



# Webinar Series

## Indigenous Evaluation Methodologies

In June 2022, Marisa Van Bavel and Richelle Ready presented the webinar "Indigenous Evaluation Methodologies" to share frameworks for culturally appropriate evaluation research with Indigenous peoples. Here are some key messages from the presentation.

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### Key Messages

**Evaluation Research** is the process of gathering information on a program in order to determine its relevance, impact, and effectiveness. The intent of the evaluation may be to provide insight on goals, effectiveness, program strengths, cost-effectiveness, to justify funding, or considering new directions for the program (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2013).

Evaluation research, like all research, requires a sound methodology that informs the research design. **Methodology** is the approach one takes to conduct research in a systematic way. (Mishra & Alok, 2017). Examples of Indigenous methodology include implementing a **Bundle, arts-creation methods, Talking Circles**, and **Sharing Circles**. The axiology, the set of values and beliefs, which guide the methodology is what dictates whether or not a methodology is an Indigenous methodology. Talking Circles without the set of beliefs, values, and ethics from Indigenous ways of knowing is not a Talking Circle. Indigenous methodology requires Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

An Indigenous methodology requires **Relational Accountability**. Every decision, from conceptualizing the evaluation process and research questions, to disseminating the results, needs to be grounded in the **community** (relational) and done in a way that demonstrates respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (i.e., accountability). This is because knowledge is gathered through **relationships**. Knowledge is not an individual identity; it is the produced through interactions with all of creation.

*"Your methodology has to ask different questions: rather than asking about validity or reliability, you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? ... This becomes my methodology, an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to all my relations."*

(Wilson, 2008, p. 177)

# Indigenous Evaluation Framework

This framework has five steps:

## 1. Understand the context of the community you are working with

- What constitutes a social problem and success?
- What are appropriate responses to the problem?
- What does meaningful evaluation constitute?

## 2. Create the story

- Stories and culturally rooted metaphors have meaning within the community context. These stories or metaphors encompass aspects of a Eurocentric logic model that is used in evaluation research (i.e., resources activities, outputs, and outcomes), but are culturally meaningful.
- The development of the story takes time and requires meaningful conversations with the community to understand their core cultural values and processes (LaFrance et al., 2012).
- Have opportunities been created for participants, community members, Elders, Cultural Helpers, Knowledge Holders, and Knowledge Keepers to share their experiences, their stories, their realities?
- Storytelling is considered to be one of the most important ways for Indigenous peoples to share their experiences and continue the traditions intergenerationally (Battiste, 2013).

## 3. Build the scaffolding

- The scaffolding is the evaluation design and process (i.e., evaluation questions, selecting methods, developing a timeline). When using an Indigenous evaluation methodology, this phase requires deep respect for Indigenous values and taking account of cultural and community considerations
- This requires the work you do to be place-based: your methods, the protocols you follow, the relationships you are in are based in place. The community, the land, the Indigenous peoples of the land you are on and working inform the scaffolding that you will create.
  - "There is no single way of knowing, no single way of being, no single way of understanding and there may be similarities between Indigenous communities and their teachings but you cannot assert that the similarities equate to sameness" (Cote & Ready, 2021).

## 4. Planning, implementing, and celebrating evaluation

- Examples of evaluation methods include: Arts-Creation Method, Sharing Circle, Talking Circle.

## 5. Engaging community and building capacity

- Shift from "smash-and-grab" to knowledge exchange and data collection that is grounded in interdependent relationships, which are developed through space for participants, community members, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Cultural Helpers, Knowledge Holders, and the researcher or facilitator to share their experiences and thoughts, as well as reflections and knowledge received from the other individuals (Kovach, 2009).

## Bundle

A research paradigm can be understood to be a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions (also understood to include the ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods). An **Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational.**

Just as the research paradigm outlines values, principles, and methods that are important in the design and implementation of evaluation and research, a Bundle also outlines values, principles, and methods, as well as protocols for handling and caring for the Bundle. A Bundle is often known as a physical sacred gathering of objects, ideas, gifts, and teachings that take place over the lifetime of an individual. In the context of a research paradigm, understanding a Bundle extends to honouring the holistic, interconnected, and unique nature of learning journeys and the reality that the Bundle is evolving and new teachings and stories can be gathered. A Bundle also has the caveat that it is important to connect with and build knowledge through mentorship and support (relational accountability).

Bundle is comprised of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual elements.

For **Ode Zhigo Ode**, as modeled by the Bundle created for Na-gah mo Waasbiskizi Ojjaak Bimise Keetwaatino: Singing White Crane Flying North (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba, 2018), the Bundle consists of the following:

1. Start with Ceremony (led by Cultural Helper or Elder-smudging and calling in song)
2. Creation of Safer Space and Relationship (this is done through an opening sharing circle with introductions, sharing, and sharings from the facilitators, the researchers, and the cultural helpers). It is important to remember that you cannot guarantee a space will be safe, because you do not know everything that will trigger a participant, nor do you know everything that a participant needs to feel safe; however, you can do your best to create safer space.
3. Introduction of story and the methods (Cultural Helper, Elder, or facilitator, sharing the teachings associated with the arts-creation method)
4. Arts-Creations Method: There are different arts-creation methods and it is important that the arts-creation method chosen by the researcher is grounded in place-based teachings
5. Closing Circle (formal Talking Circle with protocols and guidance from the Elder or Cultural Helper - protocols include offering tobacco to not only the Elder/Cultural Helper to share their knowledge but also to every participant who is going to share their knowledge as a sign of respect for the knowledge that they are extending and sharing.)
6. Sharing of Food and maintaining of relationships (creation of Spirit Plate, sharing in conversation and food)
7. End with Ceremony (smudging)



## Arts-Creation Method

The **Sacred Tree/Tree of Life** is one example of an arts-creation method and there are others that could be incorporated into the Bundle.

Questions are posed for each section of the tree and participants answer these questions and add to their Sacred Tree. Questions include, but are not limited to the following:

- The ground is about belonging and poses questions to consider about belonging, such as who are the important people in your life right now?
- The roots are about identity and poses questions to consider about personal identity, such as where do you feel most at home?
- The trunk is about mastery and poses questions to consider about personal strengths in skills and knowledge, such as what successes have you had recently in your life?
- The branches are about independence and poses questions to consider about personal goals and accomplishments, such as how do you experience interacting with others?
- The leaves are about the future and poses questions to consider about hopes and dreams, such as what hopes and dreams do you have currently?
- The fruit on the tree are about generosity and poses questions about individual gifts, such as how can you support others?
- The environment surrounding the tree is about the external contributors to one's environment and poses questions about feeling supported and nurtured to grow.

## Sharing Circles

Elder Jim Dumont wrote that “the Circle, more than any other symbol, is most expressive of the Indigenous view of the world. The Circle is primary to all of life and life process, and, is also of primary significance in relating to and understanding life itself in all its dimensions and diversity. Human beings, amongst other beings, are in harmony with the life flow and grow to their greatest fulfillment when they too operate in a circular fashion. The Circle, then, being primary, influences, in every way, how we see the world. The Circle is synonymous with Wholeness. Wholeness is the perception of the undivided entirety of things.

To see in a circular manner is to envision the interconnectedness and the interdependence within life. The Wholeness of life is the Circle of life.”

(2014)

- Sharing Circles are led by an Elder, Knowledge Keeper, Cultural Helper, Knowledge Holder or someone who has a blessing from an Elder to hold the Circle and there are special prayers and sacred objects within this ceremony.
- There is no time limit within the Sharing Circle and people can share as little or as much as they would like.
- Grounded in protocols and these protocols for Circle are consistent with where you are as a researcher and who your participants are (place-based).



## Talking Circles

Talking Circles are based on the sacred tradition of Sharing Circles. In a Talking Circle, we need to ensure that we are respectful of everyone's time and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to share. The purpose of a Talking Circle is to create a safer environment in which participants can share their point of view with others.

- Each participant is equal and each one belongs.
- Everyone in the Circle learns to listen and respect the views of others.
- The intention is to open our hearts to understand and connect with one another.
- All voices are equal and are given space to be heard, without interruption and with validation.

When research becomes holistic, relational, consistent with Indigenous worldviews and values, and honours history, story, and traditions then you are engaging in Indigenous methodologies.

