



How Health Coalitions Can Embrace Indigenous Ways of Knowing

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In this collaboratively written article, coalition members of the Menominee Wellness Initiative and partners from the University of Wisconsin–Madison present a case study of how the health



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coalition has shifted its focus to embrace language and cultural revitalization and a more holistic, Indigenous orientation to health. The Menominee Nation is based in the largest tribal reservation east of the Mississippi River on a portion of ancestral land in northeast Wisconsin.

“Making language, cultural traditions and values a foundation of health coalition work can advance models of coalition work that are more culturally responsive, systems-based, and focused on root causes.”

Highlights

Research and evaluation can be pursued collaboratively with greater shared power between community and university partners.

This case study may inform or further support practitioners working in Indigenous and other marginalized communities.

The Menominee reservation approximately corresponds to the boundaries of Menominee County, Wisconsin, and includes the county seat of Keshena, as well as several small villages, and rural homes alongside lakes, marshes, and the forest. The coalition includes representatives of the Menominee Tribal Clinic, the local Boys and Girls Club, tribal food distribution, university cooperative extension, the College of the Menominee Nation, and Menikānaehkem, a grassroots community organizing group. The coalition meets monthly to build common understanding of the causes of community health challenges, to explore opportunities to respond to those challenges, to share updates, and to advance collaborative efforts. In 2017, coalition members and university partners drew on various forms of qualitative data to describe this important shift in focus and how it came to be.

This case study of the Menominee Wellness Initiative provides rationale for the centering of language, culture, collective values, and other Indigenous ways in the efforts of coalitions and others to promote health and well-being in Indigenous communities. Holding this focus in health promotion work lifts up a holistic view of health that includes physical, mental, and spiritual health, and extends beyond the individual.

Methods

As part of a program evaluation of the Menominee Wellness Initiative, our collaborative writing team of coalition members and academic partners developed a case study to answer the questions: “How did this shift in the coalition’s work occur?” and “Why does this matter?” We answered these questions through the gathering and reviewing of qualitative data from observational notes of coalition meetings and in-depth semi-structured interviews with five coalition members. As a collaborative team, we then conducted two interactive data analysis sessions to identify patterns and to draw interpretations that answered our questions.

Results

- Centering Indigenous ways of being—including language, culture, and collective values — can be an important kind of systems change that aligns coalition activities and spurs synergy.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

A Community Psychology perspective encouraged the collaborative approach to this effort, in which community and university partners came together with their different assets to promote the well-being of a local community as well as to share this story with broader audiences. A Community Psychology lens also encouraged our attention to systems, contexts, and critical perspectives towards power and justice that were important to this effort and the writing of the case study.

- Explicit, regular, and normalized discussion of historical trauma and contemporary racism within the coalition encourages shared understanding of the root causes impacting community health and supports work towards “root solutions” anchored in language, culture, and collectivism.
- Engaging community organizers as central partners in health coalitions can ground a coalition's understanding of problems and solutions in important ways. This is particularly true in Indigenous communities where we connect solutions to community priorities of language, culture, and collectivism.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation- This case study is a valuable example of the ways in which innovation in practice, especially taking place in marginalized communities, can inform current research understanding. We believe there are many examples of new learning and action that happen long before research captures them. This is one example. This case study also shows how research and evaluation can be pursued collaboratively and with greater shared power between community and university partners.

Practice- Our work further affirms the value of Indigenous language, culture, and collective values to health promotion. The case study may inform or further support practitioners working in Indigenous communities and other communities that are distinct from the dominant North American culture.

Social Action- The case study suggests the value of engaging grassroots community organizers in the work of health promotion, as well as the value of explicit and ongoing discussions of historical trauma, structural racism, and other critical perspectives within health coalitions.

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