



## Stronger Together: Helping each other to strengthen and sustain Indigenous youth identity and cultural knowledge

The Impact of Participation in a Canoe Journey on the Ethnic Identity of First Nations Young Men  
Dr. Chris Lalonde (University of Victoria) and Dr. Travis Holyk (Carrier-Sekani Family Services)

### Background

A relationship with the natural world for First Nations peoples has been characterized as more than merely feeling connected to the land, but rather that the land is an essential component of their identity (Wilson, 2003). Discussing the physical land and water in relation to identity exemplifies the complex understanding of health and well-being for First Nations peoples. In terms of mental health promotion for Aboriginal youth, in a report on best practices, Williams and Mumtaz (2007) suggested that programming should be focused on both individual and community healing. The focus on cultural assets and building of ethnic identity are two of the foundations of the Carrier-Sekani Family Services Canoe Journey Program. Ethnic Identity is the self-concept that comes from knowing one is a member of a specific ethnic or cultural group, and the value and emotional significance attached to this group membership (Tajfel, 1981). Identity development is central to the adolescence period of life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). During this process of development, some environments are more suitable for fostering ethnic identity development than others.

### Methodology

The current study explored participants' perceptions of their ethnic identity after they had participated in CSFS's Canoe Journey in the summer of 2013. The Journey is a five day program during which participants live off the land the entire time. Each day, the group travels on Lake Babine in traditional canoes, followed by setting up wilderness camping and cooking facilities. Lessons from Elders in traditional ways of life (e.g., hunting, storytelling) are woven throughout the program. Individual interviews took place with 11 participants when the Canoe Journey was completed; 12 participants completed quantitative surveys. The participants were all young First Nations men (ages 13-20) from the Prince George area in Northern BC. Academic and community based researchers drafted 11 interview questions to learn more about participants' cultural and identity development on the canoe journey. Individual interviews were conducted in the Prince George area. The interviews took five to ten minutes, and were followed by a quantitative survey. The interviews were transcribed, and analyzed using a content analysis process (Gordon-Finlayson, 2010) in which similar comments were grouped to form themes. The survey consisted of 16 questions assessed on a 5-point Likert-scale ( $1 = strongly disagree$ ,  $5 = strongly agree$ ). The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) was used to make up the first 12 questions, and the remaining 4 items were designed by CSFS to reflect the overall goals of the Canoe Journey.

### Results

#### Interviews

Three major themes were identified: Cultural Awareness, Identity Development, and Community Awareness. Within these major themes, several sub-themes were also identified.

**Cultural Awareness:** The development of a more enhanced level of cultural awareness was a prominent theme in the interviews. Some young men had an existing high level of cultural awareness, while others were learning for the first time that about their First Nations culture. There were three sub-themes in this section: Appreciation of Elders, Traditional Life, and Nature Connection.

**Identity Development:** The interviews revealed participants had experienced substantial shifts in their understandings of who they are as individuals. There were two different paths leading to this personal change, which were identified as sub-themes: First Nations Identity, and Personal Growth.

**Community Awareness:** This is the smallest of the three major theme areas identified. Socially, the Canoe Journey offered the participants a unique opportunity to connect with other young men from the same traditional territory and to build an awareness of their community resources. The young men spoke about how they learned more about activities running in their communities, and felt more encouraged to be involved.



### Survey

The first 12 questions of the survey were designed to measure Ethnic Identity. The young men in this study scored quite high; in fact, scores are considerably higher than those reported in other studies. Participants tended not to choose either of the two lowest options “strongly disagree”, and “disagree”. Rather, “neutral” was most commonly used as the lowest response. Therefore, participants had very high scores from this survey. This suggests that the young men already felt strong in their identity as a First Nations person. The final 4 questions of the survey asked questions about improvements in the lives of the young men as a result of participating in the Canoe Journey. The majority of the participants agreed that the Canoe Journey helped them improve their knowledge of First Nations culture, strengthened their connection to Elders, and improved their sense of self (self-esteem).

### Conclusion

Results from this study offered a glimpse at how the young men developed their identity and connected with their culture on the Canoe Journey. Expanding cultural awareness was one of the most salient aspects of the Canoe Journey. Many responses were about new cultural understandings learned from the Elders on the Journey. The Elders sharing their knowledge and the opportunity to practise the culture (e.g., hunting, singing) gave the young men a strong connection to their First Nations culture. Similarly, it has been established in the literature that being part of the Indigenous legacy by passing on culture is an important part of developing one’s ethnic identity (House, Stiffman, & Brown, 2006). In this research, participants also reported being connected to the legacy of Indigenous people as a factor in what grounds them. This evidence highlights the importance that ancestral connection can play in the lives of Indigenous people. There has been little investigation into the cultural and identity development of Aboriginal young people. The narratives provided by the participants in this study contribute new insights into cultural and identity theory that are of concrete and practical relevance for educators, parents, Elders, practitioners, and policy makers. Further, the Indigenous epistemological framework contributes to the research methodology literature, and extends our understanding of community-based and Indigenous methodologies. This may be valuable for other researchers who wish to review a study that integrates the research interests of both university and community partners.

### References

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