

# INDIGENOUS MEN CONNECTING TO CULTURE THROUGH DRUM-MAKING:

Report on Research Findings

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**BRANDON  
UNIVERSITY**



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We acknowledge the living relationship that exists between Indigenous communities and their lands and graciously accept the knowledge that they have shared with us throughout this project. The research was conducted on Treaty 2 lands. We invoke the spirit of Treaty 2 with good intentions while recognizing the strength and wisdom of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Assiniboine, Dakota, Dene Peoples and the Metis Nation.

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# INTRODUCTION

Many Indigenous people lack opportunities to connect with cultural practices and a shared sense of community identity because of continuing colonial practices in Canada (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Nelson & Wilson, 2017). Indigenous men face distinct challenges including high rates of incarceration (Dennison et al., 2014), high rates of interpersonal violence (as perpetrators and victims) (Rizkalla et al., 2021), lack of programs and services addressing their specific needs as fathers (Ball 2009; Waddell et al., 2020), and intergenerational trauma (Innes & Anderson, 2015; Prehn and Ezzy, 2020). The systemic challenges that Indigenous men face perpetuate negative stereotypes about their ability to fulfil social and cultural obligations as fathers and role models. At times, Western research reinforces negative and deficit-focused framings of Indigenous men by focusing on the ‘problems’ they and their communities face.

# WHY THE RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT

In response to these problems, culture has been framed as a solution. Indigenous people have often sought cultural teachings to first find, and then understand, their identities as a people (Isaak et al., 2015). Ceremonies, according to gkisedtanamoogk and Hancock (1993) provide "a way of communicating," "a way of living" (p. 17). There is a growing body of research on the importance of cultural connection, teaching, and ceremony particularly in relation to Indigenous health and well-being. Sacred teachings, ceremonies and cultural values have been linked to healing, resilience, and positive mental health outcomes (Kirmayer, et al., 2011; Tuck & Anderson, 2014). Other studies have found that cultural programming can enable Indigenous men to learn in community with other Indigenous men and share thoughts and emotions safely (Rossiter et. al., 2017, p. 23). However, these programs are not without challenges. For example, staffing issues, including lack of Indigenous staff and lack of Indigenous language use in programming are common (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2018). Furthermore, research about such programming has seldom followed up with participants to understand its impact on their experiences over time (Rossiter et. al., 2017, p.28). Sustainability, capacity, and control are core issues.

# HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DONE

This research project was shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing and Western research methods. Indigenous partners co-developed the approach to evaluating the program with Brandon University researchers and all decisions about how to do the research and what to do with the results were a part of this collaboration. Sharing circles were held to collect the stories of the group involved in the program. Researchers also made observational notes while participating in the hunt and drum-making process alongside the men. Throughout the year long project, the researchers joined the men in the traditional hunt, dressing the animal, preparing the hide, creating the drum, and then awakening the drum. Interviews were used to collect the individual stories of participants and participants also took photographs to capture how the program shaped their lives. This information helped the research team to get a comprehensive view of the impact of the program, from the voices of participants and through observation, in the moment and over time.



# FINDINGS

The men in the research shared a wealth of information about their lives, their experiences with the Urban Indigenous men's programming, and the impact of that programming. Overall, the results of the research reveal the essential resources provided by the program and the impacts of the program.

The resources the men were provided included:

- 1. Culture, ceremony, skill, and knowledge sharing** – members of the group gained and shared knowledge about different land-based activities (i.e. hunting, fishing, trapping). In addition, a spiritual advisor or a knowledge keeper was available to provide teachings on the culture and ceremony involved with the different activities. The group members were able to facilitate learning using their own inventory of skills and knowledge rather than always needing outside support. The members within the group alternated between teaching and learning.
- 2. Honoring Relationships to Land and Natural Resources**– the men's group was able to take responsibility for land and resources. The land in this project was owned by the local Friendship Centre, and the men had sovereignty over ceremonial buildings, collection of resources and overall protection and caretaking of the space. Some of the impacts of the program were directly tied to the caretaking and protection of the land.

"We have a belief that everybody should know every little job, so when you're there that day and have to build a fire, you can do it. It's a life skill learning to do that. It's also shelter- you cover it and you're in a time of need, and you find that, you can make a small one to protect yourself. There's- there's so much of that there. And that particular spot, we always tell people that come, this is sacred ground."

- PARTICIPANT MS

“I was nervous, but it was having your backing up that gave me confidence. And I think that’s what we get on a constant basis here, is we feel truly supported, right? Even if I can’t do something, I feel like I can when I’m with you guys. So I’m just truly thankful for that.”

- P A R T I C I P A N T J

The impacts of the program included:

1. **Supporting community, social and family connections** – men within the group reported that they have stronger connections to each other, their community, and their children.
2. **Creating a place to heal through brotherhood, encouragement, and reassurance** – men within the group talked about how they were finding their voice, sharing their experiences, supporting one another, and creating a safe space to be there for one another with no judgement.

“To be able to have these- these extensions of myself, this is what healed, me as a young man who has been through so much in my life, this drum has saved me time and time again, not this drum, but every drum that I've seen, the songs that we sing, the meaning of it alone, just to look at it, can make you feel better. Healing, there's healing that comes with it, there's a life, there's just a feeling of being Indigenous. I love- I love what we do.”

- P A R T I C I P A N T S

3. **Strengthening land-based knowledge through teaching, learning and ceremony** – the men talked about the ceremony they were learning, the accomplishments they feel because of the program and how they were transferring this knowledge to their children and other individuals.
4. **Fostering a sense of purpose** – men talked about how they enjoyed taking care of the land, gathering the grandfathers (i.e. stones used in the sweat lodge – the word grandfathers illustrates the nurturing and reciprocal relationship between the land and Indigenous people), making the lodges, creating relationships with their drums, and how all of this provides them with purpose.
5. **Awakening Indigenous pride** – men talked about the pride they felt for their accomplishments and for what they are doing with the drums, as well as the land resources.

# WHAT CAN WE DO

This research illustrates the impacts of land-based learning for Indigenous men. The information in this report can be used to inform investments into initiatives that support Indigenous men's health and wellness.

## Recommendations

- Provide local Indigenous organizations with ongoing, sustainable funding committed to men's land-based programming.
- Respect that cultural programs, such as land-based learning, have lasting and important impacts.
- Provide land for ceremony and programming. This land should be cared for by Indigenous organizations in a meaningful and empowering manner that recognizes the sovereignty of Indigenous people over their land. .
- Support further research into the impacts of cultural programming such as this one on men's wellness more broadly.



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