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Healing through Photography – A reflection on the Brightening Our Home Fires Project in the remote hamlet of Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories

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Article abstract

This creative piece of work and writing showcases the work of a woman participant from the community of Ulukhaktok in the Northwest Territories (NT). Ulukhaktok is located on Victoria Island above the Arctic Circle. This community shares land with its neighbors in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut; located on the north end of the island. The hamlet of Ulukhaktok, NT and many small, remote and isolated places in the territories reflect a rich cultural Inuit heritage in regions, settlement areas and communities. There is a deep sense of interconnectedness within the North in a vast landscape that is known as home to Inuit culture. The purpose of the Brightening Our Home Fires Project (BOHF) was to work in four communities in the NT on a project related to prevention of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the north. A co-researcher living in the NT suggested the community of Ulukhaktok (formerly known as Holman Island, NT) as a place to visit and invite participation. Annie Goose supported this project through participation, acted as a translator and supported us by facilitating meetings within the community. Annie is the primary author of the work shared in this paper. It was my privilege to share in this work and support the knowledge development and exchange that deeply highlights the impact of the Brightening Our Home Fires Project. This work speaks to the possibility of Photovoice in giving voice to unheard experiences in a creative and innovative way on complex areas of health. This article will be of interest to people who are interested in topics such as Northern Canada, qualitative research, women's perspectives on health and healing, and those interested in Photovoice as a methodology.

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An Interdisciplinary Journal

Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

Healing through Photography – A reflection on the Brightening Our Home Fires Project in the remote hamlet of Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories

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Abstract

This creative piece of work and writing showcases the work of a woman participant from the community of Ulukhaktok in the Northwest Territories (NT). Ulukhaktok is located on Victoria Island above the Arctic Circle. This community shares land with its neighbors in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut; located on the north end of the island. The hamlet of Ulukhaktok, NT and many small, remote and isolated places in the territories reflect a rich cultural Inuit heritage in regions, settlement areas and communities. There is a deep sense of interconnectedness within the North in a vast landscape that is known as home to Inuit culture. The purpose of the Brightening Our Home Fires Project (BOHF) was to work in four communities in the NT on a project related to prevention of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the north. A co-researcher living in the NT suggested the community of Ulukhaktok (formerly known as Holman Island, NT) as a place to visit and invite participation. Annie Goose supported this project through participation, acted as a translator and supported us by facilitating meetings within the community. Annie is the primary author of the work shared in this paper. It was my privilege to share in this work and support the knowledge development and exchange that deeply highlights the impact of the Brightening Our Home Fires Project. This work speaks to the possibility of Photovoice in giving voice to unheard experiences in a creative and innovative way on complex areas of health. This article will be of interest to people who are interested in topics such as Northern Canada, qualitative research, women's perspectives on health and healing, and those interested in Photovoice as a methodology.

Authors' Note: This paper is part of the Brightening Our Home Fires project. It is the third in a series of three articles in this journal: 1) An Examination of Three Key Factors Alcohol, Trauma and Child Welfare: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and the Northwest Territories of Canada, Brightening Our Home Fires; 2) An Exploratory Study on the Use of Photovoice as a Method for Approaching FASD Prevention in the Northwest Territories; and 3) Healing through Photography – A Reflection on the

Brightening Our Home Fires Project in the Remote Hamlet of Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories. Together these three articles provide a comprehensive introduction and overview of this project that took place in the NT from 2011-2012. These are the first publications on this research. This project received funding from the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, ethics approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary and a research license from the Aurora Research Institute after a process of community consultation with different communities engaged in this project. These papers are of interest to researchers, practitioners and educators in the north. Names and images are used with permission of the individuals. All the images in this article were taken by Annie Goose. Special thanks to Laverna Klengenber for her identification of this project as Healing through Photography, a title that truly resonates with the work of the Brightening Our Home Fires Project.

Introduction

On our first trip to Ulukhaktok in January, 2011, Arlene and I remarked that it was mighty cold and dark. We went to the Arctic Char Inn and were the only guests at the time. After getting settled we had a meeting in the Helen Kalvak Community Centre. We met with a number of women with children who were eager to hear about the project, to learn about digital photography and sign consents. One of the key issues we recognized at the outset was that just talking about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) prevention, was not going to be a welcome approach in any community. We considered this question deeply as a research team long before going to any of the four participating communities. We perceived that talking about FASD prevention would be a barrier to participating in this project that is, at its essence, about women's health. This approach was informed by our participation as part of the Network Action Team on Women's Social Determinants of Health under the umbrella of the Canada FASD Research Network. Our decided focus after much discussion was the question: *What does health and healing look like for you in your community?* In response to this question a series of photographs were returned to members of the research team on sight and a discussion took place to reflecting the words and images and create a Power point. The Photovoice project, created by Annie Goose in response to this question is the highlight of this article.

Brief review of methodology

The BOHF project used Photovoice as a primary methodology for this qualitative research project. Photovoice is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. An ethics certificate was granted by the University of Calgary and a research license from the Aurora Research Institute approved a research license (a requirement for all research projects in the Northwest Territories). A letter of support was received from the mayor of this hamlet, an ethics certificate and license was granted and the work of one woman participant is highlighted in this paper. While appreciating this project was on FASD prevention, it was clear to the researchers that a holistic approach that considered health and healing as foremost offered a beginning place.

With this in mind we invited community members who wished to participate to an information session and we offered a brief workshop on digital photography. Informed consents were carefully reviewed and translated as required for women participants involved in the project. Brief discussions took place on FASD and some very interesting dialogue occurred. We did not want the term FASD prevention to serve as a barrier to participation in this project. We emphasized a focus on health and healing and indicated that this was an important construct for this research. Why did we use this approach? We used this approach because it is respectful, culturally sensitive and it reaches out to women where they are at in their lives. It also provided an opportunity for women to explore issues of health through the window of photography that is completely centered on the voices of women choosing to engage in the project. The title of this article was voiced by Annie's daughter, who stated when reviewing and selecting her photographs for inclusion in the project: *"I never thought about healing through photography!"* The women participants in this project and in this community were highly engaged and interested in the work and were provided DVDs that included a Power point presentation of the work.

Acknowledgements

As a researcher it was a privilege to spend time in the community of Ulukhaktok, to experience the warm welcome of the people, to converse with women who ranged in age from young mothers to elders and to simply spend time on the land. I have made three visits to this community. The first time I actually saw the land without snow was at the end of June and in early July 2012. I participated in a number of community events such as a feast and research meeting held on Food Security in the community during this visit and met many residents of the community. I attended cookouts and went fishing and boating I am particularly appreciative of the care and kindness of Annie and the women of this community who were willing to share their experiences, to take photographs and express some of their deepest thoughts around health issues, and to occasionally talk about some of the challenges experienced by women of the north, in one of the harshest environmental climates in the world.

While these images and words belong to Annie Goose, I simply express my gratitude for this experience and knowledge that is being disseminated and developed because of the BOHF project. The support of the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) made this work possible and their support of the BOHF project is deeply appreciated. While the work in this article represents the viewpoints of one woman, I can fairly state that the work included here is representative of a spirit of caring and concern regarding issues of health, and those transformative experiences of healing that take place as one moves along the continuum of life. This work should be considered in light of issues regarding women's health in the North. These representations are art – the images and words appear to intermingle to present a holistic portrait and viewpoint that represents both health and healing. I was constantly amazed at the reflections that came forth from women engaged in the Photovoice process. In essence, the question of what health and healing looks like in a remote, northern community portrayed a great deal about life as experienced by women in the north. The depth of insight that emerged through taking pictures, talking about the pictures, and creating captions opened many doors. Photovoice provides a venue for talking about complex health issues in a non-threatening way. Taking pictures and reviewing images offers a space from which personal meaning and reflection or dialogue can occur in relation to complex health topics.

Dorothy Badry

Image 1 – Map of the Northwest Territories



Image Source: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100027749/1100100027753>

Annie Goose – In my words - My journey – My life



What does health and healing look like for you in your community?



My Home

My healing came from a place of no return. It was a very difficult beginning. As time went by it became easier to work with. As a young child, I lost my inner child stemming from abuse which I did not realize was just that. As years went by I raised my family with what I had. I realize today I put my family through a lot. I didn't know that I could do something about it at the time. I think I was just surviving in those days.



My family – enjoying the simple things in life

Today I am honored that my own family has found in their own way to forgive me. My bonding with them is more genuine than ever before. And, we are the best of friends, my boys and my daughters. We can share, and laugh and be real with each other. That gave me great inspiration to carry on with my own life.



My Mother – Agnes Nigiyok

My great mentor was my adoptive mother who was the only mother I know. But, later in years I became closer to my biological family. I believe very strongly abuse divides, your home, your relations, your community, and so on. And, the only person that can do something about it is you. I did just that. I began my healing journey in 1992. It was never easy.



I have good mentors

I have good mentors. One of them was my mother Nigiyok. She taught me to appreciate anything that came by as a gift whether it be a fish she caught or plants from the land that she harvested because it was her way of giving her best in bringing to us children, my brother, myself; the best she had. There were days that she had to chisel through 6 feet of ice to fish just so that we can have broth and a bit of meat – a meal that day.



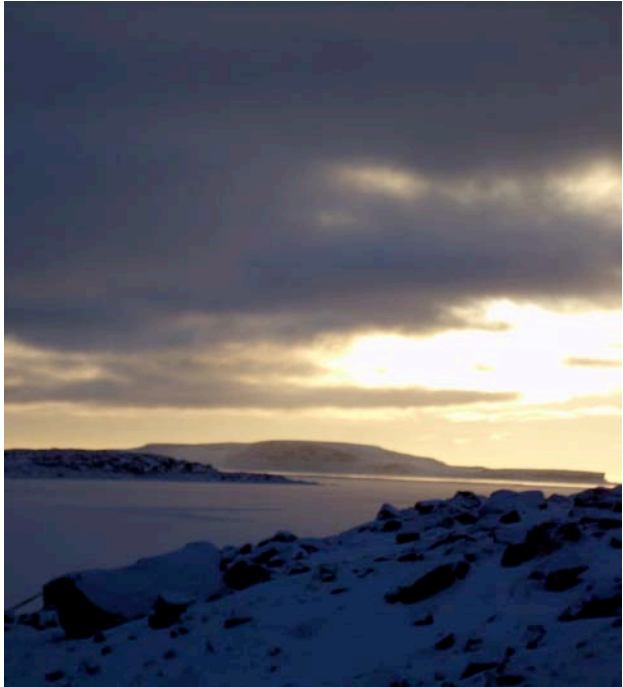
Stones and Tools – A Reflection for my Life

These are the stones I have gathered from my travel and my community. One of my favorite places is the Arctic Ocean along the shore where I pick most of my stones. These are the stones I gather from my travel and my community. Many of these stones are from different oceans the four corners of the oceans of the world. You lose friends who you thought were your friends. My coping mechanism was alcohol. It took many years for me to deal with that. It took three treatment programs and family support, friends and community and I am very grateful for that. Today, I have been sober 19 years with many achievements, some mistakes and most of all a sense of belonging.

I feel connected to the stones as part of my life journey - It is in all my travels to the four different oceans – Nunavut, Nunatsiavut, Pacific and the Beaufort Sea that a lot of my healing has come together whether it is walking the sea wall or just the scenery along the Arctic Ocean – in the freshness of the Arctic Ocean air and every stone seemed to tell its story whether its flat round or rugged of my own life story. The different shapes, color, size, whether they were round or rugged reflected a part of me and how I progressed in my own healing.

Handicraft – Rocks - My mom’s handicraft of clothing she made was appreciated by us and that is where I learned to do my best for my family and myself. She was a hard worker and displayed her faith by doing rather than by talking. In my own work and healing, I model what I have learned throughout my life. To share with care with those around me, my family, my community and anyone else.





Today I love my world

Today I love my world. Thankful to wake up and grateful to appreciate my day with my family and my grandchildren and great grandchildren. My faith has a lot to do with my daily life. I have learned to take back my power which I lost along the way. It was always mine. I believe many times you don't have to talk very much, but you model your own healing along the way because everybody has their own way. Healing begins by saying I want my power back and forgiveness has a lot to do with the process. And, the greater part of your healing is your humbling attitude.



My work – Part of my therapy is through my handicrafts which are very relaxing in creating the colors and the choice of colors – the colors I choose reflect my healing and how far I have come. I have a need to see the mistakes I make sometimes in my own life and reflect on how on my own life can be through my creations. Sometimes it's so easy to go back and see the mistakes in life and as I do my creations through my crafts it brings me right back up. I do not stay too long in my own negative world I used to be in, because it was back in my lifetime, the time of darkness and pain as I do my handicrafts it helps me to relax and take pride in my work and be real in my own healing journey. As I grow older and progress in life I begin to know my own need to model and not so much speak it or



The Land – is my place of therapy, picturesque scenery, flowers, the stones, the rocks, the plants, animals, birds, ocean mammals all have a place in my own life. There was time in my own life that I did not know how to properly prepare these things as a young mother, and over time I learned these skills, and how to store away dry, frozen meat and the land has a way for my own life. I feel free, energy – you can gather energy wide as your arms, high as the sky and as deep as the ocean for your own life. If I am in the tree-line country I improvise – take what I can and leave the rest.

In summary

Photovoice is a very safe passage for one to express their selves. Our words and pictures convey more about our inner being and support healing more than I realized. Taking pictures can reflect everyday reality and contribute to healing your inner being. This experiencing gives you an enjoyment – just being true to yourself and those around you. There are moments that you never realize you see until you take a picture and then you see it – differently. Photovoice through images and true colors offers inner peace and enjoyment of moments in your life that you never thought were important.

Annie Goose – June 26, 2012, Ulukhakto