“Well-Healthy Relationships”: Using Indigenous Approaches to Support Relationship Formation for Persons with Disabilities

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There is limited knowledge about the experiences of intimate relationship formation for those with disabilities, particularly amongst Indigenous populations in urban areas. In order to address this research gap, our project uses an Indigenous approach—talking circles facilitated by a Knowledge Keeper—to engage local community members in discussions about their challenges and journeys of relationship formation, and considerations of community-level efforts at improving socialization and safe meeting spaces for disabled Indigenous persons. Through a central aim of “story-catching” through semi-structured biographical narratives in talking circles, we demonstrate how Indigenous methods can be appropriately and effectively employed to generate rich qualitative data. Our research also underscores how qualitative Indigenous approaches work to foster an ethical space (Ermine, 2007) between researchers, participants, and their communities, and how this in turn encourages individual and community empowerment.

Research Question and Objectives. Given this lack of knowledge—and awareness of challenges faced by Indigenous persons with disabilities—as our backdrop, our research asks the following central question: What supports and challenges do Indigenous persons in Saskatoon who self-identify as having a disability have as they search for and form intimate relationships? Concretely, our research objectives are as follows: 1) Conduct a community needs assessment, facilitated by our two community partners, through semi-structured discussions with disabled Indigenous persons in talking circles moderated by a Knowledge Keeper, of existing resources and challenges for those with disabilities seeking intimate relationships. 2) Co-create, with participants, resources to assist in relationship formation. 3) Mobilize knowledge by sharing our findings through academic channels, but most importantly with Indigenous community organizations and populations.

Methodology and Methods. Our Indigenous and PAR approach to research, wherein community and empowerment are central, informed our decision to gather data through a series of small talking circles facilitated by the Knowledge Keeper. Talking circles are similar to focus groups, yet they have a particular emphasis on problem-solving and are intended to provide an opportunity for full emotional openness and disclosure.

Talking circles followed an interpretive approach to qualitative data collection and were organized around two complementary Indigenous approaches: “story-catching” and “yarning.” Story-catching, as a broad approach to working with knowledge shared by participants, sees the researchers’ role as that of facilitator and illuminator of participants’ life stories. In keeping with the expectation that a Knowledge Keeper will lend some—but not too much—structure to talking circles, story-catching asks researchers to initiate and validate story-telling from participants, but to leave space for participants to work with (i.e., reflect upon and build on) their stories in collective discussions such as talking circles. Yarning, more specifically, involves efforts by researchers to moderate discussions such as talking circles by making and encouraging exploration of links between what participants share. The metaphor, here, is the spinning of a thread (see Bessarab, 2012). Story-catching and yarning, taken together, are thus inductive, and work forward from participants’ narratives and ideas to generate
broader understandings about social phenomena. At the data analysis stage, researchers’ notes from the talking circles were analyzed through a process of thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). 

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing; interpretive approaches; community-focused research; relationships; disabilities.

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**References**

