Partnering to Build a Social Co-operative for Aboriginal Women Transitioning from Prison

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We report in this paper on practices and momentum of a research project undertaken by a university-community team that began with the idea of studying the feasibility of developing a co-operative for justice-involved women. Currently, our research has advanced towards beginning stages of practical implementation of catering and sewing co-operatives housed in an education centre for women newly released from corrections. Our paper examines how movement toward the goal of establishing a co-operative needs to be tempered by recognition of the difficulties of overcoming the intersectionalities of oppression and awareness of the complexities of building Indigenous-non-Indigenous alliances. We track moves from project inception toward the development of a social co-operative. This is a report on our work in building a cross-cultural team and an action-oriented approach to promoting safe conditions for Aboriginal women as they transition out of the justice system. We explore the fit between co-operative principles and Aboriginal values. Our overall project seeks to learn from successful reintegration co-operatives in Italy and other countries and to contribute to development of a broadly defined multiple-literacies programme. Rather than being guided by a vision of "co-operating at the edge," we are working on a plan to "co-operate in connection".

Introduction: Who's Your Community?

Intense spirit of community — the feeling of equality and solidarity — seldom extends through the prison walls for those whose paths have not collided with the justice system. Many of us who conduct research or control resources for social enterprise development remain unaware not only of those community members who have been removed to prison but also those who have returned to carry with them the stigma of being an "ex-offender. For many Aboriginal people in the inner city, by contrast, the intersection between family and prison is a lived experience and poverty, violence, and addictions are expressways back to jail. The subtitle for this introductory section of our paper (*Who's Your Community?*) picks up on Florida's (2008) helpful challenge to the maintenance of status quo boundaries in *Who's Your City?*; yet in place of Florida's question about opportunities for urban growth in the development of elite arts communities, we ask about opportunities for those who are oppressed into invisibility by the punishing judgments of the justice system and wider society. In urban inner-city communities, Aboriginal women are a population who are among the most vulnerable to oppression by a justice system that creates dangerous boundaries of exclusivity. We witness the daily disappearance of women from the downtown streets, trapped in a "discourse of sexual domination through violence … dependent upon creating borders, upon categorising and excluding or destroying 'others'" (Anderson et al, 2010: 7). Our research explores how co-operative opportunities provide educational and economic alternatives for justice-involved women who are at the intersection of a number of systems of oppression and whose needs remain invisible and under-resourced.

As university researchers and non-Aboriginal community members, we began this project hoping to discover possible and existing ways to intervene in a vicious circle of inner-city street life mixed with bouts of incarceration. We anticipated that a conceptual shift was required so that those of us who have not experienced criminalisation and incarceration might be moved to stand beside or closer to those who have. To pursue this project we initiated discussions with staff and residents of Eagle Woman's Lodge, a newly established facility for justice-involved women seeking educational and training opportunities as they are reuniting with their community and with their families. A co-operative venture is taking shape in the form of catering and sewing collectives. This paper reports some of the work we have done to cultivate this

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partnership and determine the shape of our role and contributions. Partnership-building work like this can be slow and may take unexpected turns that can be either dead ends or openings.

We have learned that walls are built on both sides of the cultural divide that exists within this city (as in other parts of Canada) and that finding passages takes work. What we report on here depends on building cross-cultural allegiances and is informed by a growing body of research that explores the complexity of “Indigenous-non-Indigenous relationships” and “transcend[ing] the powerful binaries of coloniser and colonised” (FitzMaurice 2010: 364). We are envisioning a new community of social enterprise and life-long learning for those willing to build new partnerships, going forward with stronger awareness that it is “hard learning how to do this kind of work … [because] working through something as intense and deep as colonisation causes pain for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples” (Davis and Shpuniarsky 2010: 343). Our report on working within an Aboriginal community in Winnipeg may be helpful to researchers working with Aboriginal people in cities across Canada.

Our research supports the work of those involved in long-term community development at the social and economic margins or “edges”. We have been encouraged by Hammond Ketilson’s (2014) observations of the linkage between traditional Indigenous and co-operative values which has supported the growth and community integration of the Arctic Co-op in the far north. Long-term community activist Hunter (2014) calls attention to the particularly strong appeal of the co-operative culture for Aboriginal women who are motivated by community and relationship-based work: “I grew up in a co-operative setting where we take care of each other. It’s good for today’s Aboriginal women because there are so many single parent families whose adult members need each other’s support. It’s also the grandmothers in the low-income inner city who keep the family together by getting together and sharing” (Hunter, 2014). In place of being oppressed and invisible, women experience greater empowerment through co-operative involvement and an agency to take up their place in a more open, functioning and diverse community. Our research on Aboriginal women and social co-operatives, grounded in the Winnipeg context, presents an opportunity to inform other urban centres encountering similar conditions of marginalisation.

Exploring the Co-operative Option

The urban Aboriginal population is growing nationwide according to an Environics Institute report:

> The urban Aboriginal Population in Canada now numbers over 600,000 and is at an all time high. There are now more Aboriginal people living in urban centres across Canada than there are living in Aboriginal territories and communities on reserves, in Metis settlements and in Inuit communities. (Environics, 2010: 8)

Nowhere is the Aboriginal population growing faster than in Winnipeg, propelled by factors that push people out of underserviced northern communities and pull people towards services and urban opportunities. Unfortunately, poverty and unemployment rates in Winnipeg’s Aboriginal community are keeping pace with population growth, fueled by lack of education and suitable training.

For Aboriginal women, along with poverty and unemployment, come the dangers of inner-city street life: “Low education levels, poverty and economic dependency are typical characteristics of Aboriginal women who experience violence,” according to Canada’s Aboriginal Affairs Working Group (2011). For criminalised Aboriginal women, the situation is still worse. Research reveals that there is “a staggering increase in the numbers of incarcerated women” (Eljdupovic and Bromwich, 2013: 7) and Aboriginal women are over-represented, many having committed crimes of fraud and prostitution to meet their day-to-day needs and those of their families.

There is no question that some form of social enterprise and engagement is needed, but the question that drives our overall research project is the practicality of a social co-operative for

Aboriginal women transitioning from prison. Encouragingly, Loxley (2010) in his research on Aboriginal economic development recommends "that co-operatives are seen to be a suitable organisational form for social enterprise" and "that there is interest in having the goods and services of daily life provided by social enterprises in the form of co-operatives" (224-225). As recent research into the attitude of female Aboriginal inmates towards co-operatives attests, co-operative values such as respect and reciprocity may hold a gendered appeal (Findlay et al, 2013: 58-59). A co-operative model may further appeal to a justice-involved population — many of whom lack work experience — by offering the transparency of "a clear legal framework, including that of democratic decision-making, profit-sharing and taxation" (Loughran cited in Loxley, 2010: 225).

In their Canada-wide study, Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson (2001) are among those who see co-operatives as a natural fit in Aboriginal communities. They have observed the close fit between the main priorities for economic development identified by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Government of Canada, 1996) and co-operative principles. The convergence of goals and values arise from the flexibility of co-operatives, the collective spirit, a focus on "process," and the locating of development at local, community level. Amin (2009) identifies the current interest in social economy as a response to our search for an alternative that would support these goals:

> allow diverse forms of social ownership, harness finance to productive use, mobilise local resources and capabilities, serve social and developmental needs, empower producers and consumers, and reinforce human solidarity and ethical care (3-4).

Social enterprise models are flourishing in Europe and we believe they may provide a timely intervention in traditional approaches toward greater economic inclusion in Canada and the United States. Quarter and Melnyk (1989) argue forcefully in support of workers' co-operatives, one promising form of social enterprise, as a democratising force in the economy and an opportunity for the direct voice of the workers to be heard. For those shunned by the dominant market economy, a workers' co-operative may provide a route back into society, an opportunity for self-actualisation, and a working environment that is compatible with indigenous values.

While the literature suggests co-operatives should flourish in inner-city neighbourhoods and may meet economic need in urban centres where Aboriginal residents are concentrated, many such enterprises struggle for years to establish a membership that functions well and has commitment to co-operative principles (Champagne, 2010). Because there is no established formula for success, our research began by examining attitudes towards co-operative development in inner-city Winnipeg and continues to document issues related to the readiness of participants and the needs of potential consumers and clients. We have currently advanced towards studying the beginning stages of practical implementation of catering and sewing co-operatives housed in an education centre for women newly released from prison; while we participate in planning sessions, our core role is research-oriented, so that we maintain a reflective approach to documenting steps in the process of co-operative development.

The following overall objectives frame our larger research project and we report on the first three in this paper:

1. Identifying the need for social enterprise options for Aboriginal women transitioning from prison and the option of establishing social co-operatives as a specific model in this context.

2. Building a cross-cultural team and an action-oriented approach to promoting safe conditions for Aboriginal women living in the inner city as they transition from prison.

3. Creating a research environment that enables a consultative exploration of the fit between co-operative principles and structures and Aboriginal values and needs.

4. Drawing lessons from successful reintegration co-operatives in Italy and other countries.

5. Contributing to the development of a broadly defined multiple-literacies programme that supports social enterprise in Winnipeg for justice-involved Aboriginal women.

Aboriginal Women Transitioning from Prison

The Aboriginal population in Winnipeg and in Winnipeg's inner city is large and growing: "Some 50,000 Aboriginal people currently live in Winnipeg and by the year 2016, one in five children in Winnipeg will be Aboriginal" (Loxley, 2010: 225). We know that the Aboriginal community, both male and female, is over-represented in the prison system (Eljdupovic and Bromwich, 2013: 43). According to Comack, Deane, Morrissette and Silver (2009), women re-entering the community after imprisonment are frequently locked into the street lifestyle. Despite research demonstrating the "systemic nature of violence, racism, and poverty in Canadian women's lives," little is done to help the growing number of criminalised women who are often dismissed as "too few to count" (Adelberg and Currie, 1987) or 'more mad than bad' (Allen 1987)" (Balfour and Comack, 2006: 17). Strategies that provide training and work encourage disadvantaged adult learners to gain a critical sense of commitment to the communities from which they come, having transformative outcomes "in the fight against poverty and colonisation" (Silver, 2013: 16).

In Winnipeg there are several social enterprises aimed at addressing the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people transitioning into the workforce after incarceration. OPK (Ogijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin) teaches from a traditional, indigenous perspective and provides construction skills on the job. The OPK programme (Bracken et al, 2009: 69; Morrissette, 2013) is based on "holistic healing". Men and women who are transitioning also work at BUILD (Building Urban Industry for Local Development), an organisation that has its own training strategy. BUILD supports a community development approach focused on convergence theory which supports meeting basic needs with local resources. As in the case of OPK, the interest among men and women leaving prison and looking for work is not only in finding employment but also in giving back to the community. Residents of Eagle Women's Lodge, the site of our study, may enrol in the BUILD programme, which offers them three months of training in building construction.

The co-operative programme we are envisioning focuses attention on Aboriginal women at risk of returning to prison. We begin with the observation that the number of Aboriginal women who are federally sentenced in Canada is increasing at a rate that exceeds even that of Aboriginal men. From 1996/97 to 2001/02 the number of federally sentenced Aboriginal women increased by 36.7 per cent, compared with 5.5 per cent for Aboriginal men (Solicitor General of Canada, 2002). In an updated report using statistics from 2010, the numbers are worse: while four per cent of the Canadian population is recognised as Aboriginal, 21 per cent of the inmate population is of Aboriginal decent and 33 per cent of incarcerated females are Aboriginal. (Eljdupovic and Bromwich, 2013: 44)

Statistics reveal that Aboriginal women are disadvantaged in parole and sentencing options:

> Aboriginal women are almost fifty per cent more likely to be in a maximum security setting, twenty per cent more likely to be in a medium security setting, and fifty per cent less likely to be in a minimum security setting than non-Aboriginal women. (Eljdupovic and Bromwich, 2013: 44)

Apart from being faced with discrimination and danger in the process of criminalisation, Aboriginal women are subjected to similar threats to safety living on the outside. An estimated 75 Aboriginal women disappeared in Manitoba in the last two decades. Across Canada 580 women have gone missing or been murdered since 1990 (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010).

Elizabeth Fry reports on disturbing numbers at the provincial level where the majority of women are sentenced: "Indigenous women comprised more than 85 per cent of admissions of women in jails in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and just over half in Alberta. Yet, in 2006, Indigenous adults represented only eleven per cent, twelve per cent and five per cent of these provincial populations" (Elizabeth Fry Society, 2011). Eljdupovic and Bromwich (2013) point out that sixty per cent of incarcerated women have children under the age of 18, that "the incarcerated Aboriginal population is younger than the non-Aboriginal population," and that because many are likely to be young mothers who serve sentences in prisons, "a higher proportion of incarcerated Aboriginal women than non-Aboriginal women are separated from their children"

(45-46). Picking up on all of these trends Elizabeth Fry provides the following profile of an Indigenous woman prisoner, drawn from information on the Correctional Services Canada website:

> CSC describes "the average Indigenous" woman in federal penitentiary as 27 years old with a limited education (usually grade nine), unemployed or under-employed, and the sole support mother of two or three children. She is usually unemployed at the time she is arrested. She has often left home at an early age to escape violence. She may be forced to sell her body because she needs money and is unable to obtain a job. She is likely to have been subjected to racism, stereotyping and discrimination because of her race and colour. However her experience on the streets becomes violent as she continues to experience sexual, emotional and physical abuse. She is likely to become involved in an abusive relationship. There are children born from this relationship and the social, emotional and economic struggle continues. The cycle of an unhealthy family continues. (Elizabeth Fry Society, 2013)

Our project is a response to the recommendation of Eljdupovic and Bromwich (2013), that the over-representation of Aboriginal women among the criminalised population needs to be addressed by "investments in community infrastructure and education as well as investments in community-based restorative justice practices" to prevent "social inequities and crime while supporting the healing and community reintegration of Aboriginal women and their children" (55). The co-operative and education project we are exploring at Eagle Women's Lodge seeks to meet the unmet needs of women exiting from provincial corrections facilities, while also including women released from federal prisons and from Drug Treatment Court. Those interested in pursuing education and participating in co-operative work will be offered the opportunity of selecting Eagle Women's Lodge as transition housing dedicated to these opportunities.

Social Co-operatives – From Italy to Manitoba: What Travels Well?

The Italian model of the social co-operative is one that presents two options, one for the delivery of social services and one for people facing employment disadvantages (Restakis, 2010). With our commitment to expanding training and job opportunities for Aboriginal women with limited work experience, we are interested in the second option. In our larger research project we will consider how social co-operatives in Canada might be informed by Italian practices in terms of motivations, training supports, and meeting political and legal challenges.

Our initial understanding of factors that would affect the establishment of social co-operatives for offenders is based on Harris' participation in interviews and tours (accompanying A Hoyt and W Dickie, University of Wisconsin) with Cooperativa Sociale Giotto and the Palazzi Jail in Padua, Coop Kaleidoscopio and Co-op Coste in Trento, and Canton Mombello in Milan. Restakis (2010) describes the roots of Italian social co-operatives in the struggle for a decent standard of living for people with disabilities and other disadvantages. He explains that during the 1980s, social services were in short supply in Italy due to inefficiencies in the public system. Act 381 (1991), recognising social co-operatives, was passed after ten years of parliamentary debate (Borzaga 2011). The social co-operative in its two forms — those that deliver social, health and educational services (Type-A) and those co-operatives that produce goods and services for private customers or for public agencies to integrate disadvantaged people into the labour market (Type-B) — represents an important innovation domestically and internationally. These social co-operatives are worker-owned but required to carry out activities for the general benefit of the community and the social integration of citizens.

Italian social co-operative law permits three categories of membership: workers, consumers, and volunteers and supporters. To allow the co-operatives to remain small and responsive, consortia have been set up at the regional, provincial, and national levels (operating as a general contractor or conducting research, training, and counselling co-operatives). By 2008, 269 social co-operative consortia had been established (Carpita, Andreaus, Costa and Carina, cited in Borzaga and Galera, 2012: 99). When Act 381 was passed in 1991, there were 2,000 social co-operatives and by the end of 1997 the number had more than doubled to 4,500:

> In 2008 there were over 12,428 social co-operatives employing 350,000 workers, 35,000 volunteers, and with 4,500 users. As a sector, social co-operatives had a turnover of 9 billion Euro, created value added for 5.3 billion Euro, and had an invested capital of 7.2 billion Euro. (Borzaga and Galera, 2012: 95)

The Italian model provides significant supportive national legislative advantages for social co-operatives. For example, disadvantaged workers must make up at least 30% of members in Type-B co-operatives. In turn, the co-operative and the individual are exempt from payment of the mandatory national insurance contribution for those workers. In the 1990s authorities and agencies were allowed to outsource services to co-operatives or other enterprises, providing additional contract opportunities for social co-operatives. In addition, Borzaga and Galera (2012) describe a strong, contributing civil society sector as evidenced by the numbers of volunteers involved in the work of Italy's social co-operatives.

The different social history and tax structure in Canada make establishing social co-operatives a challenging prospect, yet co-operatives offer likely social cost-savings that are attractive, given the challenging fiscal environment faced by government agencies. In place of tax incentives, start-up grants, particularly in Manitoba and Quebec, encourage co-operative development and auger well for future growth of this sector. Given neo-liberal cuts to social programmes and the weakening of the social safety net, organisations in the non-profit sector may follow their Italian counterparts and look increasingly to the social co-operative model. Many community development organisations and Aboriginal leaders in Winnipeg's inner city are interested in the development of social co-operatives. Our proposed co-operatives, whether catering, sewing, or other, tap into Aboriginal values that complement a co-operative approach (Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson, 2001).

Italian social co-operatives located in the prisons have been highly successful. Hoyt (2012) reported on American recidivism rates in a presentation in Winnipeg, MB. She quotes the National Reentry Center:

> In a study of 15 states, more than two-thirds of state prisoners released in 1994 were re-arrested and more than half returned to prison within three years of their release (National Reentry Resource Center).
>
> In comparison, the rate for ex-offenders who have been members of social co-operatives is in the range of 1%-5%. This statistic — the very low recidivism rate for participants in the prison co-operatives — is nothing short of astounding and exceeds any other known attempt to reduce recidivism rates. It was this statistic that interested me in these co-ops (Hoyt, 2012).

A recent report by the John Howard Society (2013) summarises relevant experience with prisoner co-operatives "inside and outside of the walls" in the UK, Sweden, Italy, and Canada. As the prison population grows, budgets are stretched and there is growing interest in recovering costs of incarceration. The federal average daily inmate cost was $114,364 in 2010-11 compared to the $31,148 to maintain an ex-inmate in the community (John Howard Society 2013: 6). The following points capture John Howard's argument (24-28) that prison-based co-operatives offer restorative and transformational possibilities:

1. Remunerative work can contribute to victim restitution, family obligations, and reintegration costs.
2. Prison work can link to outside work in co-operative or other employment.
3. Social enterprise can achieve measurable outcomes which would deliver taxpayer savings and could make use of social finance instruments.
4. Peer-supported models can be employed to assist with assessment of potential participants entering the programme.
5. Safe integration is promoted through diverse partnerships and stakeholders.
6. Costs to the taxpayer can be reduced.

Despite these positive indicators, it is unlikely that co-operatives paying living wages will be realised in Canadian jails in the near future. Manitoba has seen some improvements in conditions for women. A new 100-cell Women's Correctional Centre (WCC) has just been completed in Headingly, Manitoba. The WCC is designed specifically for women, incorporating intimate spaces conducive to relationship building. Facilities for training programmes in life skills and food safety are also part of the architecture. These accommodations may signal a move to a better space and perhaps a shift in attitude as well.

In a Winnipeg Free Press interview in 2011, Lucille Bruce, the former Executive Director of the Native Women's Transition Centre in Winnipeg, said that positive changes cannot come soon enough to relieve the pressure created from years of under-sourced releasing of women into the community.

> What often ends up happening is (women) come back to Winnipeg with very little supports, no safe housing … and end up very often going back to the same kind of situations as to what brought them to jail in the first place. … To reintegrate successfully so they have stability, they need to feel really connected and supported, not just by native women, but by other organisations and services. … These women are from our community. They belong to the community. We have a responsibility to them. (Bruce cited in Provost, 2011)

Social care services such as education, health care, and care for those with disabilities are "relational goods," according to Restakis (2010: 101) — a specific kind of public good that by their nature requires that they be shared. They involve the exchange of human relations. Bruce is emphasising the relational nature of the services need by women transitioning from prison. We are proposing, in concert with Bernice Cyr, Executive Director of the Native Women's Transition Centre (and their Eagle Women's Lodge), and her staff, that the women transitioning at Eagle Women's Lodge be provided with training and supports that will help them establish co-operatives similar to Italy's Type B social co-operative — embedded in a community that is seeking to share information, responsibility, and power. Another term for this relationship is "reciprocity" a relationship of "mutual benefit on the basis of equality" (Restakis, 2010: 102). A unique Search Conference process provided us with further confirmation that there may be a "window of opportunity" for relation-based social co-operative development for women exiting correctional facilities (Cassels et al, 2012).

A Community Sounding: Social Enterprise for Women Transitioning from Prison

Upon returning to Winnipeg after viewing Italian prison co-operatives, Harris convened a university–community team (Jaqueline McLeod Rogers, Larry Morrissette, and Virginia Hunter) who hosted a "Search Conference" (Rehm and Cebula 1996) in December 2012. We brought together more than forty academics and practitioners from the legal system, literacy community, and social economy fields, as well as women from the community with lived experience. The Search Conference model was created by Emery (2000) who emphasises that this process of problem solving is rooted in oral tradition and follows a narrative design by which ideas unfold during the search process. Winnipeg is a small 'village city' where many people know each other and can interact with one another face-to-face. The hope was that all present would take part in this sharing and build strategies as a group. Emery insists that participants refrain from taking individual notes since, as they have been instructed in advance, the group objective is the priority.

We engaged a transcriber who took notes for simultaneous viewing by participants at the conference. Although we featured two keynote speakers, once their presentations were over, they joined discussion circles as full participants. We now have a website (www.womentransitioningprisons.ca) to extend the possibility of interactive sharing so that as much as possible the co-operative project belongs to the wider community. The final report of the Search Conference (Cassels et al, 2012) can be found on that website.

This "search" of the participants' knowledge of challenges and opportunities relevant to initiatives for previously incarcerated women identified barriers to integration, including a flawed justice system, particularly for Aboriginal women. They also identified opportunities to build on social capital development in the form of permeable community boundaries and diverse networks. Winnipeg's inner city is increasingly well developed in terms of the social capital needed to support worker and multi-stakeholder co-operatives (Cassels et al, 2012; Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson 2001). Co-operative development organisations such as SEED (Supporting Employment and Economic Development) and social enterprises such as BUILD have demonstrated the need, the willingness, and the supportive system that is in place in Manitoba for new co-operatives.

Our findings provided system-wide as well as quite specific guidelines for moving forward with the social co-operative project. Among them were the following:

- Recognition of institutionalised discrimination that is reflected in labels, standardised testing and policies.
- Awareness of what women, in particular, lose when they enter the penal system, including their families and children.
- The need for individual planning that takes place in the correctional facility to begin with education and employment.
- Commitment to a community development approach based on assets and drawing on peer mentorship opportunities.
- A multiple literacies approach.
- A curriculum that "transcends mere training models" and addresses day-to-day human needs of the women and their families.
- The opportunities available in social enterprise, when the challenges of employees become the concerns of management.
- Options for eliminating common barriers like childcare, when women with similar life experiences share in ownership of business (Cassels et al, 2012).

The Search Conference identified interest at the Elizabeth Fry Society in establishing a social enterprise for criminalised indigenous women who are keenly focused on education, employment, and recovering their children. For us, it also established a partnership with the Native Women's Transition Centre at their newly established Eagle Women's Lodge (EWL), where there was interest in an education and training centre that would lead into development of co-operatives. This education centre will be known as the Violet Nelson School after a well-loved staff person lost her life in a bicycle accident on her way to the EWL opening.

With awareness of both what co-operatives can accomplish in terms of reduced recidivism as well as current conditions in Canadian prisons that discourage in-house co-operatives, the social co-operatives we propose would be located in a transitioning environment. The challenge in changing the locale is that we do not have the "captive" group of workers; we do not have their attention the way we would in an environment of restrictive options. For our project to work, it would need to be backed up by in-house training programmes and its delivery would be accompanied by education programmes. This will happen when plans go ahead to convert Eagle Women's Lodge into an education centre that is also a hub for social co-operatives. The co-operatives we are envisioning in partnership with EWL offer a safety network and a living wage for women facing the challenge of transitioning from incarceration. The challenge we are facing in this setting with this proposed membership is to cultivate an interest — and even belief — in co-operative enterprise through education.

Research Approach and Development Team

The idea of considering the social co-operative as an alternative socio-economic model for women transitioning from prison emerged from J Harris' tour of Italian social co-operatives, many prison-based. The current research team is interdisciplinary, drawing on the resources of scholars in Urban and Inner-City Studies (Harris) and Rhetoric, Writing and Communication (McLeod Rogers) and the Indigenous experience and scholarship of community advisors (Morrissette, a social worker, and Hunter, a community researcher). This working group offers a cross-cultural perspective ballasted by the expertise in Indigenous culture and knowledge that is essential in a Winnipeg, inner-city case study. In its composition, the research team is responsive to an ethical regime recommended by Castellano (2004) emphasising the need to increase Aboriginal presence and leadership in research involving Aboriginal communities: "Aboriginal Peoples have a right to participate as principals or partners in research that generates knowledge affecting their culture, identity and well-being" (98).

Our group has expanded partnerships so that the work we are doing is in consultation with the leadership of Eagle Women's Lodge (EWL), a facility housing about 20 women transitioning from prison and the focus of our study. Executive Director Cyr is the driving force behind mapping these directions and developing the funding and the philosophical foundations for EWL. A central theme in her approach is to devise plans to keep the women safe rather than focusing on harm reduction (Caslor and Cyr, 2011). We work closely with Cyr and Valerie Vint, the EWL cultural programmer. Through this partnership we have received funding to equip a sewing circle, to develop the Lodge as an educational centre, and to retrofit the existing commercial kitchen facilities for a catering co-operative.

Our methodology is informed by principles identified by Cree researcher Shawn Wilson who examines Aboriginal approaches to knowledge making in his (2008) study. He emphasises the values of respect, relational responsibility, and reciprocity, principles appropriate and effective for community-university engagement in inner-city work that involves Aboriginal people. While most studies of university-community engagement identify values like the 3Rs of respect, relational responsibility and reciprocity, our project demonstrates that these elements are essential for scholarly and practical work to go forward.

Critical theory in the mid twentieth century called on the researcher to be self-reflective, to be open to the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, and to understand power as "sustained by not only large structural forces such as legal regimes and schooling, but also through the discourses and practices of everyday life" (Davis and Shpuniarsky, 2010: 335). As non-Aboriginal university researchers the authors of this paper understand the demand for corrective reflexivity and the need to secure partnership with Aboriginal community-involved researchers. While it is possible as non-Aboriginal researchers to meet the community in the spirit of the 3Rs and to build on networks cultivated through prior educational and community involvements, building formal alliances with Aboriginal researchers is a steadier route to ensure authenticity. We are not suggesting that these alliances are a strategic stop-gap but that non-Aboriginal researchers need to be positioned in a way that allows them to call on associates who are interested in building more vibrant working relationships aimed at social justice outcomes and improving the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Working with Aboriginal researchers at a community campus afforded us knowledge of Aboriginal colleagues who might be interested in project partnership and holding a community symposium secured a network of interested community members (McLeod Rogers and Harris, 2013).

Our research has been responsive to developments in the area of the ethics of Aboriginal research. Apart from encountering ethical questions in theory, our practice in the community required us to reflect on the ethically-sensitive question of our role as researchers. Whenever a researcher studies a particular cultural or ethnic group, there is methodological debate about the appropriate insider-outsider role of the researcher in relation to the community. We do not want to overlook the need to overcome attitudes of resistance that some Aboriginal people express

when they encounter non-Aboriginal researchers who are examining their lives. In fact, some Aboriginal colleagues have cautioned us that this research should be undertaken by Aboriginal people. We see this impassioned advice as an extension of an anti-colonising stance that continues to play a role in establishing Aboriginal autonomy. We are also aware of more general and continuing methodological debates about the appropriate insider-outsider role of the researcher in relation to the community he or she has chosen to consult. Yet many Aboriginal researchers have recently moved towards a model of cultivating proactive alliances. Assembly of First Nations former National Chief Shawn Atleo's leadership, for example, encourages recognition of shared accountability; to say "we are all treaty people" (Atleo, 2013) is to point out that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people continue to negotiate how we share place.

Related to Wilson's approach, informed by the values of Aboriginal ceremony, is a concept described by Morrissette (2013) as "common sharing" the deliberate cultivation of shared understanding and purpose. Such sharing was employed in programming at OPK for men involved in the criminal justice system highlighting what Morrissette refers to as "holistic healing" by dealing with biographical trauma, addressing negative racial stereotyping, encouraging participants to develop a sense of identity (similar to Freire's (1970) conscientisation). The outcome aims at developing new forms of social capital for bonding, bridging, and linking (Bracken et al, 2009; Putnam 1993).

The research strategy for this project is responsive to the principle of "common sharing" in several ways. It was by sharing with inner-city community stakeholders and groups that we began imagining what a co-operative might accomplish and entail. In our initial phase, we conducted interviews with community members to share our ideas and open the possibility of common interests or partnerships.

Working at Eagle Women's Lodge

Currently in our work at Eagle Lodge, common sharing continues to be a centrepiece of our approach to building relationships with staff and transitioning women. Rather than impose our goals for the development of a co-operative and for traditional literacy supports, we take our cue from those who work with the women in the Lodge. We have also used this time to get to know some of the women on an interpersonal basis. As researchers who have spent years working with residents in the inner city, we were quick to acknowledge that this did not prepare us to work specifically with criminalised women. After we talked to people involved in justice and social services to learn more about their work, what we came away with was a variety of stories about criminalised women, some stigmatising or outdated. For example, a representative from Elizabeth Fry said the majority were young and gang involved and unlikely to be interested in committing to a co-operative; a representative of a government funding agency said that they were hungry for cultural programming. By spending time with this group, we have found that neither of these is universal. Many of the young women appear to be open to redirecting their lives, although the pressures of institutionalisation have discouraged their willingness to trust others and participate in cultural activities on a voluntary basis. In March 2012 we accessed funds from the Urban Aboriginal Strategy to purchase sewing machines and materials for a sewing circle at EWL. When we held our sewing circle focused on creating traditional "star cushions," some of the women were more interested in avoiding this form of cultural programming than taking up the activity. Director Bernice Cyr (2013) reminded us that institutionalised women are still trying to relax from the impact of being told how to spend all 24 hours of the day. Describing their resistance to cultural activities, she used the phrase "programmed to death". While this perspective is antithetical to some research that links cultural programming to successful transitioning, in our experience it would be wrong to expect the majority of justice-involved women to embrace programmes and opportunities on a voluntary basis because many are still automatically set up to resist. Resistance for those who hold little power is often the only way to gain control over one's life circumstances (Scott, 1985).

We began the project imagining that a co-operative might serve as an invitation to marginalised, justice-involved women to participate more fully in urban community life. Working with these women has helped us to understand that many factors might prevent them from taking up membership in a co-operative and that for such an enterprise to be successful, many partnerships need to be struck. In our conversations at EWL, we have learned the importance of the concept of "intersectionality"; that is, subordination rooted in multiple axes of oppression. Criminalised women are subjected to factors in addition to racism and sexism so that overcoming oppression and opening opportunities is a complex undertaking. As Comack (2006) points out in discussing racialised groups and the law, "we need to inquire further into how class/race/gender inequities have a bearing on which women are more likely to be crimilised" (65).

At this point, our action research project — our learning by doing — seems poised to result in the actual development of catering and sewing co-operatives, yet we wish to emphasise that this process of negotiating potential place and participants for such a social enterprise undertaking has been as much about listening as about taking action. Moving at a slow pace has also been instrumental in our understanding the complexity of an undertaking with intersectional sources of oppression.

Going Forward

How inner-city people and the Eagle women in particular — faced with so many forces of oppression and isolation — come together in co-operatives is an under-researched field. A presentation by Harnecker (2008) shed some light on the stages and indicators of transformation that signal the development of collective consciousness within a co-operative workplace. Noting that growth towards participatory citizenship takes planning, she sketched a path with individuals expanding their interest in relationship building and others as they participate more completely in a co-operative community. They move from self-interest, to extending concern to other members within their group, and then extending again concern to those outside their group, developing both collective and social consciousness in the process. This analysis is instructive for our research, which aims to track the evolution of personal, social, and political values in the social co-operative.

This is a transition period. We are learning, as non-Aboriginal educators, how to work in partnership with the women and with the leaders at Eagle Women's Lodge and we are finding our place within this culture of women. Nationally, our country is in a position of bridge building and recognising what it means to be "Treaty People". In our project, on a local scale, we are learning how to participate in an initiative that respects everyone's standing in the community by recognising the needs of the most vulnerable amongst us — women who are impoverished, abused, and marginalised. Those who come to Eagle Women's Lodge or other transition facilities teach us about the justice system and about a hard life in the inner city. They have perpetrated crimes but they have also been victims of crime (Cyr, 2013).

While the primary focus of the Violet Nelson School at EWL is to be on credentialed learning, there are also plans for programming that supports spiritual growth and personal empowerment. This programming is not based on a narrow definition of cultural programming but linked to the "Learning Spirit" of Indigenous knowledge (George, 2008):

> [A]cknowledging the sacredness of Life and experience; generating the spirit of hope based in experience as a connection with others in creating a new and equitable future; generating the meaning of work as a vocation and as a mission in life; and developing the capacity to do everything to open new cognitive space in which a community can discover itself and affirm its heritage and knowledge in order to flourish for everyone. (Battiste, 2002: 29-30)

This definition of Indigenous knowledge, particularly in its emphasis on opening new spaces to help the community to flourish, makes the fit between co-operative and Aboriginal values implicit. As part of the alternative economy that blends industry with collectivity, a co-operative

can be understood through the lens of Indigenous knowledge as a building strategy for common good.

The sewing circle at EWL is not just our starting place but a good metaphor for starting a co-operative in the inner city. Rather than making material things, to establish the co-operative we start with crafting co-operative relationships. We undertake small projects that succeed because they are achievable with commitment and show results that are useful and practical. While many of the transitioning women are at the edge of mainstream and even Aboriginal society, by meeting them "where they are at," our hope is that they develop a stronger sense of being connected not to mainstream values and economies but to safe and satisfying alternatives. While perhaps optimistic, there is widening movement afoot towards transforming social attitudes and towards creating space for Aboriginal values and practices in contemporary urban settlements. Rather than being guided by a vision of "co-operating at the edge", we are working on a plan to "co-operate in connection".

The Authors

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