Research in partnership

Professor Julie Marcotte discusses her research on youth transition to adulthood in the Aboriginal population, and changing the paradigm to conducting research with, rather than on, these communities.

How did your interest in education and youth transition begin? By what means has this evolved into your current focus on Aboriginal youth?

While pursuing my PhD in developmental psychology, I was offered a job as a psychologist in a Québec second-chance school. Here, I encountered many distressed 18-24 year-olds, who represented a portion of the population either considered as fully adult or as adolescents, and for whom few services were available. After completing my PhD, I began a postdoctoral fellowship studying young adults who dropped out and later returned to school. When I obtained my first professor position, I decided to devote my research to this group. A few years later, Georgia Vrakas joined my department and I found her work with Inuit youths very inspiring. We decided to combine our interests and work together on Aboriginal youths, their transition into adulthood and the identity issues that concern them. Consequently, we invited Arlene Laliberté (Professor at Université du Québec en Abitibi Témiscamingue) and Aude Villatte (Professor at Université du Québec en Outaouais) to join our team.

What are the pitfalls frequently encountered in conducting research with Aboriginal people?

For a significant period, research has been conducted ‘on’ Aboriginal people rather than ‘with’ them. Colonisation, assimilation and forced sedentarisation (settling) have taken various forms, but always implied a power imbalance that has marked Aboriginal history. In more recent years, educational practices involving community members in research.

How has this evolved into your current focus on Aboriginal youth?

Researchers at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières are studying the links between postsecondary education and health for Aboriginal youth in Canada. Applying a narrative approach, they hope to add to knowledge on the complexities of health and education disparities.

HEALTH INEQUALITY IS found all over the world, most obviously between developed and developing countries. However, there are also significant gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous populations within countries. The causes of poor health in these groups are the result of complex socioeconomic factors alongside cultural and historical issues.

An example of this is the Aboriginal population in Canada, which is facing urgent health issues and developing many diseases at a disproportionate rate. In this context, health promotion programmes are key. Frameworks recently released by the Canadian Government and the World Health Organization (WHO) have initiated a new approach that is focused on empowerment, encouraging a bottom-up strategy that actively involves community members in research.

Professor in psychoeducation at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Dr Julie Marcotte, is applying such a perspective to understand inequality in the context of development; particularly the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Studying this process in Canada’s Aboriginal youth, Marcotte aims to elucidate the links between social determinants and health, and the importance of good education in reducing health inequity.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

The causes of health disparity for Aboriginal populations are complex; linked to colonisation, migration, loss of language and disempowerment. Education has emerged as a key player, evidenced by the significant educational gap between Aboriginal people, the fastest growing demographic group in Canada, and non-Aboriginal populations. In 2011, less than half of Aboriginal Canadians held a postsecondary qualification, compared to almost 65 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population. This is also reflected in their health status; indeed, education is a central socioeconomic indicator and a major factor in poor health.

To gain a deeper understanding of the connection between education and health, Marcotte and her team developed a project that goes beyond statistics. While educational attainment statistics are valuable, they fail to take into account historical, cultural, linguistic and identity issues. Thus, the group aims to collect the personal stories of youths that are currently enrolled in Aboriginal-only postsecondary schools in Québec or who have succeeded in these settings, as well as those who dropped out.

Applying a rather unconventional approach – using a narrative method, which accounts for personal histories – the researchers will investigate the complex interactions between cultural, historical and relational factors, while considering the specific insights of each participant. This ‘life-story interview’ format is particularly appropriate to Aboriginal cultures, who traditionally use tales to educate younger generations. The approach has another important benefit: it confirms the value of Aboriginal knowledge, making the participant the expert and re-positioning the traditional power relationships of research.

PROVIDING A VOICE

Although the project is still under preparation, initial feedback is extremely encouraging: “Participant empowerment is not only tangible in the results of the research but also through...”

The team is currently looking for candidates to participate in a project investigating identity development, motivation to study and the psychosocial adjustment of university students.

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used in residential schools are examples of how Aboriginal people have been despicably abused. How we conduct research with this population must be based on partnerships, confidence and mutual trust. Researchers have to ensure that their goals are significant for the Aboriginal people, and they must also consider them as experts of their situations and active agents of change. Failing to work ‘with’ only perpetuates the coloniser-colonised positions, which are deleterious for both parties. Are you taking a different approach to understanding post-secondary educational pathways for Aboriginal youths?

Many studies have outlined the obstacles that these young people encounter on their educational path. Challenges relating to history, culture, identity and geography have been identified by teachers, politicians, researchers and professionals; however, few other studies have relied on the youths’ perceptions.

Can you discuss the main goals you hope to achieve through your investigation?

We aim to gain a different understanding of Aboriginal post-secondary pathways by gathering information from the experts: Aboriginal students. Their narratives will enable us to better understand the complex interplay of historical, cultural, geographical and Aboriginal identity issues. With the narrative corpus we gather, we also wish to compare post-secondary experiences from students in Aboriginal-only post-secondary settings and students in mainstream colleges or universities. Finally, the nature of the study’s approach gives us insight into the lives of Aboriginal youths that goes beyond their educational experiences; we will also learn about health outcomes, family and community issues.

Looking ahead, Marcotte aims to further her passion for understanding human behaviour: “I want to keep developing research methods that are respectful to participants and that favour empowerment,” she reveals. She will continue to focus on Aboriginal and at-risk youths, contributing to scarce understanding on the vital transition into adulthood. Ultimately, she envisions a virtual ‘living lab’ in which young adults can share their stories. A passionate researcher, Marcotte is proof of how enthusiasm for your subject can lead to results. “For me, being a psychology researcher is the greatest job; you get to know people and I am continually astonished by human resilience and adaptation,” she concludes.

**ABORIGINAL HEALTH IN CANADA**

**HIV**

Despite comprising less than 4 per cent of the population, Aboriginal people accounted for 8 per cent of those living with HIV in 2006 and 12.5 per cent of new infections in 2008.

**DIABETES**

Type 2 diabetes has reached epidemic levels in First Nations communities, where adults are 4 times more likely to develop the disease than non-Aboriginal Canadians.

**MENTAL HEALTH**

The suicide rate among Inuit communities in Arctic Canada is 10 times that of the general Canadian population.

**EDUCATION: THE CAUSE?**

Those aged 25-34 with high school diplomas in 2006:

- Aboriginal - 68%
- Non-Aboriginal - 90%

**MEDIAN INCOME CAD (2005):**

- Aboriginal - $16,572
- Non-Aboriginal - $25,955

**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (2006):**

- Aboriginal - 13%
- Non-Aboriginal - 5.2%