends out there. They make money and stuff. Me and Joe, like seriously, if we were in a rough position, we're more than sure, we could say to them "I need some cash. I'm in a real spot, eh?" And it wouldn't be borrowing. It would just be giving.

Larry: See, White people don't do that.

Jason: Go for it!

Larry: They don't recognize when someone's going through a hard time, because you won't say you're going through a hard time. People will know. I need this, I'm out of smokes. People know. They just know. It's not a hard stretch.

But we need to find a way to be able to do that without the crime attached.

Like Joe talked about. There's got to be a way to get people sort of looking after each other. Some way to strengthen everybody. When somebody is going through hard time, they don't feel like their begging. I mean, that's the biggie, eh?

It is difficult for non-Aboriginal people involved in such situations to grasp the strength of this value orientation. Just as the Board members could not understand why a low income person would not avail themselves of the opportunity to own a home, the manager of the renovation workers' employment program could not understand why, of his 19 workers who had been trained through the program, none would accept a role as supervisor. The role came with a substantial increase in wages, and a number of workers had the skills to function in the capacity.

According to Larry, however, accepting the role of supervisor would break a strong ethic of relative equality among the workers. They saw themselves as part of a family-like group. The manager also had difficulty understanding why the workers—who were frequently in financial difficulty—were prepared to lend or give away part of their wages to relatives and fellow workers who were in need.

Taking the supervisory job might have been functional for participants from a financial perspective, but it would not have been workable in relationship terms within the group. Lithman (1984:81-82) documents a similar reluctance at Pine Falls for Aboriginals to become supervisors in a paper mill. The explanations they gave to Lithman were that "All the White guys started to raise all kinds of troubles...so I resigned" (p.82). But in NEHP the problem is occurring intra-ethnically, among a workgroup that is all Aboriginal. In this situation the workers are unwilling to be boss over their peers.

Larry suggests that the project adopt a different concept of supervision. He suggests that leadership be given to different individuals, at different times, to perform particular tasks. One might take the lead in drywall taping. Another may head up the crew for roofing. Yet another may take leadership in finish carpentry. Larry believes the group would acknowledge the leadership ability of individuals for specific tasks, but would not appreciate a peer taking on a structural position as boss. This would be viewed as "bragging." Certainly none of those who were offered the role was prepared to take it, and the lure of money was insufficient to override relational values.

The implications of what is being discussed are very significant for organizations wishing to be of assistance to urban Aboriginals. In contrast to Lithman's contention that most Aboriginals in southern Canada are fully acculturated, this research suggests that many urban Aboriginal people have value orientations that differ significantly from the mainstream, and that these norms exert significant influence on individual action and behavior. The testimony is certainly widespread in the literature that there is a persistent Aboriginal cultural consciousness (Battiste, 2000; Canada, 1996; Duran and Duran, 2000; Hart 2002; Henderson, 2000;

Moore, 1993).

This discussion does not argue that traditional cultural orientations are necessarily fully intact, coherent, or experienced equally among all urban Aboriginal people. Just as each individual has their own idiolect, or personal speech pattern in a commonly shared language, so each individual has their own idiomatic expression of a commonly shared culture (Goodenough, 1994:266). Colonization and assimilation, of course, have also had devastating impacts. Leroy Little Bear (2000:84) describes Aboriginal consciousness this way.

Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview – but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Their consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand. Many collective views of the world competed for control of their behavior, and since none was dominant modern Aboriginal people had to make guesses or choices about everything. Aboriginal consciousness became a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing desires and values.

It is this colonized consciousness that is so troubling to urban Aboriginal people, and that necessitates the arduous journey toward decolonization and learning one's identity. As Hart says (2002:32, 34)

Our people must relearn what it means to be ourselves, whether Cree, Anishinaabe, Dakota, Mi'kmaq, Haida, Inuit or any of the other peoples.

We have to recapture our people's language, history and understanding of the world, take those teachings which will support us in the attempt to overcome oppression and reach *mino-pimatisiwin*—the good life. On a spiritual level, we must learn and understand the values and beliefs of our people and freely decide those which we will internalize.

This is not an opposition ideology, as discussed by Lithman, designed to extract advantages from exploiters, but rather it is a perplexing personal journey to reconcile conflicting internal intuitive orientations and recovered traditions, to arrive at an authentic personal identity.

It is this conclusion that is reflected in the second theme of this research.

## Community Children's Cultural Development

Community members told researchers they had a vision for cultural learning activities for their children.

Jason: There's lots of people out there willing to spend time with these kids. We went to one house—Ruby—she was doing beadwork, making medicine bags. She was more than willing to help along those lines. She has a spirit name, but she wouldn't tell us.

And they are really leaning towards Native studies, Native language, cultural teachings. Like not going to a ceremony and being part of it, but learning the ideas behind it. The thought. Because they believe kids are suffering cultural identity loss. They want to speak their own language.

Samantha: Yeah, everybody says that.

Jason: Everybody wants to be involved, but there's nothing out there for them to get involved with. And everything's culturally based that they want. Except hockey and soccer.

Most everybody focuses on a place where everybody could get together.

Everyone's going to say the same thing, I'm more than sure. Like they want Elders. They believe that if these kids had a place to go, and there were Elders around steady, just by the Elders being there, they would learn respect, for self for everything.

The implications of this enduring cultural of orientation for urban Aboriginal people is far-reaching for social and economic development initiatives in inner city depressed areas. It suggests that it is not sufficient simply to make available economic or material opportunities, and expect people to utilize them. If these are premised on incompatible value systems, they may have only limited relevance for the people they are intended to benefit. Nor is it sufficient that agencies are Aboriginal-controlled. While this may address the inter-ethnic aspect of the interaction, it may not resolve problems of incompatible values. Many Aboriginal agencies borrow their models of service from non-Aboriginal programs, and find their services have only limited relevance (Hart, 2002; Duran and Duran, 2000).

Hart (2002:35) says

The way out of this conundrum lies in applying the concept of praxis to our helping services.... Aboriginal practitioners can use Aboriginal theories and approaches in their helping practices. In turn, these theories and approaches should be based upon the peoples' worldviews, beliefs and values.

This means that the hard work of relearning what it means to be Cree or Anishinaabe or Haida or Inuit also applies to organizations. They must undertake a process of discovery to develop an Aboriginal form of helping. In fact, the task may be broader than simple service delivery. Aboriginal social development may require building culturally based institutions in the urban neighbourhood setting.

As Larry says (albeit rather harshly)

(NEHP and other neighbourhood groups) are not Aboriginal programs, I agree. But I also agree that that shouldn't be an excuse not to look out for Indian people, and expand on some of the local ideas at the community level. Because everything has become so compartmentalized. Like, if you're Aboriginal, you go to the Aboriginal Centre. If you're Aboriginal you go here. And it's a thing that really tears apart community. So if a Board, or grouping of people, really seriously considers working with Indian people, it has to be seen as a partnership, but a partnership that could be entered at any level.

You go to (many Aboriginal organizations) they're pumping out a bunch of noise—it's almost like a vacuum—we'll put you through a few courses and you're expected to be White at the end. That doesn't work. We've got issues of racism, discrimination, poverty, all those things. Hurdles we have to somehow deal with—independently of training programs...at the community level, that's where you live and breathe. You go home and you're stuck there. Or you're part of the whole scene and somehow, some way, sort of join partnerships.

Hart agrees that what is needed is the development of culturally-based institutions within urban neighbourhoods (2002:33)

Social institutions such as justice, education, health, recreation and spiritual systems, must be developed and based upon the languages, values and beliefs of the people.

Morrisette, Morrisette, and McKenzie (1992) have developed a paradigm for a range of culturally based institutions that might be put in place in urban neighbourhoods (figure 1). In this model the colonization process is considered to have disrupted Indigenous Aboriginal institutions and replaced them with alien and culturally inappropriate structures. Morrisette calls for the replacement of these colonial institutions with culturally-recovered Aboriginal patterns.

You know people in the community can be made into Elders if they have Elders around them who transfer over that knowl-

edge and they become the teachers. Then it is built into the community.

Some such institutions have been established within William Whyte. Nijimahkwa Elementary School and Children of the Earth High School are examples. Others have been attempted, but have struggled with the process of developing culturally based models. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre and Bear Clan Patrol are examples of this. The vision is to establish culturally-based healing, education, employment, safety, community decision-making, spirituality in the local neighborhood. The value systems on which the alternative institutions are based extend much beyond those of reciprocity and trust. Little Bear (2000:79) and Gaywish (cited in Hart, 2002) and The Four Winds Development Project (1988) develop extensive lists of Aboriginal values that should inform community building.

Ponting (1986) argues that institution-building has proceeded in some communities to the point where they have achieved "institutional completeness." In Ponting's view this is the case at the Khanewake Mohawk community of Montreal. He refers to Khanewake as "a large scale success story in community development" (1986:151).

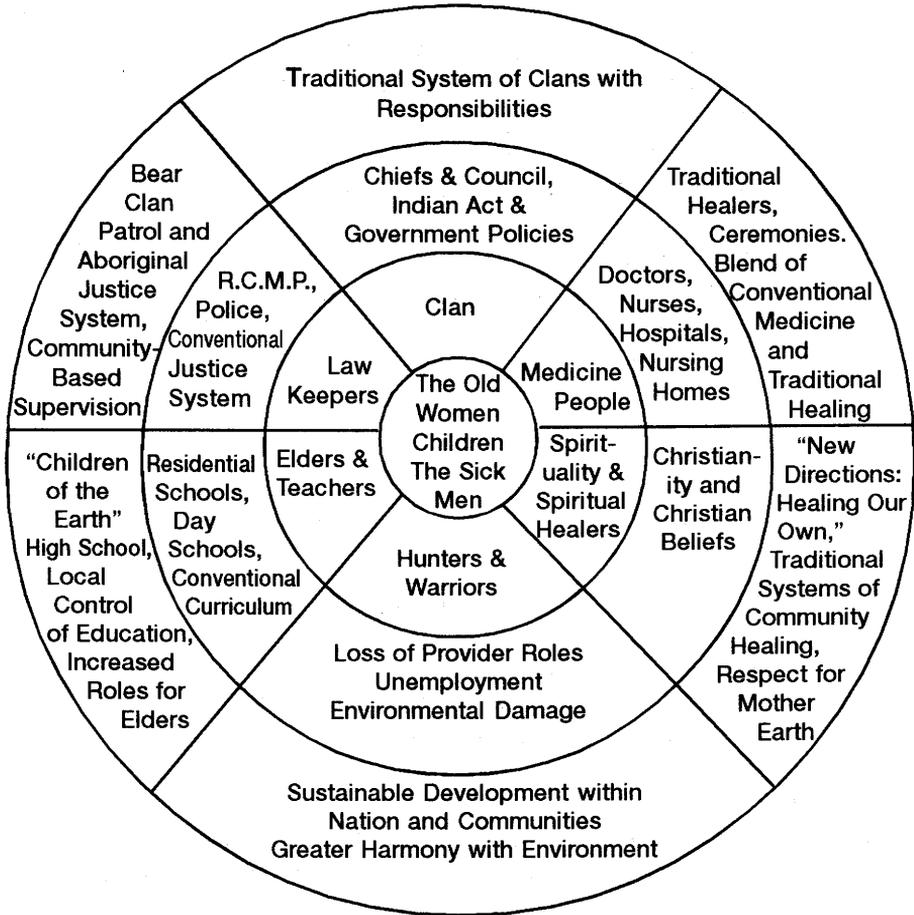
The final shape of institution building in William Whyte cannot be determined in advance. It must be an outcome of community discussion. The process would be one of community organizing that respects cultural values and ways of interacting as they exist in the community.

As this research has shown, Aboriginal culture still exerts a powerful influence on inner city Aboriginal residents. Years of colonization, impoverishment, and immersion in the mainstream life have not erased its relevance. Aboriginal culture may be a collage of jigsaw puzzle fragments, it may be an amalgam of traditional values, mainstream adaptations, and inner city survival skills, but urban Aboriginal culture is nevertheless recognizable to those who share it, and powerful in its normative influence. There is a strong quest on the part of inner city Aboriginal people for cultural coherence, personal identity, and community completeness. If NEHP's goal is to restore not just the physical infrastructure of the community, but its social and cultural bonds and linkages, then the organization must pay attention to the cultural orientation of the largest ethnocultural group within its boundaries. The work of community building must belong to the people, and it must build on their own understanding of what it means to be both urban and Aboriginal.

Larry: I think what you need in that area is community workers. People who just talk and share ideas. (11b)

The people we interviewed, they're coming from a certain perspective, meaning that when they're talking about 'fam-

**Figure 2**  
**Circles of Development: Traditional Systems, Colonization and Decolonization**



1. During the pre-contact and peaceful co-existence periods Aboriginal societies were based on a family/clan system with respective roles and responsibilities.
2. As a result of internal colonialism traditional Aboriginal systems and roles were destroyed and replaced with institutions from the dominant society.
3. Decolonization involves, in part, the replacement of conventional systems with systems which re-integrate aspects of traditional systems destroyed during colonization.
4. Concepts illustrated in this model reflect the collective contributions of Elders and many other Aboriginal people. Special acknowledgement includes Robert Daniels, David Blacksmith, Marilyn Fontaine, Linda Clarkson, Wilfred Buck and Judy Williamson.

Source: Morrissette, et. al. 1992

ily,' they're not talking just about 'nuclear' family, or 'locational' family. I think what they are trying to throw out to us — what I believe — my own assumption — it's a community effort.

What I mean by 'family' — there's a concept of community. And if you take that further, there's also a concept of being Aboriginal, and being connected to other Aboriginal people. And I think that becomes the basis of the bottom line. That's the potential to organize, or to bring people together around. Regardless of issues on every side, the potential is there. There'd be stuff right on your street that you could tap into and create situations. All of it provides some kind of focusing point - focal point. Some way, somehow to create a connection to the culture.

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