Hand Drumming:
Health-Promoting Experiences of Aboriginal Women from a Northern Ontario Urban Community

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ABSTRACT
Over the past 10 years, Aboriginal women from a northern Ontario urban community have been gathering to hand drum as a way to revive their culture and support one another. As a member of an Aboriginal women's hand-drumming circle called the Waabishki Mkwaa (White Bear) Singers, I had a vision of exploring the connection between hand-drumming practices and health promotion, and was the primary researcher for the study described in this article. Adhering to Aboriginal protocols as part of an Indigenous research methodology, I offered traditional tobacco to members of the Waabishki Mkwaa Singers, as an invitation for them to be both co-researchers and participants in the study. In accepting the tobacco, the members agreed to help facilitate the research process, as well as to journal their experiences of the process and of their own hand-drumming practices. Using an Aboriginal Women's Hand Drumming (AWHD) Circle of Life framework—a framework developed by the co-researchers of the study—we explored the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional benefits of Aboriginal women's hand-drumming practices, and examined how culture and social support networks are key determinants of Aboriginal women's health. Results of the qualitative analysis show that the Aboriginal women's involvement in hand-drumming circles has many health promoting benefits and builds on strengths already existent within their community. Through their experiences with hand drumming, the women reported gaining a voice and a sense of holistic healing, empowerment, renewal, strength and Mino-Bimaadiziwin ("good life"). These findings are consistent with evolving Aboriginal perspectives on health promotion.

KEYWORDS
Aboriginal health promotion, Indigenous research methodology, women, hand drumming, healing, Medicine Wheel, Circle of Life
INTRODUCTION

In 1998, I began hand drumming and became a member of an Aboriginal women’s hand-drumming circle, the Waabishki Mkwaa (White Bear) Singers. We are a group of Aboriginal women from many Nations, who have come together to hand drum in an urban northern Ontario community located in Anishnaabe Ojibwe territory. Hand drumming with other Aboriginal women led to my vision of exploring the connection between our hand-drumming practices and health promotion. I saw this as a way of studying something positive that would be culturally meaningful to me and to members of my urban Aboriginal community. As the primary researcher, I discussed this idea with my community and they fully supported the vision. This support came from our shared beliefs that practising our traditions within an urban community helps us to promote our cultural identity, and that participating in a hand-drumming circle is one way for Aboriginal women to support one another.

As defined in one of the guiding documents in the field—The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion—health promotion is “the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health” (World Health Organization, 1986, para. 3). Empowerment and participation are central to health promotion; they are also key elements in the revival of the traditional ways of Aboriginal people (Kenny, Faries, Fiske & Voyageur, 2004). Many of us believe our traditional ways will improve our health and well-being (Anderson, 2005; First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Survey, 1999). Reynolds (1994) found that the Ojibwe people in her study described health promotion as “a way of living” (p. 151). A prominent message is that a return to the “old ways,” before the arrival of the white man, is a good way of living (Reynolds, 1994, p. 150). Thus, to the Ojibwe people, health promotion is simply another term for Mino-Bimaadiziwin (“good life”). Living a “good life” requires us to find our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional balance (Anderson, 2005; Garrett, 1999; Rheault, 1999), a concept that has been promoted by Aboriginal people for centuries.

The study described in this article demonstrates how hand-drumming practices among Aboriginal women support their physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being, while helping to strengthen their ties to traditional cultural practices and to facilitate the formation of social support networks. Culture and social support networks are two determinants of health that are critical to this study. These concepts, as well as a holistic approach to health promotion, are shared by Aboriginal people and members of the mainstream population (Riddé, Delormier & Goudreau, 2007).

A brief history of hand drumming in Aboriginal cultures

Drumming has been an integral part of Aboriginal cultures since time immemorial, as the drumbeat represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth. According to Vennum (1982), however, our knowledge of the history of Aboriginal musical instruments such as the drum is limited. This is because early explorers and missionaries held a low opinion of Aboriginal music and therefore devoted little space to it in their records, except perhaps to mention it in passing as “barbaric.”

In the late 1800s, western scholars began to pay more attention to Aboriginal music, however, they viewed the drum as a simple instrument as compared to their own keyboards, strings and wind instruments (Diamond, Cronk & von Rosen, 1994). To add to the insult, Duncan Campbell Scott—Deputy Superintendent General with the Department of Indian Affairs at that time—pronounced powwows to be “senseless drumming and dancing” (Francis, 1993, p. 98). In Vennum’s (1982) book about the Ojibwe dance drum, a Menominee man explains that Catholics believed that the drum would lead to war, because in the past some Aboriginal people used the drum during intertribal clashes (as cited in Slotkin, 1952). Missionaries were able to convince people, even some Aboriginal people, that the drum represented evil spirits (Vennum, 1982). During this period, the Canadian government put assimilation policies in place that made it a punishable “Indian offence” to use Aboriginal musical instruments, and, in 1885, they outlawed many ceremonies that involved drumming (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a). Aboriginal people who chose to continue using the drum were forced to do so in private. Indeed, many cultural traditions were kept hidden—and some of them almost forgotten—until a revitalization of these traditions occurred in the 1960s and 1970s with the help of Aboriginal activist groups such as the American Indian Movement (Nagel, 1995).

Aboriginal women and hand drumming

Although there is minimal literature about hand drumming in Aboriginal cultures, existing documentation about Ojibwe tradition suggests that, historically, drumming was predominantly the role of men (Diamond, Cronk & von Rosen, 1994; Vennum, 1982). However, Vennum (1982)
notes that Ojibwe women traditionally used medicine drums, in particular the water drum. This is a rare finding since Aboriginal women are not often mentioned in historical literature on cultural traditions such as drumming. Thus, they have been referred to as the “hidden half” (Almeida, 1997), which is likely a reflection of the European, male-focused approach to historical documentation (Albers & Medicine, 1983).

Given the minimal literature on Aboriginal women and hand drumming, I added to my understanding of this topic by interviewing several Aboriginal women and Elders about their knowledge of hand-drumming traditions. As Smith (1999) notes, “Story telling, oral histories, the perspective of Elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful” (p. 144). According to one of the traditional grandmothers interviewed, medicine women who were part of the Midewiwin Society used the water drum for healing (personal communication, January 19, 2004). Elder Miin Gaboo Kwe also talked about how, “traditionally, Aboriginal women had a hand drum all the time to sing lullabies to their babies. This helps the baby connect with its mother. They hear the mother’s heart beat again. This also helps the baby become connected to the culture” (personal communication, November 13, 2003).

Many Aboriginal people still believe that powwow drumming is the men’s traditional role, and that the women’s role is to stand behind the men and sing (Diamond, Cronk & von Rosen, 1994; Ritter, 1996). This is interesting since it was originally women who presented men with the big drum that is now used at modern powwows, according to Ojibwe oral tradition (traditional grandmother, personal communication, January 19, 2004; Vennum, 1982). While the debate over whether Aboriginal women can use the big drum continues to this day, many Aboriginal women are using the hand drum and are participating in hand-drumming circles. As discussed by one of the traditional grandmothers, it is good for women to use drums because “we [Aboriginal women] need to move on and look ahead. We need to have something that is going to help us” (personal communication, January 19, 2004).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Indigenous research methodologies**

For too long, western-based research methodologies have failed to incorporate the perspectives and values of Indigenous Peoples (Walker, 2001). As a result, the outcomes of many studies, including health research, are often irrelevant to the needs of our communities (Smylie et al., 2004). In addition, many Indigenous women’s stories have gone untold or have been misinterpreted (Smith, 1999). For these reasons, new knowledge about Indigenous cultures must be generated and documented by Indigenous people themselves, so that the perspectives of the dominant culture are not inadvertently applied to the interpretation of results (Duran & Duran, 1995). According to Weber-Pillwax (1999), this will increase the possibility that research “will be a source of enrichment in the lives of Aboriginal people and not a source of depletion or denigration” (p. 38). The time has come for Indigenous people to develop and assert the use of our own research methodologies—ones that honour our cultures and traditions.

Unlike conventional positivist research approaches, there is no set prototype for these types of research methodologies (Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Broadly, however, Indigenous research methodologies respect our cultural ways, honour our rites and social norms as critical processes that underpin our communities, and represent our worldviews as central to how we live, learn and survive (Martin, 2002). The Circle of Life teachings, for example, are fundamental to an Indigenous research paradigm, as they promote the creation of knowledge through relationship-building and take into consideration the four elements of being: physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. Many Indigenous people’s concepts of good health are based on achieving balance between these four elements (Bartlett, 2005; Hylton, 2002; Kinnon, 2002; Reynolds-Turton, 1997; Shestowsky, 1993; Svenson & Lafontaine, 1999). Western research paradigms tend to be more linear and do not often encompass all of these elements. According to Peter Menzies, an Aboriginal Services Manager at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, “the problem is that the worldview of mainstream society, with its emphasis on measuring and quantifying, runs contrary to the holistic and esoteric principles on which the Medicine Wheel [Circle of Life] is based” (Tillson, 2002, p. 13).

Spirituality is another central aspect of Indigenous belief systems and “communication with the natural world and ancestors, as well as knowing that comes through dreams, visions and intuitions, forms an integral part of Indigenous Knowledge Research” (Walker, 2001, p. 18). By failing to acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing and doing research, the sacred aspects of Aboriginal cultures are often silenced. Therefore, methodologies that do not encompass the spiritual element may do more harm than good where the promotion of an Indigenous person’s health and well-being is concerned. As stated by Walker (2001),
“Research processes that fail to voice the sacred aspects of Indigenous experience have resulted in data which is incomplete and inaccurate” (p. 19).

Integrating Indigenous approaches to research and principles of health promotion

Our study drew on Indigenous research methodologies and was based on Aboriginal principles that promote working collectively, not only with a community but with all of Creation. This approach is referred to by S. Wilson as “relationality” (personal communication, August 10, 2005). The research was designed to ensure respect for our teachings, our traditions, our connection with the land, and, most importantly, our people. In her work on decolonizing methodologies, Smith (1999) stresses that for Aboriginal people the research process is often more important than the outcome, and the process itself is “expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate” (p. 128). The Indigenous research methodology created for this study encouraged Aboriginal women hand drummers to share their stories, build on their strengths, and generate knowledge in a way that was familiar to them, by fully engaging them in the research process.

Consistent with the traditions of the area where the study was carried out, as the primary researcher, I offered traditional tobacco to members of the Waabishki Mkwaa Singers as an invitation to become both co-researchers and participants in the study. For thousands of years, Ojibwe people and many other Aboriginal cultures have presented traditional tobacco when asking someone to do something meaningful. When an Aboriginal person accepts the tobacco, it is a spiritual commitment; it is the highest level of consent that we can give. Seven core members of the Waabishki Mkwaa Singers accepted my offer of tobacco, and thus their dual roles as co-researchers and participants. This approach reflects one of the main principles of health promotion outlined in the Ottawa Charter (World Health Organization, 1986): encouraging individuals to take an active role in improving their own health, which is of particular importance to members of Aboriginal communities.

The co-researchers and I designed the study and analyzed the stories of other Aboriginal women hand drummers who agreed to participate in the research process. The research data were collected through various methods, including a sharing circle, individual interviews and journaling.

SHARING CIRCLE: A sharing circle is an Aboriginal way of communicating that usually incorporates sacred objects such as an eagle feather and begins with a smudging ceremony—which is the burning of one, or several, of the sacred medicines (sage, tobacco, cedar, sweet grass)—to cleanse away negativity and to connect with the Creator. Aboriginal women hand drummers were recruited from groups other than the Waabishki Mkwaa Singers to share their stories about hand drumming. Seven women participated in this aspect of the research.

INTERVIEWS: In-depth interviews were conducted as a way to hear individual stories. Five more Aboriginal women hand drummers were recruited from groups other than the Waabishki Mkwaa Singers. These interviews were conducted after the sharing circle and built on ideas that were developed in the circle.

JOURNALING: As a third source of data, co-researchers agreed to keep a journal of their thoughts about their involvement in the research process and their experiences with hand drumming. By the end of the study, four journals were available to me for content analysis.

ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S HAND DRUMMING (AWHD) CIRCLE OF LIFE FRAMEWORK: This framework was developed by the co-researchers, based on the traditional Circle of Life model, commonly referred to as the Medicine Wheel. The AWHD Circle of Life framework, as shown in Figure 1, was used to explore participants’ perceptions about how hand drumming affects their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Two key determinants of health related to Aboriginal women’s hand drumming—culture and social support networks—were also incorporated into the framework. “Culture” was placed at the centre of the circle, because it is vital in promoting physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, whereas “social support networks” forms the outer rim, which keeps the circle intact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Aboriginal women who participated in this study perceived many health-promoting benefits of hand drumming, and the themes that emerged from their stories and experiences fit well within the AWHD Circle of Life framework. Although each element of the framework was initially examined separately, everything within the Circle of Life is interconnected, and four holistic themes emerged from the data analysis. In Figure 2, these four themes
are depicted in a new outer ring. The benefits of having social support networks are depicted in the next ring, and the benefits pertaining to the four elements of being are listed beneath each of them in the innermost ring. The key cultural aspects that participants linked to their practice of hand drumming form the circle in the centre. The positive impact of hand drumming on the well-being of participants’ is obvious. Some examples of the primary findings for each element/theme are further outlined below.

Links between physical well-being and hand drumming

The physical element within the Circle of Life includes learning about nurturing our bodies and developing physical skills that enable us to be active and healthy (Chamberlain, 1998; Montour, 2000). Food is an important part of any Aboriginal gathering. The availability of healthy traditional foods at hand-drumming circles—such as corn, moose meat and strawberries—was an encouraging factor for many participants in the study to attend them. The participants also discussed the importance of being physically able to use their voices; many Aboriginal women learned to sing when they became involved in hand-drumming circles.

Overall, participants believed that the beat of the drum in itself is good for their health. Some participants indicated that they gain physical energy from partaking in hand-drumming circles. This is not surprising, given that energy travels through the vibrations of a drum to all those who form the circle. This energy level can also be heightened as the group synchronicity increases. One participant explained that as people drum together they quickly learn to be “in synch” (individual interview, December 22, 2004). As synchronicity increases, it is likely that the drummers’ heart rates and brain waves will be affected, as they respond to the rhythm with their whole body. In the literature about drumming, this is referred to as “entrainment” (Friedman, 2000; Lounsberry, 2002; Maxfield, 1990; Strong, 1998).

As much as drumming can provide energy, it can also relax our bodies. Many participants described how the beautiful sound of the drum helps them to release tension. Drumming in time with our heartbeat can also help us to realign with our body's natural rhythms (Friedman, 2000; Kaplan, 2000; Lounsberry, 2002; Strong, 1998). According to Lounsberry (2002), sound, vibration and rhythmic beats can help us to deal with tension, which is especially important when “many people suffering rhythmic mismatches and stressful demands may refrain from their natural

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Figure 1. Aboriginal Women’s Hand Drumming (AWHD) Circle of Life Framework
rhythmic selves in order to accommodate the external world” (p. 45). One participant in the study noted that drumming relieves stress and increases vitality because it gets the “heart pounding, our blood flowing, and releases endorphins” (individual interview, February 2, 2005). As the body becomes invigorated and/or relaxed, individuals may also experience pain relief. Indeed, several participants mentioned the pain-relieving effects of drumming.

Since many Aboriginal women suffer from chronic health conditions (Health Canada, 2002), it is encouraging that some participants connected hand drumming with disease prevention, and that others found it helpful in dealing with their addictions. One participant for example, a former alcoholic, discovered that drumming is a fun social activity that she can actually remember the next day. This helps to explain why Aboriginal cultural practices such as drumming have been used in some addiction treatment programs as well as in substance abuse prevention initiatives (Hazel & Mohatt, 2001).

Links between mental well-being and hand drumming
Many of the participants in this study indicated that hand drumming has helped them to gain a better understanding and greater knowledge of their cultural traditions. Having learned the teachings of the drum, such as the meanings of its circular shape and the songs, some participants have begun to use the hand drum as a teaching tool in ceremonies, workshops and classrooms, where they help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people learn about our ways of life.

Participants also talked about how they gain relief from mental stress by hand drumming; it is a way to unclutter their minds of busy schedules and to escape the daily pressures of life. In addition, several participants hand drum as a way of meditating and centering themselves. One participant explained how the beat of the drum relaxes her conscious mind, which helps her to regain clarity and focus (individual interview, February 2, 2005). Another participant stated that she does not think of anything when she is drumming, which is unusual for her (individual interview, December 22, 2004). This has been referred to as “being in the here and now” (Friedman, 2000, p. 3); when one hits the drum, one is placed completely in the present moment.

The women also talked about how when they are drumming, if any thoughts do come to mind, they tend to be positive. One woman noted that she has learned to identify her needs through hand drumming, and when she starts thinking negatively, she knows it is time to drum
again (journal entry, September 9, 2004). Moreover, being around other people who are trying to make positive changes in their lives helps to create an atmosphere where one can have a positive outlook on life.

Participating in drumming circles also helps to increase the women's self-confidence. In a drumming circle, no one is considered a failure; drumming is something that almost anyone can do, and one's singing ability is never criticized. Many of the participants indicated that they have gained enough confidence to drum and sing in front of others. It is not uncommon to see Aboriginal women hand drumming at public functions and ceremonies in the community where this study was completed.

**Links between spiritual well-being and hand drumming**

Of the four elements of being (physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional), the spiritual benefits of hand drumming were discussed most frequently by the participants. Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of all Aboriginal cultures and is often integrated into every aspect of daily life. Many Aboriginal people strive to feel spiritually connected; this helps to explain why the word “connection” came up numerous times in the sharing circle, interviews, and journals of participants. One woman stated that “the drum awakens our connection to all life” (individual interview, February 2, 2005). Participants believed that the drum can be used as a tool to connect them to the Creator, the Spirit World, Mother Earth, and to other members of their community.

The drum serves as a bridge between the spirit and earth worlds, by providing us with a tool to send out our prayers. When we make contact with the drum, it awakens our spirits and fills a void that we may not have even known was there. It is as if the drumbeat connects to our heartbeat and is able to help guide us on our journey. Black Elk, a well known Lakota spiritual leader, believes that “when you pray with that drum, when the spirits hear that drum, it echoes. They hear this drum and hear your voice loud and clear” (Black Elk & Lyon, 1990, p. 149).

Spiritual tools such as the drum also help us, as Aboriginal people, to achieve peace and contentment. When drumming and reaching a level of synchronicity with others, a spiritual energy spreads throughout the circle. One participant noted, “when we start out the evening just beating the drum together, I feel a certain peace and power” (journal entry, October, 29, 2004). With the drum we are able to celebrate our connection to the Creator and all of Creation. Drumming is a celebration, a spiritual expression that can be shared with others who take part by listening, dancing or drumming along. The hand drum and the drumming circle have enabled many participants to grow spiritually.

**Links between emotional well-being and hand drumming**

Many of the women who participated in this study described feeling emotionally moved when they heard a drum. Some participants had been especially moved when they first heard women drumming and singing together; some were even brought to tears. One woman explained, “It seemed like there was something deep inside that needed to be released” (journal entry, September 9. 2004). These emotional experiences increased many of the participants’ desire to drum.

Indeed, many of the women said they use the hand drum for emotional release. One participant said, “I really rely on that drum when I’m sad, when I’m happy, even when I’m angry” (sharing circle, July 6, 2004). Aboriginal people, who might have difficulty expressing their feelings through the medium of language, can express themselves through drumming. Several participants stated that the hand drum, also referred to as the “grandmother drum,” provides emotional comfort to all who are in her presence, especially to those who are grieving the loss of friends and relatives.

Participants also mentioned that when they gather together to drum, they laugh and have fun. Some women said they even feel comfortable enough to laugh at themselves while participating in a hand-drumming circle; they find happiness and enjoyment in drumming. Napoli (2002) describes the role of humour in Aboriginal societies in the following manner: “When their hearts are heavy with emotion or a situation is difficult Native people embrace humour as a way of healing. Humour helps the person feel a sense of relief” (p.1573). Since humour is considered “good medicine” in many Aboriginal communities, hand drumming can provide a form of emotional relief and healing for those who participate in the drum circles.

**The development of social support networks through hand drumming practices**

Drumming draws people together; the steady beat of the drum acts as a magnet. Elder Lokoduq stated, “When you hear drumming, you go, because that is where everybody is” (personal communication, April 14, 2004). In our study, the hand-drumming circles to which the urban Aboriginal women belong have helped to create a sense of community...
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and belonging, because they are inclusive and welcoming. Moreover, the women feel they are stable places where they can safely share their life experiences. It was not uncommon to hear the women refer to others in their drumming circle as their “sisters,” even though there is no family connection. Indeed, one participant said “It [the hand-drumming circle] is kind of like family” (sharing circle, July 6, 2004), indicating that participation in the circle provides her with an extended family similar to one that would be provided by kin relations.

Aboriginal women depend on each other for survival, and they do this by sharing and listening to one another’s stories. As stated by Napoli (2002), “Gathering together to support each other has been a traditional custom for Native women” (p. 1573). In the Ojibwe language, an Aboriginal woman is called an Anishnaabe Kwe and several Aboriginal women are referred to as Anishnaabe Kweg. The co-researchers of this study suggested that Anishnaabe Kweg can also be used to describe the act of how Aboriginal women, together, support one another to become strong. Some of the participants discussed their preference to hand drum with other women who share a common understanding and experience of issues such as racism, oppression, violence, and feelings of separation from their communities.

“Helping self” and “helping others” also emerged as strong themes in the study, and many of the participants commented on how they hand drum and share the teachings not only to help themselves, but also to help their community, hence providing mutual healing. This reciprocal benefit is enhanced in that the women drummers feel good about themselves because they are able to help others.

**Links between culture and hand drumming**

The Elders say that we must know where we come from to know who we are. Cultural identity is a key determinant of how Aboriginal people view and express themselves (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b, p. 534). Wilson (2005) further discusses how cultural identity, health and wellness are inseparable. Aboriginal traditions provide a way to express who we are with pride. Several women who participated in this study talked about the concepts of pride and identity. One said she feels proud taking care of, and carrying, a drum. Many participants discussed how their identity is now intricately connected to their drums, and how they cannot imagine their lives without them. The women also discussed the importance of learning songs in Aboriginal languages, such as Ojibwe, because not knowing the language of your ancestors limits your ability to understand your culture. The revitalization of Aboriginal languages is key to the revitalization of Aboriginal cultures, and Aboriginal women’s hand-drumming practices are an important part of this.

One traditional grandmother talked about how in order to receive a drum, you have to know the teachings and songs that are associated with it. She said, “You have to earn the drum” (personal communication, January 19, 2004). Elders have also taught us that we cannot pick up someone else’s drum and start using it without that person’s permission. These are important teachings about respect that we must know and practice if we are to carry a drum. Other teachings that were shared by participants included treating one’s drum like a child, such as covering it with a blanket when it is cold, and refraining from the use of drugs and alcohol when around the drum. The more we know about our sacred items, such as the drum, the more we will know about ourselves and how to obtain and maintain balance amongst the four elements of our being.

Patterson (1996) writes that the woman’s role in some Aboriginal societies is that of protector and teacher of traditions and histories. All participants in our study were inspired to hand drum as a way to preserve their culture, and they felt empowered to pass on the teachings they had received about the hand drum to their children and the youth in their communities. They also discussed the pride they feel as teachers, and in seeing youth use the hand drum.

**Links between holistic health, well-being and hand drumming**

According to Svenson & Lafontaine (1999), the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, although culturally diverse, share a more holistic worldview of health than the western world. The holistic themes that emerged in this study were: healing, finding voice and empowerment, renewal and strength, and Mino-Bimaadiziwin. The concept and practice of healing is critical to the health and well-being of Aboriginal people. During our healing journey we become motivated to take care of our whole being and all of our relationships. As part of this journey, many Aboriginal women are once again finding their voices (Patterson, 1996) and feeling empowered by learning the practice of hand drumming. Participants believed that hand drumming increases their overall strength and their ability to handle the difficulties in their lives. Several women also feel a sense of renewal when drumming—a feeling of being reborn. Most importantly, participating in hand-drumming circles has allowed these women to feel they are living “the good life,” or Mino-Bimaadiziwin.
CONCLUSIONS

The majority of health research about Aboriginal people to date has been focused on disease and dysfunction (Reading & Nowgesic, 2002), resulting in numerous statistics, but very few solutions (Atkinson, Graham, Pettit & Lewis, 2002; Oberly & Macedo, 2004). While it is true that many Aboriginal people, women in particular, suffer from poor health (Anderson, 2005; Stout, 2005), when the continuing focus is on the negative issues affecting Aboriginal communities—such as addictions, abuse and violence—it is difficult for members of these communities to achieve wellness. To more successfully promote Aboriginal health and well-being, emphasis should be on the promotion of holistic healing by drawing on the strengths of cultural traditions.

Over the past decade, Aboriginal people have become increasingly involved in the development and application of research methods that are more respectful of our own cultures and traditions. Indigenous research methodologies enable us to collectively apply our traditional knowledge in order to explore current health issues from a more holistic perspective. This approach is consistent with a key value of health promotion—empowerment—which is at the heart of the definition listed in the Ottawa Charter. Aboriginal people need to continue developing research methods that are embedded in our own epistemological lenses (Absolon & Willett, 2004), in order to promote health and healing in our communities. The women who participated in this study believe that the revival of traditional activities, such as hand drumming, can offer a way of promoting overall well-being, or Mino-Bimaadiziwin.

The circle is a key symbol fundamental to the research methodology used in this study. It represents the holistic way of life that is widely promoted among Aboriginal societies. Many important healing tools, such as the drum, are also circular to remind us that we are all related, and that we need to work together as a collective in order to become stronger. We can gain strength from partaking in a drumming circle because, as the participants in this study noted, it provides a sense of community, belonging, inclusiveness, safety, and stability. In the circle we share and listen to one another, and by helping others in this way, we also help ourselves. Together within the drumming circle we support each other like sisters, as Anishnaabe Kweg. Hence, the drumming circle provides a social support network—an extended family—for its members.

Each woman who participated in this study played an important role in contributing to a better understanding of the positive connection between hand-drumming practices and health promotion. This study provides an example of how Aboriginal women can become involved with research in a way that builds on and strengthens our cultural traditions. The practice of hand drumming provided an excellent way to explore the concepts of health and well-being among Aboriginal women. The study of other traditional activities could have similar positive outcomes and provide further insights into the links between our cultural practices and health promotion strategies that are relevant to our needs and respectful of our people.

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END NOTES

1. To honour the original Peoples of this territory, we practise Ojibwe protocols and language.

2. For the sake of anonymity, one female Ojibwe Elder asked to be referred to as a "traditional grandmother," while others preferred to use their Spirit names instead of their English names.

3. This term is used to refer to Indigenous Peoples' perspectives globally.