






Letter to the Editor: Published Article

Engaging with Indigenous Communities in Brain Science: Not Only the What, But the Way

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The recent publication by Perreault et al. describes the outcomes of a workshop facilitated by the Indigenous Knowledge Holders Group of the Canadian Brain Research Strategy (CBRS) that aimed ‘to identify ways that Indigenous stakeholders can have an explicit voice in the initiative, weave Indigenous knowledge into the fabric of the CBRS, and support Indigenous brain and mental wellness’.¹ Priority areas for action were the need for new partnerships and stronger connections with Indigenous communities and researchers, and integration of Indigenous knowledges into research and education while accounting for the diversity of those knowledges. With the increasing awareness over recent decades of the historical and ongoing violence that Indigenous peoples face in Canada, the neurological sciences community is well-positioned to understand the importance of the priorities set out by the CBRS and to mobilize to achieve them.

In the most recent edition of her seminal book *Indigenous Methodologies*, Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach posed the important question: ‘The transformative potential for academia in welcoming diverse knowledges is significant, but what does this “welcoming” mean and at what cost to Indigenous peoples?’² Kovach further describes that ‘Indigenous methodologies offer a systematic but different approach to knowledge construction and are prompting Western institutions to expand the notion of what counts as knowledge’.² They ‘coexist within [the] landscape’ of qualitative methodologies but are distinct from Western qualitative approaches as they ‘assert an Indigenous epistemology’ and frequently involve storytelling, narrative accounts, conversations, experiential learning, and engagement with traditional knowledge holders.^{2,3} As such they are responsive to the limitations that arise from the fact that ‘Eurocentrism within research has yet to be fully unpacked.’²

By way of this short letter, we explore how incorporating Indigenous methodologies can help the neurological sciences community to pursue the priorities articulated by the CBRS in a way that centres Indigenous knowledges. Our team brought together Indigenous methodologies and Western approaches to create a

20-member Indigenous brain wellness and mental health working group. We applied the Indigenous method of sharing circles over three meetings to collectively explore the organizing questions: *What is the meaning of brain wellness in an Indigenous health context?* and, *Does it include or is it included in mental health?* While sharing circles are similar to focus groups in some ways, they are a sacred Indigenous practice often led by Elders that involve cultural protocols and allow each person to speak in sequence without cross-talk or interruption.^{3,4} The specific practices and ways they are adapted for research and other purposes vary across communities and contexts.⁴ Circles can be a place for healing and community building as they ‘giv[e] everyone a sense of worthiness and being valued and listened to, and respected.’⁴

The leadership group for the project, the authors of this paper, were female and male Elders (S.J.-B. and B.M.), neuroethicists (L.H. and J.I.), an Indigenous health researcher (M.K.), and a psychiatrist and Indigenous public health leader (C.W.). Relationality was a key element of the approach as the members of the team were from the immediate and extended networks of the leadership group with an eye to a diversity of lived and professional experiences, ages, genders, and urban, rural and northern communities. Four of six leaders, and 16 of the 20 total working group members, identify as Indigenous. To express reciprocity, we offered each member an honorarium and Indigenous medicines, either a small pouch of tobacco or a bundle of sage. The first two meetings were held virtually using adaptations that were developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic,⁵ and the final meeting was hybrid to allow those who could attend in person to share a meal together. Over the course of the three meetings, we progressed from building relationships within the group and hearing each person’s perspectives on the meanings of brain wellness, to discussing areas for action, change and collaboration. We approached the work as a collective rather than a study with research participants because the focus was on exploring methods, generating guiding questions, and developing relationships for neuroscience and neuroethics

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engagement rather than on analysing the content of the discussions *per se*.

In the meetings, we heard the need to reaffirm holistic conceptualizations of brain wellness and mental health, integrate Indigenous and Western healing approaches, pursue systems and community-level changes to overcome the continuing health impacts of racism and colonization, and regain connections with culture and spirit.

The task of applying Indigenous methodologies in academic contexts such as the brain sciences is not straightforward. As Kovach states: ‘While this is not a matter of one worldview over another, how we make room to honour both and bridge the epistemic differences is not going to be easy. This will be a challenge so long as the colonial relationships surrounding the reproduction of knowledge persist inside institutional centres’.² The approaches we have described in this letter are just one part of the solution and bring questions that lack definitive answers such as who can use Indigenous methodologies.² Nonetheless, we suggest that when they are carefully selected, adapted and applied towards Indigenous-driven priority areas such as those of the CBRS, Indigenous methodologies can help researchers to break away from the *status quo* of Western thinking in neuroscience and work in a way that is ethically grounded, sustainable, and transformative.

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