# DEVELOPING FIRST NATIONS CHILD WELFARE STANDARDS: USING EVALUATION RESEARCH WITHIN A PARTICIPATORY FRAMEWORK

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**Abstract:**   Program evaluation in aboriginal communities requires a participatory approach that recognizes the importance of culture and promotes mutual learning. Despite the articulation of principles and models that support this approach, the implementation of evaluation studies often reflects a more conventional model stressing the role of the expert and a deductive approach to knowledge development. The evaluation research project summarized in this article was designed and implemented to develop culturally appropriate child and family service standards in First Nations communities using a community-based participatory research model. Process and outcome benefits were achieved by utilizing multiple focus group interviews in the first phase and adapting these strategies in a combined feedback and consultation phase following preliminary data analysis.

**Résumé:**   L'évaluation des programmes dans les collectivités autochtones doit se faire dans un cadre de participation qui tienne compte de l'importance de la culture et favorise la compréhension mutuelle. Malgré la cohésion de principes et de modèles qui soutiennent la formule de participation, la mise en place d'études d'évaluation est souvent le reflet d'un modèle plus conventionnel dans lequel la recherche fait ressortir le rôle de l'expert et une optique déductive du développement de la connaissance. Le projet de recherche en évaluation décrit dans cet article a été conçu et appliqué pour permettre la mise au point de normes culturellement appropriées pour les services à l'enfant et à la famille dans les collectivités des Premières Nations, en utilisant un modèle de recherche participatif basé sur la collectivité. Des bienfaits de processus et de résultats ont été atteints par l'utilisation d'entrevues multiples de groupes cibles dans la première phase et l'adaptation de ces stratégies dans une phase de réaction et consultation combinées, suite à l'analyse préliminaire des données.

Program evaluation is a frequent requirement in emerging aboriginal organizations and services. Yet the legacy of cross-cultural research and evaluation, which has historically focused on the extraction of knowledge and information from these communities by the dominant culture, is not easily overcome. In addition, evaluation processes and outcomes must contribute to community and organizational empowerment and not simply be introduced as measures to ensure adequate service and financial accountability. This article describes a participatory research evaluation process that was utilized with eight First Nations communities as a major strategy in the development of community-based child and family service standards. The primary purpose of the article is to define and assess the evaluation process; thus more attention is devoted to issues pertaining to methodology. The major goal of the study, which involved the development of culturally and community appropriate child and family service standards, is being implemented by the agency and local communities in a developmental fashion over a period of time.

In 1993 West Region Child and Family Services, an agency serving nine First Nations communities, launched a project designed to develop culturally appropriate child welfare standards through the use of a community-based evaluation process. The process resembled aspects of a needs assessment evaluation in that it was designed to allow for extensive community consultation. The outcomes, however, were more ambitious: the project was designed to stimulate the development of locally based child welfare standards in communities where services had already been provided by First Nations agencies for over a decade.

Relevant contextual factors pertaining both to cross-cultural evaluation in aboriginal communities and the focus of this particular study are identified in the following section. This is followed by a discussion of methodology, including a number of implementation issues that influenced the process. A summary of preliminary results is provided in the final section.

## THE SOCIOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The history of aboriginal–white relations in Canada has been dominated by two approaches: efforts by the dominant culture to colonize aboriginal people through material or cultural subjugation, and a paternalistic approach to helping that often contributes to dependency and disempowerment by failing to respect local traditions and

values. Research and evaluation processes have often contributed to these approaches by extracting information about aboriginal people and cultures that is neither controlled by aboriginal people nor utilized to benefit their communities. Webster and Nabigon (1992) identify some of the common problems in the research strategies used. These include the failure to obtain informed consent, misunderstanding the traditional values of the host culture, lack of aboriginal involvement throughout the research process, and the absence of a collaborative relationship with the host culture. They stress the importance of respecting the cultural values and belief systems of communities, allowing for informed consent as a community right prior to the development of a research methodology, and including training and skill development for members of the local community in research and evaluation.

If these arguments are generally applicable to research conducted in aboriginal communities, they are particularly important to evaluation within the child welfare field. Child welfare services provided by the dominant society, like residential schools, contributed to the colonization of aboriginal people by devaluing aboriginal family structure, culture, and community and by playing a major role in the removal and often permanent cross-cultural placement of aboriginal children (Aboriginal Community Panel, 1992; Johnston, 1983; McKenzie & Hudson, 1985). Recognition of this influence and political action by aboriginal communities led to the development of First Nations control over the delivery of child welfare services in Manitoba in the early 1980s. By 1985 most First Nations in the province were receiving child and family services under a delegated model where services were provided by fully mandated agencies administered by Tribal Council authorities. However, services were provided in accordance with provincial legislation and standards, and with funding provided primarily by the federal government.

Although most agencies adopted a community-based model of service delivery that recognized a commitment to culturally appropriate services, family support services, and community prevention, these goals have been difficult to achieve. First, community control over services did not lead to an immediate reduction in the number of children coming into care; in fact, the opposite was true. This trend should not have been surprising in view of the inadequate level of services provided to these communities prior to First Nations control, and poor economic and social conditions. However, the result has been that agencies have been preoccupied with the high demand for crisis-oriented services until quite recently.

Second, there have been concerns about service quality and the impact of political interference by members of First Nations communities. Although increased administrative control over the delivery of child and family services has provided First Nations with some autonomy over agency-specific policy development, provincial jurisdiction over legislation and standards, and related requirements for accountability, have been contentious issues. For most First Nations, the initial acceptance of these arrangements was regarded as an interim measure. Thus, the development of aboriginal-specific standards and legislation is defined by First Nations agencies and communities as an important response to concerns about both service quality and political interference.

Third, although specific communities have developed culture-based innovative service approaches (Taylor-Henley & Hill, 1990), and although policies supporting culturally appropriate alternate care arrangements, beginning with extended family members, are in place in all First Nations agencies in the province, the development of new, more culturally sensitive models and standards of practice requires time, resources, and knowledge. In most of these communities the development of new approaches based on traditional values and practices is complicated by a recognition that many of the practices have been lost by exposure to residential schools and other assimilative instruments of the dominant society. Morrissette, McKenzie, and Morrissette (1993) have proposed a model that recognizes that aboriginal values and practices, as they are practiced today, vary along a continuum. For example, some individuals reflect characteristics that can be described as traditional because of their strong adherence to customary values and practices, whereas others practice a blend of traditional and nontraditional values. Other individuals can be defined as nontraditional because they have adopted dominant societal values or have become alienated from both mainstream and traditional aboriginal societies. This model recognizes that different and often conflicting cultural influences exist within communities, but it does not clarify whether the focus should be on prescribing standards that are related to aboriginal values as they are practiced today after more than three centuries of contact, or on traditional values that may reflect an idealized version of service development. A related issue is Popkewitz's (1988) observation that in a minority-majority context it is often unclear which elements of culture belong to the minority group as original aspects of their lifestyle, and which have been formed in response to the dominant culture and power relations.

This evaluation study recognized the importance of standards in child welfare to these communities. Standards provide criteria that establish the legitimacy of intervention in mediating between the rights of children and their families, or in intervening to protect the rights and interests of children at risk (Child Welfare League of America, 1989). They also provide a basis for measuring service quality and promoting new services to meet the needs of children and families. In First Nations communities, where standards conceived in the dominant culture have often been used to suppress traditional cultural practices, the development of new standards can provide a framework for the evolution of culturally specific services. The development of First Nations child welfare standards moves First Nations control over child and family services beyond general political aspirations for self-government, and incorporates elements important to the unique service and cultural needs of local communities.

These considerations suggest that values, beliefs, and standards shaping aboriginal child and family services must be understood within a dynamic context, recognizing differences between individuals and communities. In addition, an approach to research that was community based and carefully designed to maximize local participation was required.

METHODOLOGY

Principles and methods associated with action research were particularly relevant to this study. The role of the evaluator is an important consideration, and in his description of the principles of community-based action research Stringer (1996) defines this role as including the following characteristics:

- The evaluator is there as a *catalyst* and his or her role is to *stimulate* change, not impose it. This is done by addressing issues that concern people now.
- The primary emphasis is on *process,* that is, *the way things are done*, not on outcomes. Good process will lead to meaningful outcomes.
- The evaluator should start where people are, not where someone thinks they are or ought to be.
- The evaluator should enable people to develop their own analysis of issues.

- The evaluator should enable people to examine several courses of action and probable consequences and, once a plan is selected, assist in implementing the plan.

This discussion of the evaluator's role is consistent with the methods associated with participatory research (Whyte, 1990) and empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996). Participatory research is directed to the goal of empowerment through involving participants in examining their own situation and taking action based on their own culture and values (Cassara, 1987). Thus, it engages participants in the process of dialogue, education, reflection and action. Alary, Beausoleil, Guedon, Lariviere, and Mayer (1990, pp. 204–205) identify six basic characteristics that typically define the nature of the process:

- it is a long endeavor and not a limited intervention;
- it is undertaken in collaboration with groups in their context;
- its product, objectives, and orientation are discussed and negotiated among participants and researchers;
- defining the specific problem and research objectives begins not with existing theories or hypotheses to be confirmed, but with the needs of the situation and concrete practice;
- the findings are significant as elements in a process of social change; and
- the research adopts a participative approach by forming a subject-to-subject relationship without abandoning critical distance.

Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate within a participatory framework, and Patton (1990) has identified their relevance to evaluation research where the aims include exploration, discovery, and an inductive approach to knowledge development. In this study they were regarded as essential in attempting to capture experienced knowledge shaped by both historical relations and a particular community context.

Although these approaches have theoretical appeal, there are important limitations to consider in designing a study. First, such approaches are often time consuming, and limitations in resources or time may forbid their use or seriously compromise the evaluation process. Second, the connection between theory and practice, which is a goal of participatory approaches, is often difficult to achieve. For example, overcoming the distinction between evaluators and

participants may be resisted because of different expectations, technical expertise, or ascribed roles. Moreover, participants' process of moving from description to analysis to action may be overtaken by other priorities in their lives. Third, the research and evaluation process itself may sacrifice rigor by failing to respond to concerns of validity and reliability, including the potential bias of investigators in the evaluation process. Additional requirements in this study included the following: to overcome past community feelings of mistrust regarding the role of research and evaluation processes; to ensure adequate cultural input; to maximize local involvement; and to establish collaborative working relationships for the ongoing development and implementation of new standards.

It was recognized at the outset that the development of community-based, culturally appropriate standards would be a time-consuming process. However, the agency board, in approving the project and its budget, expressed support for a design that was more inclusive and collaborative even if it required more time and resources.

The management of a more participatory process to ensure validity, allow for cultural input, build trust, maximize local community involvement, and develop collaborative action involved several strategies. Evaluation goals were outlined in detail to each community, and although local communities were invited to participate, it was stressed that this decision was a voluntary one. Thus, informed consent was to emerge initially from the chief and council, and subsequently from individual participants. Eight of nine invited communities chose to participate. Considerable efforts were made to foster participatory partnerships. For example, the design relied primarily on qualitative methods, using two rounds of focus groups as the main data-collection strategy. A two-staged approach to focus group interviews was selected in order to allow for extensive consultation on initial questions and further input and reaction to preliminary results from initial interviews. Involvement from agency and community was extensive, but some traditional distinctions between evaluators and participants were retained, on matters such as who had primary responsibility for conceptualizing the study, managing data, and completing a preliminary analysis of data. Some of these role differences reflected a pragmatic approach to issues of time and expertise, whereas other role distinctions were adopted in order to enhance validity and reliability. Finally, the evaluation team was carefully chosen to foster local trust and involvement while ensuring a credible product. The four-person evaluation team was composed of the agency's child and family services advisor, a former

chief from one of the participating communities who was seconded from a community service position, a consultant on contract to the project, and a secretary familiar with participating communities. This combined internal-external approach had a number of advantages. For example, the policy advisor had access to key agency decision-makers, was able to work full time on the project, and was highly committed to a participatory process. The former chief also worked full time on the project, and his knowledge of local community politics and cultural practices helped ensure that these issues were carefully considered. The external consultant, who had experience in conducting program evaluations in First Nations communities, brought this experience as well as knowledge of design, data collection methods, and analytical procedures to the project.

The study was designed to respond to the need for culturally relevant, community-based child and family service standards. This general purpose reflected a realization of the impact of colonization on First Nations communities and family life, an understanding that was widely recognized by community members, agency staff, and the board of directors. The purpose of the study, as defined by the board, was consistent with an espoused commitment to First Nations self-government and the goal of community empowerment.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The primary data-collection method involved the use of focus groups, which incorporated extensive discussion in response to a standard set of questions. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) outline several advantages to the use of focus groups. Advantages important to this project were the open-response format, which provided an opportunity to obtain information in respondents' own words, allowing for deeper levels of meaning and important connections; and the opportunity to obtain in-depth information at less cost than individual interviews.

A representative steering committee consisting of community-based staff, elders, foster parents, and members of the community child and family service committees were consulted on the selection of questions and the proposed research process. A number of valuable suggestions emerged from this consultation stage, and the first interview guide was revised to include 13 general topic areas. Final questions elicited responses related to such topics as the definition of a family, the role of elders, indicators of abuse and neglect, substitute placement preferences, and the role of culture in developing

better services for families and children. Thus participant input was utilized to select questions, ensure adequate attention to cultural and community dynamics, and approve the data collection strategy to be followed in each community.

Widespread community involvement was encouraged in the way focus groups were organized. Four separate focus groups were conducted in each community, composed of the following participants: chief, council members, and elders; local child and family service committee members and community staff; biological parents, foster parents, and homemakers; and youths between the ages of 13 and 18. In one community a combined focus group was conducted owing to the small size of the community. Members were invited to participate through a letter that outlined the purpose of the evaluation and the main questions, but this invitation was reinforced by personal contact from local child and family service workers. Each focus group interview lasted approximately half a day and included between 8 and 16 individuals. More than 200 community participants were involved in this first phase of the evaluation, and there was extensive discussion concerning both local community issues and questions related to standards.

All first-phase interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. This involved the categorization and coding of open-ended responses consistent with approaches recommended by Patton (1990), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Krippendorf (1980). Coded responses were quantified to identify the relative strength of themes, and interview passages were selected to identify both the range of responses and common themes in participants' own words. Data reduction involved the summarization of coded data and the transfer of selected participant responses and analyst questions or comments to a word-processing program. This enabled all summary data to be organized by question, group, and community. This process was very time consuming, but became particularly important in organizing material for the second community consultation phase.

Three objectives consistent with the principles of participatory research guided the organization of the second round of focus groups in each community. First, general results pertaining to each question and responses received from the specific community in question were shared both as a means of educational feedback and as a prerequisite to group discussion about how results should be interpreted. Second, gaps in information, contradictory observations, and community problems were identified. Finally, new information that

might be an elaboration or extension of earlier responses and might lead to action strategies and recommended standards was solicited.

This phase involved collaboration between the evaluators and community participants in clarifying and interpreting the results from earlier focus group discussion. In addition to the provision of feedback, the interview guide used in this phase included 14 open-ended questions. In each community, initial focus group participants were invited to a combined session, and in many cases this consultation session lasted a full day. Although not all first-round participants attended, the level of participation was quite high, and this emerged as a particularly valuable phase of the study. Gaps and contradictions in responses were clarified, and it is of interest to note that interpretations and priorities that differed from those identified by the evaluation team emerged in a number of situations. An important benefit was increased awareness of important local issues among participants. For example, the level of alienation among youths was an issue that surfaced in a number of communities, and this consultation process served to sensitize adult participants to the need for more immediate attention to this issue in their communities.

Several efforts were made to enhance validity and reliability. As earlier noted, questions were carefully selected and pretested with a representative group of participants. Most focus groups were conducted by two members of the evaluation team; as well, the secretary/recorder took notes and audiotaped each session. Appropriate tests for inter-rater reliability were completed at the analysis stage, demonstrating an accuracy rating of .8.

There are limitations to any study that relies on one method or data type. To offset these limitations, Marshall and Rossman (1989) advocate the use of triangulation, which may include the combined use of different methods, data types, or evaluators to enhance the understanding of a phenomenon and, accordingly, the validity of the study. In this study each evaluator recorded his or her own impressions of each meeting, including an identification of salient issues. Triangulation concerning data sources was observed in that information was obtained from several key stakeholder groups in each community. Methodological triangulation was also a feature of this study. For example, a literature review, including other research on the development of standards, was completed. As well, a service review questionnaire with both open- and closed-ended questions was designed and administered to community participants who attended the agency's biennial operational planning workshop following the second

round of community consultations. Although the final summary of results from the study relied most extensively on data emerging from the two focus group phases, these were supplemented by results from the survey on current services and the literature review.

It is of particular interest to note the approach taken to data recording and analysis in the second round of community consultations. During community consultation meetings, facilitators played a role in encouraging group participants to summarize discussions with an informed opinion that would set directions for policy or standards. For example, in discussion about the role of prevention and early intervention in child and family services, the following question was posed: Should the agency be required to provide prevention and family support services before placing a child in care whenever the child is not in immediate danger? Both majority and minority responses were recorded to each question, although a consensus position was apparent on a number of questions in several groups. These discussions were recorded and again transcribed for analysis. In analysis, both the content of discussion and the distribution of opinions on key policy or standards questions were assessed. This process, which reflects an adaptation of nominal group techniques, enabled clarification of a majority position across groups, and the relative strength of this position.

Participatory approaches identify a role for the evaluator or researcher that ranges from that of collaborator or partner to one involving closeness to the subject without loss of a critical perspective. Evaluators were not neutral on the issue being examined; however, they retained a critical and objective stance in evaluating participant views. Elements of a partnership with participants was present, particularly in the interpretation of findings, but evaluators took primary responsibility for data management, organization, and initial analysis. In this process the composition of the evaluation team, which included members with previous evaluation experience and community members with expertise related to culture and community dynamics, emerged as a major asset.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The results from this evaluation research study can be considered in relation to both process and outcome objectives.

In most respects the process objectives for cross-cultural research outlined by Webster and Nabigon (1992) were met, and these helped

to overcome key community stakeholders' feelings of mistrust and hesitancy about participation. The project was initiated at the request of community leadership, who were represented on the agency's board of directors; in addition, each community determined whether it would participate in the project. Community representatives were involved in setting questions and approving the evaluation methodology. As well, each individual invited to participate received information on the project and was able to decide whether or not to participate. Cultural values were also considered. First, community representatives, including elders, examined the methodology, including questions designed to obtain information on cultural values and practices. Second, a broad cross-section of community residents were invited to participate, but special importance was attached to contributions from elders and those concerned with the role of traditional practices in child and family services. Finally, the research team included members sensitive to traditional values and cultural practices, and these issues were reflected in dialogue regarding methodology, the interpretation of findings, and the conclusions that should be drawn. Training and skill development was a feature of this project, but was limited primarily to members of the evaluation team and to community staff who were involved in liaison roles for the project.

The use of multiple focus groups in each community was particularly effective in engaging participants, including young people, in meaningful dialogue about community child welfare issues. The level of participation was encouraging, but of more significance was the quality of discussion and the time people were willing to devote to the process. The feedback from participants throughout the process was extremely positive, and they appreciated the opportunities to provide input and receive feedback. During the initial round of focus groups many sessions lasted three hours or more, and even more time was devoted to the process in the second phase. The second focus group was particularly valuable both in influencing the outcomes of the project, and in encouraging local understanding and action on issues that did not need to wait for the final report on the project. For example, local concerns about relationships between the child and family services committee and chief and council could be addressed by presenting these issues before the council for discussion and resolution. Another example concerned the frustrations felt by young people concerning the role of adults in developing activities and programs relevant to their interests. While the project served to stimulate community response to such issues, there was no structured implementation mechanism incorporated to ensure follow-up

action. Thus, the action phase was dependent on the level of local initiative that emerged following community consultations, and this varied from community to community.

This project was very time consuming, reflecting the scope and complexity of the task as well as the methodology selected. Two enabling factors must be recognized. First, the agency and its board were willing to provide sufficient resources, including time, to avoid the need to circumvent important process steps. Second, the composition of the evaluation group, which included members with previous evaluation experience and community members with knowledge of culture and the particular communities involved in the study, was a major asset. These members established an effective working relationship based on respect for complementary areas of expertise, and this helped to ensure the success of the study.

The development of culturally appropriate standards was the primary outcome goal of the project, and although these standards continue to evolve, selected findings related to this goal can be briefly summarized. Of particular interest are some of the emerging service concepts that serve to guide practice, and the policy and program directions that reinforce a different model of child and family services in First Nations communities. Community consultation confirmed the importance of placement planning for children requiring out-of-home care, beginning with the extended family members in the same community as the first priority. However, it is important to note the high priority placed on community-based placements. For example, nonrelative foster homes in the same community were valued as highly as extended family placements outside the community. This reflects the legacy of previous experience with child welfare agencies who removed children from the community, but it also reflects a more traditional view of the family that includes community connections. As noted in a separate focus group question, family was most frequently defined as "extended family," but quite often the whole community was defined as "a kind of family." This more holistic approach to bonding and attachment is particularly important in aboriginal communities. Although positive attachment to parents and caregivers is recognized as important, the concept of bonding in these communities has been expanded to include extended family, community, and culture.

One aspect of the study obtained information on the preferred rights of the community, the parents, and the child in decision making on

child welfare matters. Although parental rights to involvement in planning were regarded as important, community groups cautioned that "denial and minimizing" behaviors might limit the ability to exercise these rights. The input of extended family and age-appropriate children was highly valued, although the local child and family service committee was regarded as the final authority. The majority of respondents stressed the importance of trying to reach a consensus; in the words of one respondent, "We must come together and form an understanding …   All parties should work together and come up with a solution." These results provide support for the concept of inclusive case planning and management, but they also exemplify the traditional value placed on participatory decision making in aboriginal communities.

Definite views were voiced about the criteria to be considered in the selection of foster parents, including extended family providers. The ability of foster parents to provide a good level of emotional care, including love, respect, and kindness, was far more important than material criteria or physical space. The presence of stability in the home, good communication skills, and the equal treatment of foster and biological children were other important attributes. Most respondents indicated that previous involvement with alcohol and drugs should be considered in assessing foster parents, but that past experience should not be used to eliminate potentially good foster parents if this was no longer a problem.

The importance of culture, including language, ceremonies, and teachings, both as a component of child welfare practice and as a method of healing, was stressed. The agency was urged to provide cultural training as one way of offering people "a different way to live life." This policy directive and the expressed view that preventive and early intervention services should be a mandated requirement serve to set a different course for child and family services in First Nations.

Although formal standards are not yet fully developed in these communities, the study provided a framework for their development, and work is proceeding in this direction. Some may observe that a number of issues raised by community members concerning the need to protect children at risk are not unique; however, they have now been articulated from inside the community and culture rather than imposed from outside. In addition, there are also significant differences that need to be recognized. The growing interest in traditional practices, including the teaching of elders, was endorsed, particu-

larly by young people, and standards that fail to recognize the importance of culture will not be acceptable in these communities.

There was also the realization that many traditions have been lost, and that this has had a significant impact on parenting, discipline issues, and the quality of child care provided within First Nations communities over the years. One of the effects of residential schools, which have contributed to contemporary parenting problems, was captured by one respondent in his comments on the subject of discipline:

> It came from the [residential] schools … That is not the way of the Indian culture. That is their way. That system will be here for a hell of a long time, that residential school system. You don't know this but you are handing that system out to your own child. I believe that. When I was growing up my father could not show any affection. Now I have trouble showing emotions to my children. I'm passing it on to my children from my parents who were in residential school.

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