

“Ocanku Duta Amani” or Paths to Living Well for Aboriginal Youth in Saskatchewan

Summary

This article describes a research program that builds understanding, identifies barriers and facilitators, and informs programs and policies related to the wellness challenges and opportunities of Aboriginal youth at Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation in Saskatchewan.

Key Terms

Photovoice combines photography with grassroots social action that encourages individuals to “tell their stories” through the sharing of photographs. Participants are asked to represent their community or point of view by sharing photographs, discussing the stories behind them, and developing narratives to complement the images. Photovoice not only lends a voice to various groups, but enables an enhanced insight into how a particular group views or conceptualizes their circumstances and brings this perspective into the policy-making process.

Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation: The Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation is situated six miles west of Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan. The band is affiliated with the Touchwood File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council and Treaty Four area. The band is one of the four First Nations of Dakota/Lakota/Nakota descent.

Winter count is a traditional Dakota/Lakota historical calendar that portrays annual key community events as pictograms on an animal hide.

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As a group, Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan face less favourable health indicators compared to non-Aboriginal youth in the province. Aboriginal youth represent one of the fastest growing segments of the province's population. This article describes a research program that aims to build understanding, identify barriers and facilitators, and inform programs and policies related to the wellness challenges and opportunities of Aboriginal youth at Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation in Saskatchewan.



Panel representing Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation. Photo image courtesy of Paths to Living Well research team.

About the Study

This study is a participatory and community-based research program. Academics, community members, and First Nation leaders are working together to explore the pathways “to being and becoming well” at Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation.

The research undertaken so far has not only relied on community involvement, but has also used creative approaches, such as:

- sharing circles;
- photovoice methods; and
- cultural methodologies (winter counts).

The research provides the youth of this First Nation community a means of identifying, representing, and enhancing personal and community factors that affect their health status or health indicators. Their inputs and contributions are helping to inform researchers about the various social, cultural, environmental, and age-specific (youth-specific) aspects affecting the health of youth who live at Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation.

The Study in Action

“Photovoice” was chosen as one research tool partly because the youth participants were attracted to the tool and liked using it, and because it was culturally appropriate. This tool presents a potentially powerful and useful approach to data collection; it not only provides youth with an opportunity to capture and convey what makes or keeps them well/unwell, but also helps them to learn how to use a camera and develop a practical life skill. To date, the research team has undertaken three sets of photovoice collection sessions through which the youth have contributed over 200 images.

The use of dialogue sessions was another method that engaged the youth effectively. At the sessions, youth were asked to select three to five personal photographs for photo-elicitation; followed by a conversation with researchers where the youth were able to share the images and the stories related to the photographs. In this way, community researchers gleaned valuable insight into what Aboriginal youth viewed as key to staying well, as well as the factors that kept them unwell. Three themes emerged: environment; cultural practices; and people (across generations).

Next Research Phases

As the photovoice phase of the research drew to a close, the elders and the community researchers advised the academic partners that the **preferred next steps** in the research

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process should focus on traditional approaches, to further evoke issues of “being and becoming healthy” for the youth.

Currently, the research team is engaging youth in the use of winter counts as a means to express their views on the factors that enhance and promote their own wellness.

Sharing our Findings

In our view, a primary goal of any research program should be to ensure that the research has the opportunity to inform policy-making and health programming. Although our findings will be shared widely with stakeholders, program developers, academics, researchers, and other interested groups and individuals, the unique perspective of Aboriginal youth will also be shared within their own community.

Working with the Chief and Council of the Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation, the research team engaged the youth participants to create a mural to hang in the powwow grounds. Youth who participated in the research worked with an artist to imagine, design and co-create a series of four panels representing youth perspectives and views on “paths to living well.” Other youth from the community also learned about the research and their fellow youth by participating in the art project.

Cultural Implementation

This research program has had a positive influence on other programs in the community, in part because it sought the perspectives of youth who reside in the First Nation community. For example, the research team has worked with the local “culture camp” to ensure practical applications of the results of the photovoice and dialogue discussions.

In addition, the research work and related involvement with the community has since led to early-stage work on an activity initiative referred to as PLAY (positive leadership, living attitudes, and activities for Aboriginal youth). This program, when fully developed, will be a culturally-informed activity, play, and informal educational program that will complement existing programs in this First Nation community. The PLAY program will also build on the findings of the “Paths to Living Well” study, particularly the three thematic areas of environment, cultural practices, and people (across generations) which youth from the community identified as related to “being or becoming healthy.” 

About the Authors

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About the Organization

Bonnie Zink, Communication and Knowledge Exchange Officer (SPHERU), assisted in the preparation of this article.

SPHERU is a bi-university research unit with sites across Saskatchewan in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. SPHERU engages in population health research, which is the study of social factors that contribute to the well-being of various groups within the population. Working across various disciplines, SPHERU researchers collaborate with communities, other academics, and policy makers to undertake this critical research.

