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An Introduction to the 2SHAWLS Article Collection



The Two-spirit HIV/AIDS Wellness and Longevity Study (2SHAWLS) ran between 2012 – 2015 (data collection occurred in April, May and June 2013).

This project was born from the experiences of Indigenous community providers who were frustrated with the ongoing focus in research on the perceived dysfunction, harm, suffering, and pathology among two-spirit people living long-term with HIV. Community providers working with many long-term HIV-positive two-spirit men report they are doing very well, but the voices and experiences of these men are rarely represented in the research literature. Through conversations between a leading Indigenous elder and community provider (Art Zoccole) and a new academic researcher in social work (David J. Brennan), along with an Indigenous scholar (Randy Jackson) and another community provider (Tony Nobis), a commitment was made to seek funding to establish a community-based research study that foregrounded Indigenous knowledges and experiences in ways that would highlight the resilience of two-spirit men who are living long-term with HIV.

We sought to better understand what living with HIV long-term was like, how research could address these needs and experiences, and how programs and services can continue to build on the strengths and resources found among two-spirit men who were living long-term with HIV. Along the way, there were many delights and challenges. Ample creativity was engaged to ensure the voices of two-spirit men living long-term with HIV would be captured to build an arc of learning, discourse and research that was more inclusive, and that fostered an Indigenous lens. As well, important relationships were built that continue to this day, and provide ongoing opportunities to shift the research and literature discourse about how we understand resilience from an Indigenous perspective.

The research team was a blend of HIV-positive two-spirit/gay/bisexual men who are living long-term with HIV, and settler academics. This created opportunities to teach each other about our world views, how we come to understand the world, and how we can seek to create change to better represent the needs of two spirit men living long-term with HIV. It was through these relationships among the research team and the exchange of differing worldviews, that we were able to negotiate some of the challenges we experienced, including working within western paradigms of research funding, research ethics, and understanding different worldviews in order to create new and lasting ways of adding to the ongoing research that affects Indigenous people living with HIV.

It is through this process that we have developed three papers for inclusion in the Journal of Indigenous HIV Research. These three papers represent distinct areas of focus of the 2SHAWLS project. Our first paper presents a scoping review of the health research literature to report how issues of resilience were identified among two-spirit men who are living with HIV long-term. The summary of those findings provides an important digest of what is known and what has yet to be known in the existing academic literature. Our second paper describes our study methods in detail with a focus on lessons learned in developing and executing the study, and the ways in which we sought to blend Indigenous and western ways of knowing to build a study that moves the academic field forward. Our last paper in this volume presents the results from the study. These results suggest that there are new critical elements to understanding how two-spirit men living with HIV long-term manage their ongoing health and wellness needs. Grounded in Indigenous methodologies and knowledge such as the Medicine Wheel, we present how study participants described what we labeled as their journeys to understanding resilience.

A few challenges caused us to be significantly delayed in the presentation of these findings. Most importantly was that from a relatively early point, the research team felt like we wanted to do the work in a good way—a way that is deeply embedded in community engagement and prioritizes process over western structures of deadlines and timelines. In addition, our research team had two significant transitions over the course of time. Tony Nobis, one of our passionate community leaders, passed into the spirit world suddenly at a point in time where we were working to try and incorporate his teachings and lessons into our understanding of the findings. In addition, Art Zoccole retired and stepped away from the front-line work in which he had been such a significant force for a long period of time. Though it took us a while to get back on track, the team feels the work we have done has significant meaning for those who are affected by the very issues we describe.

Finally, we are extremely grateful to the Journal of Indigenous Health Research and the staff at CAAN for their ongoing support and guidance in ensuring that we were able to develop these three papers that will hopefully be used by others to continue to build the scholarship in the areas of understanding how HIV impacts two-spirit men who live long-term with HIV.

In solidarity,

DJB

RJ

GG

CH

AZ

And TN