NATIONAL NETWORK FOR ABORIGINAL MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

Widening the Circle

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About NAMHR

The National Network for Aboriginal Mental Health Research (NAMHR) is a collaboration between academic and community-based researchers, mental health providers, and Aboriginal organizations. NAMHR aims to build research capacity to address the mental health needs of Aboriginal people in Canada. NAMHR was established in 2001 with funding from the Institute for Aboriginal Peoples' Health (IAPH) of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

NAMHR 2009 Annual Meeting

– Colette Isaac

NAMHR held its second combined Annual Meeting and Summer School during the week of August 10-14, 2009. Over the five days, forty-six students were registered in six different workshops, and ninety-four people attended the conference highlighting the work of researchers in Canada, the United States and Australia.

The Summer School consisted of six workshops focused primarily on research methodologies. Researchers from PRAM (Participatory Research At McGill) and community members from the Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Project held a full-day workshop that addressed participatory research and the link to integrated knowledge translation. Two other half-day workshops continued the theme of participatory research in the context of indigenous suicide prevention, and knowledge translation with reference to research in addictions. Multi-method approaches to working with indigenous communities, and an introduction to Atlas-ti, a computer assisted software program for qualitative data analysis, were also offered. The last workshop covered the basics of proposal writing with emphasis on applying for mental health research dollars and on ethical considerations relevant to Aboriginal mental health research. Many thanks to our workshop facilitators – Judi Jacobs, Morgan Phillips, Amelia McGregor, Tommy Deer, Jon Salsberg, Lisa Wexler, Stephanie Fryberg, Rob Whitley, Colleen Dell, Sharon Acoose, and Laurence Kirmayer.

The two-day Annual Meeting brought together expertise from around the globe. It was opened and closed by Kahnawake Elder Joe McGregor, reminding us of the importance of giving thanks for all the gifts of the Creator. There were some very moving and personal stories by indigenous researchers who have themselves struggled with mental health issues such as substance abuse, violence and incarceration, whose research serves to illustrate the complexity of mental health issues for Aboriginal people. There were presentations on efforts undertaken to integrate indigenous and western approaches to addressing mental health and healing. An overarching theme was the use of media to reach people, including music, websites, digital stories, and e-health initiatives.

Photo: Jorge Martinez

Joe McGregor, Kahnawake Elder

The importance of engaging youth was also a common theme. The final day concluded encouragingly, with presentations of ongoing research to identify factors that promote resilience in Aboriginal communities. Thanks to all of our conference presenters – Amber Christie, Colleen Dell and Sharon Acoose, Robert Brooks and Justin Files, Les Whitbeck and Melissa Walls, Jeff d'Hondt and Hillary Connolly, Suzanne Stewart, Lisa Wexler, Naomi Adelson, Karine Plouffe, Stephanie Fryberg, Sherry Stewart, Florence Kellner, Laurence Kirmayer and Morgan Phillips, James Waldram and Michael Chandler.

9th Annual National Gathering of Graduate Students in Aboriginal Health: June 25-28, 2009 at Dalhousie U, Halifax

– Morgan Kahentonni Phillips

This past June, graduate students, Scientific Directors, Principal Investigators and others involved in Aboriginal health research gathered once again for four days of knowledge sharing. It was great seeing old friends, making new ones, sharing our research ideas with each other, "making connections", and gathering new resources and ideas from everyone who is trying to make a difference by improving the health of Indigenous peoples in this country. As a graduate student, having this opportunity to network helps not only to build capacity amongst us, but it is also a time for us to realize and celebrate the diversity that exists throughout the multiple Indigenous nations on Turtle Island. Meeting and sharing with Indigenous peoples from different nations and geographical areas has helped us appreciate our distinctiveness and realize that our communities are facing many similar challenges.

As an Indigenous researcher, this gathering was a very empowering experience because it made me feel proud to meet so many Indigenous scholars who I look up to, and to support them by reading, sharing and applying knowledge from others I have come to know. I urge everyone to continue supporting each other because this is what helps our nations grow stronger scholastically and culturally. I want to thank the organizers for the great job they did in Mi'qmaw territory – especially in the planning of the social events, like the walking tour of the Mi'kmawey Deber Cultural Centre and Glooscap Heritage Centre, and the visit to Peggy's Cove because that's where all the real networking takes place. I hope I get the chance to attend next year's gathering and look forward to visiting Vancouver!

One of the important items discussed during the conference was communication strategies between scientific directors, principal investigators, coordinators and researchers. Participants made many great suggestions. One was to make use of networking tools available to us online such as Facebook. Since then, a NEAHR Friends group on Facebook has been created – we welcome you to join. It is being used as a fun tool for us to keep in touch, keep each other informed on upcoming events, as well as for the use of sharing resources and ideas.

Morgan Phillips, Renee Linklater and Stéphane Dandeneau

Another important item discussed was how do we get secondary students excited about research. Here is where effective knowledge translation and knowledge exchange activities are important for our communities because many people believe that research must have tangible benefits to Indigenous communities. Community members should have access to the data that we collect so that we can close the gap and ensure that the information "speaks to the people". Participatory research: How do we define participatory research? Is it only about building capacity and partnerships? For me, Aboriginal health research is about creating research projects with community members to address the needs of a particular community. In my opinion, we need to shift our focus from looking at the negative aspects of Indigenous life, or the problems related to illnesses to focusing on health and the positive aspects such as resilience and the strengths of our people. As a result of this graduate gathering I have become a stronger supporter of Indigenous research paradigms being developed from the works of Cora Weber-Pillwax, Shawn Wilson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith and many other Indigenous scholars.

I particularly enjoyed the IAPH (Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health) consultation with the students' session facilitated by Angeline Letendre and Malcolm King. During the talking circle, each graduate student was asked to share a little bit about their background, discuss their challenges, voice concerns that we face as students, and provide suggestions for the IAPH to consider, in the spirit of growing knowledge. I look forward to seeing our suggestions come to fruition.

Nia:wen á:re/Thanks again

Morgan Phillips and Raven Sinclair

Gail Valaskakis Award 2009

– Amy Bombay

The Gail Valaskakis Award is awarded for the best original scholarly paper on Aboriginal mental health by a graduate student in a research training program. This year, the award was presented to NAMHR scholarship recipient, Amy Bombay for her article titled "The impact of stressors on second generation Indian Residential School survivors".

Amy Bombay

Amy Bombay is a member of Rainy River First Nation in Ontario, but grew up and attended high school in Ottawa. She completed her final year of high school and her first year of university in the United States on hockey scholarships. During this time away, she began to conduct historical research on Aboriginal issues, including some investigation of her grandparent's experience in Residential School (a topic that was not frequently discussed at that time). Although she managed to excel in her studies, she struggled with some personal issues related to homesickness which served to accentuate her interest in the experiences of children at Residential Schools. These experiences and interests led her to develop a deep interest in mental health issues, which in turn prompted her to pursue the field of psychology at the University of Ottawa so that she could learn more about mental health issues that are such a major problem for Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Since then Amy has completed her BSc and her MSc in Psychology, and has worked for, and in collaboration with, many Aboriginal health organizations and has carried out numerous research projects concerning Aboriginal mental health issues. She is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa under the supervision of Dr. Hymie Anisman and Dr. Kim Matheson. The majority of her research is concerned with identifying risk and resiliency factors for mental health outcomes among First Nations peoples in Canada. One of her main focuses has been looking at the impacts of perceived discrimination on mental health outcomes, and her other main line of research has been related to the impacts of Indian Residential Schools and the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.

The impact of stressors on second generation Indian Residential School Survivors

Background: As part of an effort of forced assimilation, from 1863 to 1996, Aboriginal children from across Canada (and the United States) were forced to leave their families to attend Indian Residential Schools. These children experienced neglect and abuse, as well as the trauma of being separated from their parents and culture. Particularly relevant to the health status of today's Aboriginal population is that trauma experiences may have intergenerational effects.

Objectives: To assess (a) depressive symptoms among First Nations Canadians as a function of parental Residential School attendance, (b) whether increased stressors experienced by second generation Survivors mediates the relation between parental experiences and increased depressive symptoms, and (c) whether second generation Survivors were more vulnerable to the negative impact of stressors.

Design: First Nations adults (n = 143) from across Canada reported whether their parent(s) had attended Residential School, and completed measures of depressive symptoms, adverse childhood experiences, adult traumas, and perceived discrimination.

Results: Adults who had a parent attend Residential School (n=67) reported greater depressive symptoms, adverse childhood experiences, adult traumas, and perceived discrimination compared individuals whose parents did not attend Residential School (n=76). Mediation analyses revealed that adverse childhood experiences partially accounted for the relation between parental Residential School attendance and both adult traumas experienced and perceived discrimination. Moreover, both of these stressors experienced in adulthood partially accounted for the relation between adverse childhood experiences and depressive symptoms. Multiple mediation analyses revealed that all three stressors contributed to the elevated depressive symptoms among offspring of Survivors. Further, these individuals were also more strongly impacted by the negative effects of these stressors.

Conclusions: Offspring of Residential School Survivors are at an increased risk for depression, likely owing to greater experiences of childhood stressors, adult traumas, and perceived discrimination. As well, these individuals reported increased sensitivity to stressors associated with vulnerability to depressive symptoms.

Why I became interested in doing research in the field of Aboriginal mental health

– Elizabeth Fast

I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba to a Mennonite father and a half-Mennonite, half-Métis mother. My first real job was as a camp counselor at a day program for special needs children from low-income families in the north end of Winnipeg. Many of the families in this program and neighborhood were Aboriginal and I started to become more aware of the intense racism faced by Aboriginal people. I moved to Montreal and completed a Bachelor of Social Work degree and worked for child welfare agencies in both Toronto and Montreal for seven years. I came to realize that the large majority of so-called child abuse or neglect cases were related to poverty and other structural issues, and usually occurred in families that had multiple stressors. During my years of child welfare practice, I was a strong advocate for keeping children in their homes whenever possible, or failing that option, finding family members that they could stay with. I returned to school to complete my Master's degree in social work and became involved as a research assistant

Elizabeth Fast

on the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect. I was impressed with how this quantitative study had been used to influence policy decisions – such as the need for more prevention services within First Nations communities due to the structural issues – poverty, addictions and low-quality housing – that were linked to what child welfare workers termed "neglect". As I began to learn more about the history of assimilation, residential schools and the "sixties scoop", I became committed to pursuing research that would end the cycle of removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. The continued growth of Aboriginal child welfare agencies, the expansion of Aboriginal child welfare services off-reserve and into urban areas, and the change in funding formulas that provide preventative funding to these agencies is of utmost importance to end the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system.

NAMHR Scholarships/Fellowships 2010-2011

Applications for next year's awards are now available at www.namhr. ca. **Due date: February 1, 2010.** Contact Program Coordinator Colette Isaac (colette.isaac@mail.mcgill.ca) for more information.

The following list shows the research that 2009-2010 award recipients are undertaking in universities across the country, on mental health topics that cover a broad range of issues that are important to Aboriginal people.

Master's Award ($18,000)

- Morgan Phillips, Concordia University – Research Topic: Understanding Resilience through Revitalizing Traditional Ways of Healing in a Mohawk Community

Doctoral Award ($21,000)

- James Allen, University of Victoria – Research Topic: Cultural Continuity in Community Narratives from Canadian Aboriginal Youth
- Stryker Calvez, University of Guelph – Research Topic: Developing a healing space: Exploring the effect of worldviews about community and community participation in social and healthcare programming
- Elizabeth Fast, McGill University – Research Topic: A Comparison of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child outcomes in the child welfare system: How are addictions and mental health problems that are connected with out of home placement related to residential schools?
- Lily Lessard, Université du Québec à Rimouski-(Lévis) – Research Topic: Performance des services offerts aux personnes qui consultant les services de santé de première ligne et qui nécessitent des soins pour des problèmes de santé mentale courants au Nunavik
- Krista Maxwell, University of Toronto – Research Topic: Mental health services and urban Aboriginal peoples (Ontario): An historical ethnography of power-knowledge.
- Christopher Mushquash, Dalhousie University – Research Topic: Development and delivery of personality-motives matched alcohol early interventions for Aboriginal youth in Canada
- Janice Victor, University of Saskatchewan – Research Topic: Discourse, agency, and self in the community treatment and integration of sexual offenders

Post-doctoral Award ($42,000)

- Stéphane Dandeneau, McGill University – Research Topic: Speaking from the heart: Investigating Aboriginal perspectives of resilience

Comments, Suggestions, Submissions

If you wish to submit an article or have information about projects, organizations, announcements or upcoming events, that you would like published in Widening the Circle, please contact us at katya.petrov.namhr@gmail.com. Articles should be 300-350 words and contain contact information for the said project or organization.

NAMHR Mailing List

The NAMHR mailing list is for researchers, health professionals, and others interested in Aboriginal mental health and is a useful place to post announcements, post questions or locate resource people.

To subscribe to the NAMHR listserv, send a registration email directly to the listserv program at listserv@lists.mcgill.ca. In the email the subject is to be left blank, and the body of the email should contain the following one line:

> SUB NAMHR firstname lastname (replace the firstname and lastname with your first and last names).

Everyone is welcome to subscribe to the listserv.

Contributors

Colette Isaac is Pottawatomi from Moose Deer Point First Nation on the shores of Georgian Bay in Ontario. She is the Program Coordinator for NAMHR.

Stéphane Dandeneau, PhD is post-doctoral fellow and Scientific Coordinator of the Roots of Resilience project, one of NAMHR's numerous collaborative projects. He is Métis from St-Boniface and lives in Montreal with his spouse Catherine Fagan.

Morgan Kahentonni Phillips is a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) from the community of Kahnawake and is currently an MA candidate in the department of Sociology & Anthropology at Concordia in the area of Indigenous Mental Health Research. She has been part of the Stories of Resilience research team since June 2007 as a Community-based Research Assistant. She is also a member of Kahnawake's Health & Social Services Research Council (Onkwata'karitáhthsera) and McGill University's School of Social Work First Nations & Inuit Steering Group.

Katya Petrov, BSc, BFA, Dip Ed is the NAMHR Communications Coordinator. She has been working on projects concerning health and education for many years.

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