**Authors:** Julian Robbins, PhD, (Research Affiliate Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre -IPHRC)

 robbins.julian@gmail.com

Warren Linds, PhD (Concordia, IPHRC)

Benjamin Ironstand (Student, First Nations University)

Erin Goodpipe (Student, First Nations University, Researcher, IPHRC),

**Abstract**

Life in the city for any youth can be challenging without a proper support network. For Indigenous youth in particular, the unique burden of intergenerational trauma due to the residual effects of colonialism (e.g. residential schools, historical outlawing of traditional practices, etc.) can contribute to both unhealthy behaviours and a continuation of ‘culturally unsafe’ spaces. As a response to these challenges, this article examines the positive effects that a grassroots film creation and production program in a major urban centre in Saskatchewan, Canada had on participating Indigenous youth. Community based researchers from the Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre observed how a culturally safe space created the conditions to enable youth to become creative through the arts in an environment supported by an intergenerational network of Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) kinship relationships called wâhkôtowin. The article also argues that the effectiveness of culturally safe spaces can benefit from recognizing the operation of ethnogenetic processes in contemporary environments.

**Keywords**

Youth, wellness, arts, Indigenous Knowledge, cultural safety, ethnogenesis

**GENERATING AND SUSTAINING POSITIVE SPACES:**

**REFLECTIONS ON AN INDIGENOUS YOUTH URBAN ARTS PROGRAM**

**Introduction**

A culturally safe delivery system could strengthen the capacity of communities to resist the stressors and build resilience to those forces that push them from risk to crisis (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009, p. 7).

Life in the city can sometimes be difficult for Indigenous youth. Negative influences and temptations can seem overwhelming, especially, but not exclusively, for those who may not have positive supports in their everyday lives. In order to develop a culturally safe space to work in together, elements of respect, trust and sharing need to be present. Family environments, healthy intergenerational relationships and the transmission of Indigenous value systems are important in the creation and maintenance of such positive spaces for Indigenous youth in urban settings.

In a research review focusing on the health status of Canadian Indigenous youth, Ning and Wilson (2012) found that, compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous youth are disproportionately burdened by health disparities. This has resulted in more suicides, addictions, diabetes and sexually transmitted infections which are accentuated by social inequalities, such as racism, poor educational outcomes, low-employment, and poverty (2012).

*Acting Out! But in a Good Way* is part of a decade long health research program of the Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre (IPHRC) that is exploring the role of the arts in creating wellbeing among Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan. As one part of this larger program, we engaged in urban participatory research from September to December, 2015 through partnering with All Nations Healin’ Through the Arts (ANHTA) in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. The program supported the development of film and film production skills with urban Indigenous youth, both behind and in front of the camera.

In the program, youth were exposed to creative and technical elements required in the film making process. Youth were:

* involved in creating scripts for both short film clips and longer works;
* portraying characters on film which often examined identity and overarching issues within the Indigenous community; and
* learning some technical aspects related to film making such as operating cameras and digital editing.

While the IPHRC’s ‘official’ involvement with the program was in one sense short in terms of time, it is important to recognize that, at the same time, a web of kinship relationships or interrelatedness called wâhkôtowin in Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) (Reder, 2007, p. ii) among all researchers, participating youth, program facilitators and others was not. Many of the relationships between people, either directly or through kinship, extended back several years. We will explore these dynamics through looking at ethnogenesis as a way a community maintains and develops identity and its link to the development of culturally safe spaces.

This article outlines why cultural safety is important for the health and wellbeing of Indigenous youth. It discusses how current concepts of cultural safety enhanced by an understanding of ethnogenesis can help us create, identify or clarify instances effective cultural safe spaces within Indigenous communities. It then applies these two concepts to observations about how the arts and wâhkôtowin (supporting ethnogenetic process) combined in the urban film program to transform the gathering space into one of cultural safety and transformative learning. In doing so we hope to provide more insight into the challenge “[to] extend the discussion of cultural safety to wider issues of social well­being, including the failings of the educational system, drug and alcohol abuse, family dysfunction, and violence” (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009, p. 7).

**Methods**

Through interdisciplinary and community collaboration, this study was completed

using a combination of Western and Indigenous methodologies. Drawing on the work of Robbins (2014) for a conceptual framework that considers the relationship between ethnogenesis and the generation and/or sustainability of culturally safe spaces, the data collection process was rooted in Indigenous methods that emphasize reciprocity and relational accountability (Absolon-King and King, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). Building and maintaining relationships was central to our research activities and our goal of creating ethical space (Ermine et al, 2005). Talking circles/focus groups and one on one interviews were conducted only after an extended period of researchers attending the urban youth program and participating in activities with youth by taking turns in the film production process. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. The qualitative data was analyzed with the aid of the software NVivo10, using constant comparison procedures (Creswell, 2007)

**Ethnogenesis and wâhkôtowin**

In addition to engagement with participation in the arts, we observed how wâhkôtowin played a significant role in holding together a culturally safe space for urban Indigenous youth. In this study, wâhkôtowin operated as an ethnogenetic process which strengthened the culturally safe space.

Ethnogenetic theory was first popularized by Russian scholar Lev Gumilev. Gumilev examined the presence of ethnic groups and interactions and conflicts between different ethnic groups in historical, psychological, philosophical and geographical contexts (Gumilev, 1979). He arrived at a central concept in ethnogenesis called *passionality,* defined as a type of energetic driving force that results in the formation of a particular ethnic group and their activities (Epstein, 2006, p.194). Thus, since ethnogenesis refers to the ways in which a community maintains its identity, meaning and relevance while external factors and environments change, it can identification of culturally safe spaces when one becomes aware of just how this process is occurring.

In Indigenous South America, there are overwhelming indications that a new way of thinking about Indigenous communities is beginning to crystallize around ideas of ethnogenesis (Swartz & Salomon, 1999; Hill, 1994; Whitten, 1976; Ogburn, 2008). The existence of ethnogenetic process has not been used as much to describe communities within Indigenous North America. In one of the few examples found in the literature, Gregory E. Smoak (2006)uses ethnogenesis to discuss how the pan-tribal introduction of the Ghost Dance ceremony by Nevada Paiute Prophet Wovoka contributed to the strengthening of a shared Native American identity .Smoak notes that it was deep cultural practice, including the reinforcement of kinship and Native American spirituality, which provided the means to make sense of the new challenges faced upon the arrival of Euro-centric peoples and their ideologies.

**Why Culturally Safe Spaces are important to the health and well-being of Indigenous youth**

Cultural Safety was originally a concept developed in New Zealand within the context of the nursing profession and it continues to be applied within Maori healthcare (Wepa, 2005). It asserts that to provide quality care for people from different ethnicities, nurses must provide care within a context of cultural values and norms of the patient. The concept has spread around the world and to other fields of human services, such as education. A growing and promising body of literature that demonstrates a link between cultural safety and healing methodologies could provide a base of health indicators of Indigenous community health or risk (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009).

There are many historical and contextual factors behind the health disparities observed by Ning and Wilson (2012). Indigenous Nations have unique histories and experiences and some researchers have recently been making efforts to describe ‘culturally unsafe’ contexts as reasons behind the occurrence of such disparities. Some causes that are behind contemporary health disparities for Indigenous peoples include Historical Trauma (HT) and Historical Trauma Response (HTR), intergenerational trauma and the challenge of restoring trust, and microagressions. In order to further understand some of the reasoning behind generating and maintaining culturally safe spaces for Indigenous youth, it is helpful to briefly describe these.

***Historical trauma and Historical Trauma Response (HTR)***

HT describes the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Yellow Horse Braveheart, 2003). The stages of HT are:

* First contact: Shock, genocide, no time for grief.
* Colonization Period: introduction of disease and alcohol. Economic competition: Sustenance loss (physical / spiritual).
* Subjugation/Reservation Period: Confined / translocated, forced dependency on oppressor.
* Residential School Period: Destroyed family systems, beatings, rape, prohibition of languages and religions (Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998).

 HTR “is the constellation of features in reaction to this trauma: depression, self-destructive behaviour, suicidal thoughts and gestures, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003).

***Intergenerational Trauma and the Challenge of Restoring Trust***

Negative effects of these historical occurrences described above have, in some instances, been inherited intergenerationally and become manifest in negative feelings, thoughts and behaviours. In Canada, it is a term often used to explain negative behaviours and health disparities resulting from trauma passed on through relatives who attended Residential Schools:

An amendment to the Indian act in 1920 made it mandatory for every child between the ages of seven and fifteen to attend [residential] school. Section 10 set out the mechanics for enforcement: truant officers, and, ‘on summary conviction,’ penalties of fines or imprisonment for non-compliance (Milloy, 1999, pp. 70­1).

As suspected, such activities led to a generalized distrust of authority figures (Alexie, 2002). As youth grew into adults having their own families, distrust of authority figures, intentionally or non-intentionally, were passed on to the next generation of youth (Blacksmith, 2011).

Exposure to trauma caused many Indigenous individuals and communities to become confused with respect to internal versus external locus’s of control (Alexie, 2002). This resulted in an eroded ability for Nations and individuals to be self-determining:

Something is happening to them, but they don’t know it. They are developing a routine and someone else is making decisions for them. Somewhere in the far distant future, they will be unable to make decisions for themselves and will rely on others to do it for them (Alexie, 2002, p. 29).

With respect to our study, the importance of wâhkôtowin in helping to rebuild the trust needed to help overcome apprehensiveness towards participation that might stem from intergenerational trauma is illustrated through the words of one youth participant:

I’ve shown up time to time, like, with my Kokum [grandmother] when she was an elder here. Like, I first seen at the … when they started filming their visit movie, *North of Dewdney*, ….and I just kept coming on and off, on and off with my Kokum, just visiting the group. And I’ve really been in this group since, like, halfway through last year and the beginning of this year. So this is, like, a full year kind of thing I’ve been here almost now. But, yeah, just an on and off thing. And then, finally, I decided to join for good …. (Zack, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

***Microaggressions***

In addition to historical trauma inherited intergenerationally, Indigenous children and youth may be exposed to contemporary violence in daily life (Michaels, 2010). Microaggression is a term coined by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970 to describe the chronic insults and dismissals he witnessed non-black Americans inflict on African Americans (Sue, 2010).

Unlike historical trauma, where we have the clarity of hindsight, “microaggressions are current events and are often covert in nature” (p. 2). The power of a microaggressive act often lies in its subtleness, like a roll of the eyes during a discussion about an individual’s Indigenous identity, making it difficult to define or articulate (Michaels, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esqulin, 2007).

A microaggression can emerge in an environment that is either intentionally or non-intentionally supportive (Michaels, 2010). For instance, a micro-aggressive environment might be a university with little space for the understanding or contemplation of Indigenous Knowledge, particularly when there are Indigenous students enrolled. Consequently, Indigenous students may feel ‘less than’, isolated or invalidated in such environments.

The three notions described above denote some of the contextual, historical reasons that contribute to ‘culturally unsafe’, spaces for Indigenous people. These unhealthy and oppressive environments can contribute to poorer physical, mental emotional and spiritual health of Indigenous youth. .

More culturally safe spaces are needed for Indigenous youth in contemporary environments because culturally unsafe spaces run the risk of being recreated across generations. For example, the manager for the program referred to in the study notes that, because of the unsafe spaces for Indigenous youth, it is sometimes difficult to keep some youth attracted to the positive programs:

Yeah. And then there’s just kids that, you know, will show up once in a while, and then they just don’t come back again and they’re involved with their gangs or got issues at home where sometimes mom and dad are, you know, abusing whatever they’re abusing and they have to be at home taking care of their siblings and stuff. I mean, it’s sad but there’s nothing we can do about that. (‘M’, Interview, October 22, 2014).

Within Indigenous communities, people face “depression, self-destructive behaviour, suicidal thoughts and gestures, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7) Thus, ‘culturally unsafe’ environments are a cause of serious concern –something that is now being recognized by both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Canada recently released the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) pertaining to the operation of Indian Residential Schools; In the TRC Summary Report, the term ‘cultural genocide’ (p. 1) is used to describe how culturally unsafe those spaces actually were (TRC, 2015). As the antithesis of ethnogenesis, cultural genocide involves a direct action aimed at destroying the structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group.. This article responds to this challenge though describing an ethnogenetic process which focuses on how a community maintains connections to their traditional/cultural knowledge and uses it in modern day contexts to become healthier.

***The harmonization of Ethnogenesis and Cultural Safety***

 The benefits of considering cultural safety and ethnogenesis together was arrived at after many years of contemplating several discussions that were occurring within various Indigenous communities, including discussions with many traditional knowledge carriers, around better understanding the interface between Indigenous healing modalities and mainstream Western medicine (Robbins, 2014).

We propose that recognizing ethnogenetic processes within culturally safe frameworks helps to infuse these frameworks with the realities of the people that they are trying to help. When this occurs, the result is a safe space that remains culturally responsive to the needs existing within a particular Indigenous community.

Observations by researchers and interviews with program participants validated the significance of considering the interdependence of cultural safety and ethnogenesis in supporting wellness. The arts as a culturally safe context supported by wâhkôtowin as an expression of ethnogenesis resulted in a simple room designated for general activities in a YWCA basement being transformed into a positive, culturally safe space for Indigenous youth. When asked about why the program was having success, the manager confirmed the above-mentioned observations in the following response:

You know, some can connect with the way some people live and, others, they have no connection. But at least while they’re here, the main thing is that they’re all interested in doing some kind of art. So that brings it together ….And of course, being in safer environment. Like, sometimes some of things that these kids open up and talk about, they wouldn’t feel comfortable talking [about with a] guidance counsellor, or at school with a guidance counsellor or somebody that wasn’t First Nations, you know what I mean? Like, they feel more comfortable talking to their own culture. (‘M’, Interview, October 22, 2014)

If cultural safety programs are developed in absence of a continuous relationship between a particular culture and external groups, cultural safety runs the risk of collapsing or, at the very least, being subsumed over the longer term from the outside by mainstream ideologies. Thus, a proposed ‘culturally safe’ process that is primarily external is without positive meaning but an internal (ethnogenetic) proposal can be legitimately supported by external translations and expressions (Robbins, 2014).

On the other hand, if the ethnogenetic process occurs without accompanying external resources (e.g.: support and understanding from the greater urban community), ethnogenesis can become interrupted. For instance, the transfer of Indigenous Knowledge from one generation to the next could be negatively influenced through being externally misinterpreted and misrepresented in the mainstream which contributes to the erosion of knowledge (Robbins, 2014; Peluso & Alexiades, 2005).

This harmonized approach – of cultural safety and ethnogenesis –is proposed as a framework for understanding why a small urban film program for Indigenous youth has had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. In this example, it is shown how participation in the arts combined with wâhkôtowin, the Nêhiyaw(Cree)value of kinship or interrelatedness, creates a culturally safe space that is effective in a holistic way.

***The Arts and Cultural Safety***

Programming that involves the arts has proven to be effective as a context for providing a culturally safe environment for Indigenous youth. Archibald et al. (2012) prepared a research report for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation on the use of the creative arts in healing programs across Canada. They sent questionnaires to healing programs and did phone interviews as well on questions focusing on the role of the creative arts such as art, music, dance, and storytelling in Aboriginal healing programs.

They found that “more than 20 per cent of the survey responses referred to ways in which the creative arts build trust and help to establish emotional and cultural safety” (p. 27). The facilitator of the urban film program described how the arts also transported him into these kinds of spaces.

(The arts) took me to a place that I think I wanted to really visit again and again because it gave me a sense of just being. And the place I would be in when I was creating my work, it was a special thing. And I knew something was happening to me but it was really, really positive (Armund Sparrowhawk, Sharing Circle Interview, December 3, 2014).

Archibald et al (2012) also found this in one of their interviews, “when people do things with their body they are being creative and active and there is a connection between their mind, body and spirit which allows people to feel a sense of safety” (Interview 14 May, 2010, p. 27).

An elder who worked with the youth in the film program made a link between the artistic creative process and a sense of safety and wellbeing:

Well to me, film, or music or anything like that, that’s a creative gift. And everyone has a creative gift about them and they can utilize that to make them stronger and independent….. When they’re doing creative things, it clears their mind. It cleans up their mind because they’re thinking about those things that they have to do at that time…. (Sky Woman, Interview, December 3, 2014).

Similarly, with respect to youth becoming aware and healing from intergenerational trauma or microaggressions, we found in our work that arts-based processes provide the space where youth begin to question habitual thinking. As they become aware of habits, they are better equipped to take appropriate independent action (Linds & Goulet, 2010). Such expressive and therapeutic activities help to release trauma connected to colonialism and inter-generational trauma on a physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental level.

In Indigenous cultures, the production of artistic works or participation in creative expression is woven into the fabric of everyday life. This contrasts with western conceptualizations of art, which generally limit the term to objects or expressions with aesthetic appeal. Graham (2013) notes that Indigenous people have traditionally used experiential, expressive, holistic therapies such as movement, dance, and song in several aspects of their daily life (Townsend-Gault & Duffek, 2004; Walsh, 2002 in Muirhead & DeLeeuw, 2012, p. 2). However, these were systematically eliminated by colonial practices, laws and structures. As a result, the assertion of culture through artistic practice is now a factor in the wellness and healing of Aboriginal peoples and communities (Archibald, 2008).

**Combining the arts and wâhkôtowin to improve wellbeing**

Two factors at play were observed in the program: First, the context of the arts clearly lends itself to the creation of culturally safe spaces for Indigenous youth; and second wâhkôtowin or kinship amongst people within the program, including participants, the manager, the facilitator, the Elder and the researchers, helped to further facilitate the effectiveness of this culturally safe space.

In our work in different aspects of our research project, we have repeatedly seen how participation in the arts by Indigenous youth facilitates culturally safe environments. We also observed that such an environment was even further supported in the urban film program through the Nêhiyaw understanding of wâhkôtowin or kinship. Wâhkôtowin is an example of what Gumilev (1979) meant by knowledge or an activity that facilitates ethnogenetic process. In this particular case, wâhkôtowin became a vehicle for knowledge, stories and traditional values to be passed on through human kinship relationships. This helped to maintain a sense of Indigenous community in a multi-cultural urban environment– a community that, in this case, also was positively reinforced through participation in the arts.

The kinship relationships formed between people in an urban environment helped connect youth to the film program while supporting them as members of an extended family within an urban Indigenous community. Due to logistical and/or funding issues, the urban film program was held in different places throughout the years. A culturally safe space, rather than the physical spaces in which the program occurred, was sustained by a strong sense of kinship. Within this community of kinship and relationship we observed several aspects:

**Youth emerged as peers and role models for each other**. This was evident in the behavior of two of the ‘regulars’ to the program, Zach and Dawg. When a film creation task was given by the facilitator, these two worked together to complete the task at hand. At the same time, we often observed them in the space laughing, teasing each other, sharing music and just being normal teenagers.

**The facilitator emerged in the role of older sibling.** In fact, positive role modeling between one program participant and the facilitator extended well beyond the context and time frame of the program. An example is in this dialogue with one researcher:

 Dawg: Yeah I’ll start with me and him because I’ve known him since Grade 4 right?

 Armund: Yeah.

Dawg: He came from the MacKenzie Art Gallery to my school with another person to teach us some art stuff. And he was teaching me for a little bit there…. And I drew something and apparently he tried so hard to get all the students artwork posted up in the MacKenzie Art Gallery. And then a student counsellor or someone who talks with students at my school in Grade 8 told me and my friends about the film program and we wanted to try out the cameras and stuff. And look who I walk into, a blast from the past! [laughter]….

Armund: And being quite an observer in myself, I saw the sense of unity with the young people that were participating in the program and the courage that these guys showed. I mean, I’m fighting back the tears now because it gets me emotional. I get really proud of these guys (Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

**The program manager and CEO of ANHTA (the company that partnered with IPHRC on the project) was viewed by some as mom.** One program participant noted, ‘…. And ‘M’ was just my second mother. She’s actually part of my family’ (Dawg, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014). Another participant indicated that ‘…. ‘M’ would treat me like family like she does with everybody (Zack, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014). This dual role assured that the business of being a CEO, concerned primarily with numbers, costs and outputs, was tempered by feelings of genuine caring, love and concern: ‘M’ notes

….even if there’s only two kids at one project, at least you know we’re doing something for them and [sometimes] it’s good to have one-on-one, instruction because it makes them feel special….. Most of the kids that I have dealt with, they’re all on my Facebook page. So I’ve kept in contact with them for years and years and I read their statuses. And some of them have children now and moved on to working good jobs and furthering their education in university. It’s really nice to watch that (‘M’, Interview, October 22, 2014).

**The program elder emerged in a role as Kokum (grandmother).** Kokum in Indigenous socialization “act to link the past, present and future” (Innes, 2013, p.10) for youth:

She’s like our … all our Kokum and not all of us have Kokums and we’re so blessed to have a knowledge keeper here that cares about us and is willing to share those things, help us understand better because we’re Indigenous people living in an urban setting (Armund Sparrowhawk, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

A program participant noted the role that the elder played in creating a culturally safe space:

Yeah. I am glad Elder Sky Woman is here. It’s … she’s one person that I can … that I feel safe to talk to, for once in my life. And that’s just for me. It was something new for me when I first joined here because I had no one to talk to and, if I ever tried, they would decide not to keep any secrets. So I secluded myself from everyone (Dawg, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

It is important to note that these wâhkôtowin relationships occurred between people directly associated with the program but also extended outward to include IPHRC researchers. The intergenerational group dynamic allowed mentorship, transfer of knowledge and intimate bonds to be forged among all who entered the space: Laughter and participation in film creation and production activities as a group would relieve any tensions accompanying a traditional ‘researcher as observer’ relationship. The hierarchy of the research team was erased as members were trained to their strengths and in areas where there was need; and there was often visiting amongst participants, the manager, researchers, the program facilitator and the elder. Thus, through understanding of wâhkôtowin everyone associated with this program (from participants to those who were responsible for delivery) metaphorically sat together in a giant circle where all individual contributions were valued in an environment of inclusivity and equality.

While wâhkôtowin is used in this article to primarily frame and discuss kinship bonds amongst people, it is important to recognize that from a traditional Nêhiyaw perspective, it also extends outwards into the natural world where one also acknowledges those relationships as kinship. For example, the elder working with youth in the program acknowledged this when she talked about the importance of reconnecting youth to the natural world.

They think that each part [of the natural world] is separate and … even [that] their life is separate…. And the culture brings them back to a better understanding, of the air, the water, the fire and the mother earth. Because those four sacred elements of life, if they’re not here, we as human beings will not be here. So when you tell them the importance of life that is their own life. And they are our future. So we need to really, really instill that in their mind (Sky Woman, Interview, December 3, 2014).

Our research with Indigenous youth is embedded within the fabric of the surrounding Indigenous community. For example, some of the researchers involved in the project were young university students who participated in similar programs while in high school. In addition, some of the youth participating in the program had a relationship with the facilitators that spanned several years. In fact, their collective film work extended more than four years.

Thus, it was found from interviewing some participants and facilitators in the program that, as a result of the aforementioned longstanding positive relationships, the ‘physical space’ where the program occurred was not of utmost importance. Wâhkôtowin allowed the program to continue to be delivered in various physical spaces throughout the years. In these transformative ‘spaces’, Indigenous values were shared while youth continued to fine-tune their knowledge of film production and even acting. One participant noted:

….And then that’s how I started, four years later I’m here. I’ve been here … this is now my fourth year in this program. And ever since then it’s just felt like my second family. This is the first place where I actually cried and confessed my problems that I never thought I had because I never had anyone to talk to about that stuff. And it is the first place in my life where I felt safe for once and actually talk openly about some stuff, felt connected (Dawg, Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

In describing the effects of the urban environment on Indigenous youth, an elder with the program said:

what happens a lot of time (with our) youth, we call it the fast lane of life because there’s a lot of challenges out there for youth and when they choose that fast lane of life… into addictions and alcohol or drugs and things like that. Well, what it does is make all their gifts of life go to sleep (Sky Woman, Interview, December 3, 2014).

Culturally safe spaces are important for urban Indigenous youth as it presents an environment for their ‘gifts’ to re-awaken.

***Spaces which harmonize arts participation with Indigenous understandings of kinship are transformative***

In the same way that an understanding of kinship superseded the biological, racial and legal classifications of ‘Indian’ in Innes’ example (2013, p. 10), wâhkôtowin amongst people within this urban Indigenous community helped support and hold it together. It also helped to ensure that the artistic space retained and developed meaning as an Indigenous space of cultural safety. The artistic space of cultural safety was a positive space for youth to engage in their creativity, become more self-aware. It was also a place in which the kinship relationships within an extended family could be positively reinforced. These supportive relationships in a culturally safe space helped youth with their self-esteem and identity. According to Zack,

Before [the program] I was really just a part of the crowd, someone you wouldn’t notice because I was not different, I was always the same as everyone else. You wouldn’t notice me because you would see too many. But now that I’m with the program for four years, I feel different, like, I’m not part of that crowd. And I like it because, for once in my life, I feel different (Sharing Circle, December 3, 2014).

In cases such as this, two IPHRC youth researchers observed that youth involved in programs such as these experience positive and transformative learning. This confirmed more general observations they made about other *Acting Out!* programs. They saw:

* Greater sense of self-determination
* Ripple effects in the community-youth bring teachings home
* Greater self-esteem
* Seeing the world differently
* Greater self-awareness
* Restoration of ability to choose other options in life besides what they were previously used to
* Getting in touch with creativity- you can be creative in any situation in life

 (Reflections of Goodpipe & Ironstand, April, 2015).

**Concluding remarks**

More culturally safe spaces are needed to support Indigenous youth in urban environments. In the Canadian Indigenous context, the breakdown in traditional family structures and functions has been verified as a major factor in current health and social problems (Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples, n.d.). The literature review of Ning and Wilson (2012), illustrated the dire health status of Indigenous youth in Canada, but also noted that none of the studies examined the role of traditional healing modalities or the cultural appropriateness of care as an aid to solve these problems. If one of the major problems is the breakdown in traditional family structures, then offering culturally safe programs that are built around Indigenous understandings of kinship is necessarily a part of the solution.

Williams (1999) proposes that cultural safety should be

….an environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together (p. 213).

We recognize that the ideal as described above can be difficult to achieve in environments where cultural hegemony still functions. In such situations, the balance of attention might be fixed on educating others about Indigenous realities in order to help create more culturally safe spaces. However, Kathleen Fuller (2002) argues that trying to apply a model of cultural safety (one that recognizes groups, cultures and the individuals within them are fluid) in an essentialist context (such as mainstream medicine) could result in ‘cultural competency’ teachings that only fuel a perpetuation of existing stereotypes.

While this kind of education is important and needed, culturally safe spaces also need to be occur within Indigenous communities as well. In this article, harmonizing understandings about cultural safety with ethnogenesis was considered to be a way to help ensure that a culturally safe environment also includes the creation (and holding) of youth spaces – where a gentle community based education and re-education about Indigenous values and traditions can occur.

Thus, an awareness of ethnogenetic processes can help with the design and implementation of flexible culturally safe programs. These kinds of programs maintain their meaning and relevance over time because they are continuously in tune with the contemporary presence of a cultural group.

In a real life example that demonstrates some of these insights, we examined how the arts and traditional Nêhiyaw understandings of kinship (wâhkôtowin) created a safe space that helped a group of urban Indigenous youth. Other factors could be considered in visioning what cultural safety for urban Indigenous youth *could* be. For example, when intergenerational learning and realization of kinship is occurring *within* the urban Indigenous community, what suitable supports facilitated by the larger urban community would be additionally helpful? Design of institutional spaces, appropriate payment systems, respect for and implementation of cultural protocols and further harmonization of intergenerational learning and kinship relations with learning of skills based in the arts could also help.

In this study, the positive contribution that cultural knowledge made to cultural safety programming in a contemporary environment was seen as a key reason for its success. Thus, a small film creation and production program that transformed an activity room at a YWCA into a place of cultural safety and healing for urban Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan is one instance where a community is helping to facilitate the healing process.

**Glossary of Indigenous Words**

Wâhkôtowin (in Nêhiyaw): a web of kinship relationships or interrelatedness

IPHRC: Indigenous Peoples Health Research Centre

Nêhiyaw: Plains Cree

Kokum: grandmother

**Acknowledgements:** Thank you to the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) for the funding contribution We would like to acknowledge the late Dr, Jo-Ann Episkenew, Dr. Linda Goulet and Dr. Warren Linds as the principal investigators of *Acting Out! But in a Good Way.*

This research has received ethics approval from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board.

**References**

Absolon-King, K. & King, H. (June 2012). *Creating a culture of change for Aboriginal children: A*

*kidsLINK report*. kidsLINK: St. Agatha, ON.

Alexie, R.A. (2002). *Porcupines and China Dolls*. Toronto: Stoddart.

Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*.

Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Archibald, L., with Dewar, J., Reid, C. & Stevens, V. (2012). Dancing, singing, painting, and

speaking the healing story: Healing through creative arts*.* *The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Blacksmith, G. (2011). *The intergenerational legacy of the Indian residential school system on the Cree communities of Mistissini, Oujebougamau and Waswanipi: An investigative research on the experiences of three generations of the James Bay Cree of northern Quebec* (Order No. NR74367). Retrieved from digitool.library.mcgill.ca/thesisfile96748.pdf

Bra**sc**oupé, S. & Waters, C. (2009). Cultural safety: Exploring the applicability of the concept of cultural safety to Aboriginal health and community wellness. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, *5*(2). Retrieved from: <http://www.naho.ca/jah/english/jah05_02/V5_I2_Cultural_01.pdf>.

Department of Indian Affairs (2010, September). *Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Retrieved from [http://www.aadnc­aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597/1100100014637](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597/1100100014637)

Epstein, M.T. (2006). Russian philosophy of national spirit from the 1970’s to the 1990’s. In T. Botz-Bornstein and J Hengelbrock (Eds.), *Re*-*ethnicizing the minds*? *Cultural revival in contemporary thought* (pp. 185-218). [Volume 17 of Studies in Intercultural Philosophy]. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.

Ermine, W., Sinclair, R., & Browne, M. (2005). *Kwayask itôtamowin: Indigenous research ethics* [Report of the Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre to the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples’ Health and the Canadian Institute of Health Research]. Regina: Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre.

Fuller, K. (2002, March). Eradicating essentialism from cultural competency education. *Academic Medicine*, *77*(3), 198-201.

Graham, J.S. (2013). Expressive therapy as a treatment preference for Aboriginal trauma.  *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Indigenous and Indigenous Community Health*, *11*(3), 501-512.

Gumilev, L. (1979). *Ethnogenesis and the biosphere*. Moscow: Progress.

Hill, J.D. (1994). South America: Lowlands [Vol. 53, Social Sciences]. *Introductory Essays from the Handbook on Latin American Studies*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. Retrieved from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/hlas/ss53anthro-hill.html>

Innes, R.A. (2013). *Elder brother and the law of the people: Contemporary kinship and Cowessess First Nation.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Linds, W. & Goulet, L. (2010). (Un) Intentional spaces: Co-determined leadership through drama/theatre. In Linds, W., Sammel, A., & Goulet, L. (Eds.). *Emancipatory practices: Adult/youth engagement for social and environmental justice,* (pp. 221-240).Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Michaels, C. (2010, October). Research summary: Historical trauma and microaggressions: A framework for culturally based practice. *EReview: University of Minnesota Extension Children, Youth & Family Consortium*. [Child Welfare Series]. Retrieved from: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/cyfc/ourprograms/ereview/docs/cmhereviewOct10.pdf>

Milloy, J. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Muirhead, A. & de Leeuw, S. (2012). *Art and wellness: The importance of art for Aboriginal peoples’ health and healing.* Prince George, B.C.: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Retrieved from: <http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/26/art_wellness_EN_web.pdf>

Ning, A. & Wilson, K. (2012). A research review: Exploring the health of Canada’s Aboriginal youth.  *International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 71*, 1-10.

[Ogburn,](http://ethnohistory.dukejournals.org/search?author1=Dennis+E.+Ogburn&sortspec=date&submit=Submit) D.E. (2008). Becoming Saraguro: Ethnogenesis in the context of Inca and Spanish colonialism. *Ethnohistory, 55*(2), 287-319.

Peluso, D. M., & Alexaides, M.N. (2005). Urban ethnogenesis begins at home: The making of self and place amidst Amazonia’s environmental economy. *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, *16*(11), 1-10.

Reder, D. (2007). *Âcimisowin as theoretical practice: Autobiography as Indigenous*

*intellectual tradition* (PhD Dissertation). Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

Robbins, J. (2014): *Maintaining balance in times of change: An Investigation into the contemporary self-regulatory dynamics that operate in and around First Nations traditional healing systems* (PhD Dissertation). Peterborough, ON: Trent University.

Robbins, J., Goodpipe, E. & Ironstand, B. (2015, June). *A positive urban Indigenous space: Community based reflections on Indigenous youth participating in an inner city arts program*. Paper presented at the Canadian Indigenous Native Studies Association Conference. Concordia University, Montreal [not published].

Schwartz, S.B., & Salomon F. (1999). Chapter 12: New peoples and new kinds of people: Adaption, readjustment and ethnogenesis in South American Indigenous societies (colonial era). In F. Salomon & S. B. Schwartz (Eds.), *South America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521630764.009

Smith, L. (Tuhiwai). (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Smoak, G.E. (2006). *Ghost Dances and identity: Prophetic religion and American Indian ethnogenesis in the nineteenth century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L. & Esqulin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist 62*(4)*,* 271-286.

Townsend-Gault, C. & K. Duffek. (2004). Introduction: Image and imagination. In K. Duffek and C. Townsend-Gault (eds.), *Bill Reid and beyond: Expanding on modern Native art* (pp.7–20). Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015*). Honoring the truth and reconciling the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.* Ottawa: Government of Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf>

Walsh, A.N. (2002). Complex sightings: Aboriginal art and intercultural spectatorship. In L. Jessup & S. Bagg (eds.), *On Aboriginal representation in the gallery* (pp.247–270). Hull, QC:

Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Wepa, D. (Ed.). (2005). *Cultural safety in Aotearoa New Zealand.* Auckland: Pearson Education.

Whitten, N.E. (1976). *Ecuadorian ethnocide and indigenous ethnogenesis: Amazonian resurgence amidst Andean colonialism*.Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [Vol. 23 of International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) document]. Copenhagen: IWGIA.

Williams, R. (1999). Cultural safety – what does it mean for our work practice? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, *23*(2), 213-214.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance.* (1999). Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart, M. (2003).The historical trauma response among natives and its relationship with substance abuse: a Lakota illustration. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, *35*(1), 7-13.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart, M. & DeBruyn, M. (1998). The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief in American Indian and Alaskan Native mental health research. *The Journal of the National Center, 8*(2),60-82.