

## Our Way of Life: Importance of Indigenous Culture and Tradition to Physical Activity Practices

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### Abstract

To challenge the current negative and disease-oriented view in the Western health science paradigm, researchers from the University of Alberta collaborated with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation's Community Wellness Program in a participatory action research project that took a wellness- and strengths-based approach to explore physical activity. We worked with youth to develop participatory videos about physical activity, which sparked community conversations on health promotion, community wellness, and ways to encourage more people to engage in physical activity. Findings revealed a multifaceted meaning of physical activity, supported by the theme of cultural identity. Participants highlighted aspects of culture, tradition, participation, and the land in defining physical activity. Being active was not only about soccer and running, but also playing traditional games, checking the fishnet, scraping the hide, being out on the land, and participating in the community. In other words, to be physically active was to be culturally active and to actively contribute in the community. Ultimately, through collaboration and dialogue, we generated different meanings of physical activity grounded in wellness, and we reinforced and provided further understanding of the cultural element of this health science terminology in an Indigenous context.

### Keywords

Physical activity, participatory action research, participatory video, youth, cultural identity, strengths-based approach

### Authors

Keren Tang, corresponding author: 8339-77 Ave., Edmonton, AB, Canada, T6C 0L3, Email: ktang@ualberta.ca. School of Public Health, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB. Keren had a lead role in the research project and article development.

Community Wellness Program, Yellowknives Dene First Nation, Ndilo, NWT, Canada. The community author was integrally involved in the concept of the research, co-implementation, co-analysis, knowledge translation, and manuscript review.

Cynthia G. Jardine, School of Public Health, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB. Cynthia provided oversight to the entire research project and specific assistance in the review and revisions of the manuscript.

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## **Introduction**

### **Diverging Views of Health**

Achieving adequate levels of physical activity, a popular health promotion focus (Findlay & Kohen, 2007), is often seen as a disparity that puts Indigenous people at risk for obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases (Lee et al., 2012; Miles, 2007; Young & Katzmarzyk, 2007). This disease-focused health paradigm contrasts drastically with the more holistic Indigenous view of healing and wellness. Some authors identify this divergence in worldviews as a major reason for the limited impact of health promotion interventions in Indigenous communities (Adelson, 2005; Findlay & Kohen, 2007). Whereas the biomedical paradigm often views health as a personal responsibility and concepts such as physical activity as prescriptions to reduce disease risks (Petersen, Davis, Fraser, & Lindsay, 2010), Indigenous worldviews situate health as relationships with self, others, the community, and greater cosmos (Lavallée, 2007). Individual health and wellness are intrinsically related to collective well-being and identity (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003), achieved through the balance of body, heart, mind, and spirit. Health and wellness are thus conceptualized more broadly as an interconnection between physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components (Graham & Leeseberg Stamler, 2010; Lavallée, 2007).

To challenge the current negative and disease-oriented view in health sciences, researchers from the University of Alberta and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation (YKDFN) in the Northwest Territories (NWT) took a wellness- and strengths-based approach (Paraschak & Thompson, 2013) to explore physical activity. We carried out a participatory video project as a health promotion intervention to comprehensively understand the meaning of physical activity within the larger community context and encourage more people to be active.

### **Relationships**

The strengths-based approach in this project aligned well with the interests of the community and the researchers. After a summer participatory video project with youth about smoking prevention led by the third author of this paper (Genuis, Jardine, & Chekoa Program, 2013), the YKDFN Community Wellness Program (CWP) was keen on continuing similar projects. Through my supervisor (Jardine), I<sup>1</sup> connected with CWP as a research partner on this

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, first person plural “We” indicates the partnership between the community partner and the researchers, and the singular “I” refers to the primary researcher (first author).

project and directly worked with a research liaison. We identified physical activity as the research focus for exploration through ongoing discussions during my regular visits to the community. In those early conversations, CWP emphasized that the traditional Dene way of life is inherently physically active. This cultural perspective grounded the research from the start and allowed us to integrate the project as part of the summer youth cultural camp program. We continued to work collaboratively in designing the research project, analyzing data, and organizing knowledge translation activities.

### **Theory**

The concept of critical consciousness, developed in the 1970s by the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire (2000, 2005), profoundly influenced this research. Freire believed that conscientization, or consciousness-raising, leads to people taking actions. In other words, as people critically examine their experiences, they develop meaningful solutions or actions to better their social, economic, and political realities (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Unlike conventional research, communities participate actively in a process known as *praxis* that cycles between reflection and action (Freire, 2000). Instead of imposing their views on the community, researchers assume the role of facilitators to promote collective reflection and social action, with a strong belief that change must come from within (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

### **Methods**

#### **Research Approach and Methodology**

Often grounded in critical consciousness, participatory action research (PAR) directly engages the people that the research is meant to affect (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Research is done with participants, rather than on or to them (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoerber, 2005). The approach is highly reflexive, centering on collaboration, inclusive and safe spaces, and balanced power dynamics (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). The CWP and I took a collaborative approach throughout the process. In each phase of the project, we engaged in constant discussions to make joint decisions on an appropriate and relevant research approach, interpretation of the results, and subsequent actions.

#### **Applying Indigenous Research Methodology in a Participatory Inquiry**

This PAR project was situated within the specific context of Indigenous Peoples and was undertaken in collaboration with communities. The research was informed by an Indigenous research methodology (IRM; Wilson, 2008) and maintained an orientation that respects Indigenous worldviews and knowledges. Understanding that I am not an Indigenous person, I was careful not to re-appropriate IRM. Instead, I strove to learn about and practice principles of IRM in a respectful way, constantly recognizing the root of the knowledge.

Some Indigenous researchers also see PAR as compatible with IRM because it “facilitates Indigenous peoples’ ownership, control, and access to the re-search<sup>2</sup> process” (Absolon, 2011, p. 30). In this particular research, specific methods such as participatory video were selected in a collaborative and open process, and aligned with Indigenous understandings and ways of knowing through visual and oral representations. Prioritizing Indigenous ways of knowing and equal community participation integrates the strengths found in both Indigenous and Western knowledges, consistent with the “two-eyed seeing” approach (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013).

IRM promotes the values of respect, relevance, reciprocity, relationality, and responsibility (Hill, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2001) to ensure the integrity of research. These teachings are manifested when researchers situate themselves from the start, form relationships with the community, participate in the community to give back, honour community’s knowledge by prioritizing its desires rather than imposing outside values, and ensure research is always relevant to the people. In this project, the CWP’s vision of traditional physical activity led the research, underpinning the entire process with a fundamental cultural element, as well as the community’s definition of health and wellness in terms of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical.

With an open mindset, we aimed to keep the project holistic in two ways: (1) supporting participants’ self-directed exploration of physical activity in ways that were meaningful for them, and (2) constantly prioritizing local and traditional knowledge. Not prescribing what physical activity meant aligned with the idea of non-interference (Brant Castellano, 2004), which respected Indigenous knowledge and self-determination. Early conversations with the CWP framed physical activity within a cultural and land-based definition. This starting point significantly shaped how participants interacted with the research topic and the findings they generated.

### **Data Generation Overview**

Through ongoing dialogue with the CWP and based on community interest in a summer video project, we selected four methods to generate data:

1. Participatory videos created by youth were the primary mode of data generation ( $N = 19$  youth). Unstructured interviews with the youth provided further information about the process and their video products.
2. Community focus groups elicited diverse perspectives on the videos and people’s lived experiences with physical activity ( $N = 11$  participants).
3. Semi-structured interviews with community members and leaders allowed these individuals to evaluate the impact of the research and activities following the project ( $N = 9$  respondents).
4. Research journals, which included participant observation, field notes, summary of dialogues, and reflections, served as the last means of data generation. These journal entries were recorded from the researcher’s perspective and did not directly involve any participant.

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<sup>2</sup> Absolon (2011) defines *re-search* as searching again, a personal process of “preparing, searching, and making meaning” (p. 32).

Ethical approval for the research was received from the University of Alberta's Human Research Ethics Board (REB 1). A research license was obtained from the Aurora Research Institute to conduct the research in the NWT. Adult participants in this project provided consent, while youth under age 18 provided assent and further received parental consent. Nonparticipants appearing in the final videos provided permission to use their images. The names of youth and community members have been anonymized to respect participant confidentiality. However, given PAR's emphasis on human agency, youth retained the film credits and community information in the final videos to acknowledge the video makers. The line between confidentiality and honouring the sources of information is a constant tension in Indigenous research (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004). Ultimately, we believed that it was ethical to respect the decisions of the participants and the community.

**Youth participatory videos.** Grounded in Freire's critical consciousness theory, participatory video is an increasingly popular visual research tool, which couples video making with democratic participation to spark reflection (Low, Brushwood Rose, Salvio, & Palacios, 2012). It is a "set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film" (Lunch & Lunch, 2006, p. 10). Not only does this method align with the oral tradition found in many Indigenous cultures (LaFlamme, Singleton, & Muir, 2012), it also elicits voices that may otherwise remain silent through conventional means of data collection (Liebenberg, Didkowsky, & Ungar, 2012). Previous experience in the same community demonstrated that youth-developed messages were a powerful means of health promotion and communication (Jardine & James, 2012). Further, by focusing on their voices, we engaged young people as community resources, consistent with our strengths-based approach.

For three weeks in 2013, we worked with 19 YK Dene<sup>3</sup> youth aged 8–18 years to create participatory videos portraying physical activity in the community and on the land. Seven boys and 12 girls were recruited through convenience sampling (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005; Ford & Beaumier, 2011): CWP staff recommended some youth who were interested and available while others participated through word of mouth.

During the first week, I facilitated video-making workshops in the community where youth familiarized themselves with video equipment and editing software. They developed their capacity in digital media and research by exploring the question "What is physical activity?" through filming videos in their immediate surroundings. Youth continued producing videos during the second week of the project, at the cultural camp on the land. The summer cultural camp is an annual community event organized by the CWP, teaching youth on-the-land practices and skills. In the third week, youth returned to the community and edited the films. We stored the footage on community computers, underlining community ownership of the data and providing youth the option to make more videos in the future.

Throughout the process, I engaged youth in ongoing conversations about their lived experiences with and perspectives on physical activity. These conversations followed an overall

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<sup>3</sup> Community members from YKDFN self-identify as YK Dene people. Most of the members reside in two communities of a few hundred people.

ORID structure (Stanfield, 2000): Objective (What do you know?), Reflective (What do you feel?), Interpretive (What does this mean?), and Decisional (What do we do?). In this last Decisional stage of ORID, youth shared ideas to encourage greater participation in physical activity in the community.

With permission of the youth participants, their final videos were produced on DVDs that could be distributed back to community members and others, and posted on YouTube for more widespread availability ([www.youtube.com/user/ykdenewellness](http://www.youtube.com/user/ykdenewellness)).

**Community focus groups.** The videos sparked conversations in the community. Eleven community members and leaders (eight women and three men), recruited through convenience sampling (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005; Ford & Beaumier, 2011), participated in focus group discussions. Most of the participants worked in some capacity within the community. They ranged from a youth who facilitated recreation activities to an elder who was the community counsellor. During this phase of the project, participants analyzed the videos, linking images back to their own experiences and reflecting on the challenges and realities of organizing community-level physical activity initiatives. Like conversations with the youth during video making, these focus groups followed the ORID structure (Stanfield, 2000), and participants brainstormed more actions to promote greater community participation in physical activity.

**Knowledge translation.** The CWP and I shared knowledge generated from the project with community members at two community family suppers. We presented the videos and other research findings, distributed the DVDs, celebrated youth initiative in the video project, and promoted active living through games and a family quiz. We also shared the various physical activity ideas generated by the youth and the focus group participants throughout the research. At the end of the night, community members voted for their favourite new community physical activity programs from this list of ideas. Aligning with PAR principles, this community vote was important to the process of collective decision making that prioritized initiatives for the CWP to incrementally implement in the next few years. Sports tournaments, traditional games, and community hunts involving youth were the most popular ideas.

**Follow-up evaluation.** Several months after the suppers, I returned to the community and evaluated the impact of the research by engaging youth, elders, staff, and community members in semi-structured interviews. Nine respondents—seven women/girls and two men, all with varying degrees of participation in the overall project—discussed their impressions of the research and the resulting actions. These evaluation interviews also helped to verify information that strengthened the rigour of the research (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

## **Data Analysis**

The data generated by the research were organized by an alphanumeric system based on the participant designations shown in Table 1, which provides a roadmap for the source of data: transcripts from conversations with youth (youth participants Y1–6); finalized videos (V1–8);

focus groups (participants P1–11); evaluation interviews (respondents R1–9); as well as the research journals. Letters and numbers indicate the source of data (e.g., P1 suggests that the quote came from participant 1 in one of the focus groups).

**Table 1**  
*Data Generated From the Research and Accompanying Sources*

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Data-generating strategies</b>	<b>Transcript codes</b>
1. Video generation	Conversations with youth <sup>4</sup>	Participants Y1–6
	Videos produced by the youth: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Activities on the land</li> <li>2. Summer of Island</li> <li>3. Cultural camp short clip</li> <li>4. Things to do at cultural camp</li> <li>5. Why I like cultural camp</li> <li>6. Active vs. not active</li> <li>7. Youth in the community</li> <li>8. How the community got its name</li> </ol>	Videos V1–8
2. Community focus groups	Focus group discussions	Participants P1–11
3. Follow-up evaluation	Impact evaluation interviews	Respondents R1–9

With support from the CWP, I transcribed all data generated and used qualitative analysis software (NVivo 10) to organize information into preliminary themes and subthemes. The analysis was guided by a conventional qualitative analysis strategy (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which involved immersing in the data and repeatedly appraising the codes to abstract themes and subthemes without predetermined notions.

To further strengthen rigour and ensure consistency with the PAR approach, the CWP and I co-analyzed the preliminary coding scheme in a follow-up trip. We had one-on-one conversations that reviewed, checked, and verified each emerging theme and subtheme, characterized by representative quotes. The CWP agreed with, disagreed with, or elaborated upon the characterization. This conversation was audio recorded to facilitate further analysis and writing. The process resulted in the final coding scheme. Later, the analysis was peer reviewed with a university colleague familiar with the community (Mayan, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> There were 19 youth in total who participated in the video project in various ways – some filmed, some acted, and some edited the footage. Their participation in the overall project resulted in 8 videos that reflected the collective effort. However, only 6 youth specifically participated in interviews that were recorded and transcribed for content analysis. There were ongoing interactions and conversations between the other youth and the researcher as well, but these were not always recorded nor followed the same format as the interviews with the 6 youth. Instead, the informal conversations and interactions were captured through the research journal.

## Results

Analysis and ongoing conversations with the community revealed a multifaceted meaning of physical activity, supported by a foundational theme of cultural identity.

### Meaning of Physical Activity

Participants conceptualized physical activity as related to movements, an active lifestyle, and traditions. Fundamentally, physical activity was defined as “being active” (V5). Videos, images, narratives, and personal stories generated the following types of activities considered by the participants as being active:

- sports and exercise,
- work and household chores,
- leisure and recreation, and
- culture and traditions.

Youth, in particular, were often quick to associate physical activity with “fitness,” “exercise,” and “the gym” (Y3). These themes were evident in the videos produced by the youth in the community during the first week of the research.

In other cases, physical activity was seen as a broader concept, manifested through being part of the busyness and liveliness of community events (e.g., carnivals, community drum dances): “Everyone was just all moving and doing activities all at once” (P6). Keeping busy also translated into people’s day-to-day lives in the community. The notion of “always doing something” (P7), whether at school, in the home, or at work, was integral to the meaning of being active.

Further discussions layered notions of participation in community activities onto this foundational understanding of physical activity. This concept was evident in the videos from the cultural camp, which recorded activities on the land such as checking fishnets (V3), cutting caribou meat, swimming, and peeling spruce (V1). According to participants, being active suggested working and contributing to a greater collective. According to the youth in one video, “Back in the days, everyone was active and they ... always had something to do. Nothing was boring. Boring didn’t exist” (V5). At the cultural camp, chores such as chopping wood, building fires, and hauling water were critical in maintaining the integrity of the camp. Contributing to camp life in any way fostered an inclusive environment, connecting all individuals. One elder reminded us, “There [were] children there, even the little young baby, and also a child<sup>5</sup>, ... a youth, a parent, and an elder. So we’re connected with all the people there” (P1). Thus, at the camp, to participate or to stay constantly busy was indeed being active, whether it was joining others in scraping the moose hide, or chopping up vegetables for supper. Images in the videos portrayed this participatory aspect of physical activity (V1–5).

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<sup>5</sup> Only youth 10 years and older were registered to participate in the cultural camp program. However, families who helped out at the camp also brought other members, including a toddler and younger children who did not participate in the research project.

References to Dene games and ways of life on the land were prominent. Traditional activities are inherently active, a youth explained: “Because we do a lot of movements ... it’s exercising when you do ... chainsaw challenge, or ... leg wrestling” (Y3). Many traditional practices are rooted in survival skills, passed on through generations. For example, the game “stick pull,” where players each pull on a greased stick, is in fact “what makes [people] stronger in catching the fish” (P10). An elder specifically shared teachings about traditional physical activity at the cultural camp, teachings that were internalized by the youth. After the camp ended, a mother discussed her observation about her daughter who participated in the video project:

*The kids got to see ... the different movements [at the camp]. ... And ... when [my partner] goes to [chop] the wood, [my daughter says], we did that at culture camp, that’s exercising. You know, she knows it now. (R5)*

Her comment highlighted that the cultural camp provided opportunities for youth to more readily link physical activity with cultural activity.

Comprehensively examining the data revealed that discussions about physical activity could be further categorized in terms of spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health, as defined by this Dene community.

**Spiritual health.** One focus group participant said, “Each individual there [at the cultural camp has a] relationship with one another, with themselves, with others, with the land. It’s a way of life” (P1). This comment about traditional way of life highlights the interrelationships among all individuals and all beings. This focus on interrelationships alludes to spiritual health.

**Physical health.** The physical health benefit of physical activity was seen to lie in its disease-preventing ability. Youth participants talked about physical health even if they were unsure of the exact disease: “You have to be active ... so you don’t get ... diabetes or something” (Y5). Youth also linked physical activity to body image: “Because I don’t want to be fat. ... I want to stay healthy” (Y4).

**Emotional and mental health.** Participants seemed to link the emotional and mental health benefits of physical activity to its confidence-building capacity and the effect it has on one’s mental state. One participant shared her story about accomplishing a challenging physical feat:

*We went on a walk two weeks ago ... I was kind of scared because last time, [chest pains, shortness of breath] happened to me. But then ... I walked up there like nothing, walked down there, and it was great! I was OK. We were just walking like it was normal. ... It made me feel good. (P7)*

This participant expressed positive emotions while doing physical activity. Another youth pointed out the long-term impact of physical inactivity and an inactive lifestyle on one’s

motivation. If people are not active, she says, “they don’t get any good ... education, or a job” (Y3). Participants also discussed the effect of physical inactivity on mental health:

*What the kids are used to, playing games, watching TV, and as they get older into their teenage years ... they get these “lazy minds.” ... I can’t imagine sitting in front of a video game for 8 to 10 hours. ... What does that do to the brain, what does that do to their development? (P6)*

Others agreed that sedentary behaviours, particularly those related to screen time or technology use, tended to negatively affect the minds of youth.

### **Cultural Identity**

Embedded in the videos, and throughout the interviews, focus groups, observations, and informal interactions with community members, was the undeniable message that to be physically active is to be culturally active. One participant commented, “The Dene way of life is physical activity; you needed to be fit to be out on the land, and do all this stuff for yourself to survive” (P10). In other words, physical activity is part of the community’s cultural identity, the way YK Dene people live. This theme is therefore critical to the discussion of “what is physical activity,” and what factors encourage or prevent people from engaging in physical activity. Five subthemes supported the cultural identity theme.

**Respecting our elders.** Youth and focus group participants discussed role models as motivators for physical activity and cultural connection. Elders were frequently brought up as role models for a healthy and active lifestyle and as bearers of knowledge. One participant noted elders’ importance in the community: “If it weren’t for them, for the elders, we wouldn’t be here. That’s why here, we respect our elders” (P4). Another acknowledged, “They’re also active in the community” (P3).

**Passing on the knowledge.** Participants consistently implied that teaching the next generation is critical in preserving Dene culture and history. One of the important benefits of the cultural camp is transferring the legacies of culture and tradition. One participant voiced, “I think [the cultural camp] is important ... because it’s kind of our tradition to teach young ones about our culture ... Keep it alive” (P9). While the elder played an important role at the cultural camp in teaching knowledge, youth themselves also supported the transfer of the Dene cultural legacy by recording life at the cultural camp. As a result, the video project did not merely promote the summer program itself, but “also promot[ed] the culture” (P3).

**Inclusiveness.** Participants discussed inclusiveness as part of group activities (e.g., community feasts) and collective identity. Focus group participants suggested that a more accurate portrayal of physical activity would include events with more people. Youth were particularly insightful about how community programs could be more inclusive. One youth shared that only older youth age “10 and up [are] able to go to that [cultural] camp” and that “younger kids” should be included “because they are fun ... [and] funny” (Y4).

**Land.** Land emerged as particularly important for the Dene people. Not only is it an integral component of cultural camps and other on-the-land programs, it is also related to people's spiritual health and cultural identity. One participant shared:

*[The land] makes you feel good about yourself, you just feel alive. ... When I went there [to the cultural camp] ... just for one day ... I liked it, being away. ... It's peaceful out there, just nice. You don't get to do that, like every day ... You take a break from your busy life to go there. (P7)*

Many stories and experiences linked physical activity and active lifestyle back to the inherent value of land and traditions.

**Traditional practices.** In addition to traditional practices portrayed through life on the land, activities such as hand games, traditional game tournaments, and drumming were prevalent throughout the discussions. According to participant 1, the cultural camp program has a deeper meaning that represents the Dene way of life on the land. She explained cultural camp and the importance of the videos:

*When we say [cultural] camp ... that doesn't put the meat to it. ... It's just a camp; it doesn't mean a lot. ... Because when it's a way of life ... there's a purpose why [this person is] doing [what he is doing]. ... It's more powerful to say a "way of life." It has meaning to it. Even when ... you show [the videos] to the people in the community ... right there, they'll make the connection with the video. Because they would understand, yeah, that is a way of life. They experienced that ... lifestyle. (P1)*

## Discussion

In this research, we explored physical activity and its multifaceted dimensions. By understanding how YK Dene people conceptualized and operationalized physical activity, we reinforced this as a multidimensional, cultural concept within an Indigenous health promotion context and sparked community discussions that led to action. The terminology of physical activity was fluid. We came to use it synonymously with active living, traditional way of life, and healthy lifestyle. Culture and traditions grounded all findings. The research process itself shaped conceptualizations of physical activity through reflection among participants and, in the case of the youth, exposure to elder teachings on the value of traditional activities.

### Reinforcing Cultural Physical Activity

The meaning of physical activity generated by the participants in this research was comprehensive, with dimensions extending beyond sports, recreation, and exercise. This is consistent with McHugh's (2011) research in which Aboriginal youth felt that physical activity does "not just have to be sports" (p. 14). This research also highlighted the importance of traditional activities in the definition of physical activity, which supports the existing literature on cultural physical activity practices (Giles, 2013; Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013; Paraschak &

Thompson, 2013). Researchers who share this view concluded, “Traditionally relevant [physical activity] opportunities may enhance perceptions of a supportive environment and possibly impact [physical activity] involvement” (Kirby, Lévesque, & Wabano, 2007, p. 6). Moreover, for the participants in our research, physical activity was not restricted to specific activities but spoke to a broader active lifestyle, with participation in and contribution to community livelihood.

As some authors have noted, physical activity is multilayered, complex, and dynamic (Findlay & Kohen, 2007; Thompson, Gifford, & Thorpe, 2000). Lavallée (2007) explored the complex nature of physical activity using the medicine wheel framework, through physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health perspectives. Other authors have advocated for physical activity “interventions that nurture wholistic health rather than taking a pure problem-based approach to prevention” (Cargo, Peterson, Lévesque, & Macaulay, 2007, p. 102). The words, narratives, and stories shared in this research were consistent with the way this Dene community articulates their overall health and wellness. The results therefore reaffirmed the importance of an Indigenous multifaceted concept of health and wellness as defined by the community, and added to our nuanced understanding of what this means. Moreover, this research underscored the need for youth and communities to specifically recognize and articulate their own understanding of health and wellness, in keeping with critical consciousness theory.

Our research also distinguished viewpoints from different generations. For example, conversations with youth and adults differed on who is physically active and what is physical activity. While many adults spoke outright about elders as role models for physical activity, the youth did not directly make the association. Furthermore, in defining physical activity, youth appeared to initially compartmentalize activities that were physically active and those that were strictly cultural. This finding about youth’s contextual understanding of physical activity resonated with the idea that “sports, recreation, physical activity, and active living are culturally and historically confined” (Giles, 2005, p. 49). Ultimately, the link between being physically active and culturally active became a key lesson that the youth learned during the research process.

### **Research to Action**

A key component of this research process was stimulating critical reflections on physical activity within the community and identifying opportunities for action. The community prioritized six actions—walking marathons, Biggest Loser weight loss challenges, community hunts, longer and more inclusive cultural camps, sports tournaments, and traditional games. The CWP continues to incorporate these actions in its program planning in ways that are feasible and meaningful for the organization and the community. Follow-up conversations with CWP staff and community members demonstrated that small changes based on the results of this research had already happened. The cultural camp in the year following the research was inclusive of families. The CWP continued with the traditional physical activity teachings from the elder at the camp and added daily routines, such as morning canoe paddling, to reinforce more explicitly that the Dene culture and way of life are inherently active. The organization has also been involving

parents in coaching, and the youth in forming sports teams to prepare for larger tournaments. Ultimately, the research generated conversations about healthy living in the community and reminded people that health and wellness are a collective rather than individual responsibility, providing an important foundation for future activities.

To fully achieve actions resulting from the research in the long term, strong multi-sectoral partnerships, dedicated programming, and evaluation could support the community to share resources, implement lessons learned, and translate knowledge into sustainable programs. Additionally, these efforts could address underlying factors such as culture and community development that are outside the health sector. Such a large-scale initiative could qualify as a population health intervention with the potential to shift the health and wellness outcomes of this community (Hawe & Potvin, 2009). In continuing the conversation, the community, researchers, and other partners are currently collaborating to determine health priorities that are relevant and meaningful to the community. Like this project, these conversations aim to build on youth as a community strength and agents of health promotion.

### **Linking Physical Activity with Culture, Tradition, and Land**

The theme of cultural identity underpinned this entire research project. The subthemes were in fact values grounded in the Dene Laws, which are teachings regarded widely in the Dene Nation of the NWT as helping to guide people's lives through values in family, community, and traditional culture (Aurora College, n.d.). Two of the laws—"Be respectful of elders and everything around" and "Pass on the teachings"—directly reflect two subthemes discussed by the participants. Several other laws stipulate collective well-being: "Share what you have," "Help each other," and "Love each other as much as possible" (Blondin, n.d.). These teachings convey interconnectedness among community members and a sense of inclusiveness, which was another important subtheme from the analysis. These Dene Laws are prominent and pervasive in people's daily lives and explain why tradition and culture, and the link with traditional physical activity, are so important in this community.

Thus, Dene Laws reflect Indigenous knowledge relevant for the YK Dene people. As Kovach (2010) suggested, "[Indigenous] knowledges are bound to place" (p. 37). The significance of place and territory, land in particular, consistently surfaced during discussions of traditional way of life and cultural camps. Even Dene games were "heavily influenced by the connection between travel and life on the land" (Giles, 2005, p. 2). Many participants found solace in places such as the land where the cultural camp took place, which promoted physical activity and brought people together. Findings from this research supported the important relationship between land and Indigenous people's overall health and wellness.

A broader implication emerging from this research is the importance of land as a place for cultural connection, especially for the youth. This research illustrates a way to reconnect youth to their traditional culture while promoting community health and wellness. One avenue for future research is to focus on the relationship between Indigenous ownership of land and people's health and wellness. It would be instructive to investigate questions such as "How do land ownership and land titles matter in the health and well-being of Indigenous people? What is

the health impact of treaty negotiation processes and land claim agreements as perceived by community members?" By elucidating Indigenous experiences and perspectives, such research can greatly benefit the communication and relationship building between communities and government agencies engaged in negotiation and help them move towards common ground and reconciliation.

### **Limitations**

We encountered challenges in video technicalities, scope of the footage, and the overall scope of the project. First, we faced technical difficulties with video production and iterative data analysis in the field. The researcher capacity in the field limited participant retention and engagement. Second, we wondered about the authenticity of the video footage. Despite our best efforts, it was not possible to comprehensively portray the total realities of the community. The sheer scope of filming during summertime excluded much footage from being incorporated into the final, publishable forms. Moreover, the videos that the youth made were very positive because they were contextualized within the strengths-based approach of the project. However, this approach may inadvertently skew the picture of people's lived experiences. To overcome this limitation of scope, we supplemented the videos with stories and narratives, for example, about winter activities, volleyball nights, and community drum dances. Finally, the scope of this short-term PAR project limited long-term evaluation of the actions that the community prioritized.

### **Conclusion**

Through collaboration, we generated different meanings of physical activity to encompass understandings beyond "moderate to vigorous exercise regimes." We concluded that physical activity is cultural activity, and cultural promotion is health promotion, all grounded within Dene culture, tradition, land, and wellness. The process helped the community to reflect on the past and future, identifying ways to encourage people to be physically and culturally active not only through sports and exercise, but also through community involvement and a deeper connection with the land.

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