A reflection on Qaujigiartiit

Strengths and struggles on the journey to creating a Nunavut-led community research centre

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The historical context of research in the North, which has often included harmful and unethical research practices, has led to an environment of mistrust and displeasure with researchers in many Northern communities. This has certainly been the case in health research. In the early 2000s, the climate of health research in the North was often characterized by questions created by southern researchers and research that stayed in the south, where it frequently failed to serve the communities that needed it the most. In response to this climate, we founded the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre in 2006 as an independent, community-led research centre located in Iqaluit, Nunavut. We exist to answer the health questions of our communities. We believe that when we develop and lead our own research projects, we are able to focus on answering our own questions and incorporating methods that are reflective of what we know and how we know it.

Qaujigiartiit is driven by a multi-disciplinary board representing Inuit organizations, government, youth and community members. Our mandate is to enable health research to be conducted locally, by Northerners and with communities, in a supportive, safe, culturally-sensitive and ethical environment. We do this within a model that promotes the integration of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (Inuit knowledge) and western science ways of knowing and understanding health and wellness in Nunavut, with the purpose of creating healthy environments and improving the health of Nunavummiut.

When we established Qaujigiartiit, we developed the Piliriqatigiinniq Community Health Research Model as our guiding framework (Healey & Tagak Sr., 2014). It is based on Inuit theoretical concepts of inuqatigiitiniq (“being respectful of all people”), unikkaaqatigiinniq (“storytelling and the power of story”), pittiarniq (“being kind and good”), iqqaumaqatigiinniq (“all things coming into one”) and piliriqatigiinniq (“working together for the common good”). These concepts have been woven into a responsive community health research model grounded in Inuit ways of knowing. Our model is based on a relational epistemology, wherein the relationships between people are an important aspect of a research framework; it employs an inclusive approach that embraces multiple hypotheses and explanations rather than rejecting them. Our model outlines how our motivations, intentions, and relationships inform the research questions, methods, and subsequent analysis and sharing of findings.

The Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre promotes the idea that research must be used as a tool for action. This means that when a person understands the scope and breadth of an issue, they are better-equipped to move forward and take action on it. Multi-sectoral collaboration, illustrated by different groups and individuals shown in Figure 1, strengthens research projects, brings new perspectives to data analysis, and contributes to greater dissemination and implementation of findings across sectors. In other words, in our experience, when more people are involved in a project, the information is shared more widely and is more likely to be accessed and used by our decision-makers. This approach promotes active engagement, the sharing of knowledge, advocacy, and action.

Since our inception in 2006, our centre has brought over $16 million dollars in research and training funding into Nunavut, money that may not have otherwise come here or stayed here. This achievement has been made possible because we use a strength-based approach in our work, which means we harness the strengths of our communities to achieve our shared goals. Below, we share three key strengths that have and continue to be an important part of our success.
Three strengths

Our people, our communities, are brilliant.

Our collective Northern knowledge, approaches, and philosophies are brilliant. We are innovative. We are intelligent. We are solution-seeking. Our people are our greatest strength. We have special relationships with the land, the animals, music, arts, storytelling, and a unique worldview that do not get the attention they deserve in academic writings about the North. We have our own models for conducting research and developing programs that are based on Inuit theoretical concepts and philosophy. When we embrace them, we develop a deeper understanding of the world around us in a way that is meaningful and contributes relevant and useful information for taking action on health and wellness priorities for our communities.

We have capacity. We have so much capacity it overflows. We are often told we need to build capacity to fit into a western model of what capacity looks like. Last year, we brought over $2 million in research grants into Nunavut. We provide employment to Nunavummiut returning from school, to local summer students, and to community members who are from Nunavut and/or wish to make Nunavut their long-term home and want to be engaged in the community. The capacity is here, and we are all collectively responsible for strengthening it and expanding it.

Our knowledge and research models are of critical importance to the scientific, research, and academic communities. Our research projects focus on understanding the impacts of historical and contemporary changes in our communities, and how these changes influence health and wellness. We do this through an approach that is led and/or informed by community members and employ innovative and responsive research methods. We are respectful and mindful of the Inuit worldview that values the relationships that exist between people, the land, and the animals. The data produced by our centre is now used in university classes, in lectures and seminars. It’s published...
in seven textbooks and numerous peer-reviewed publications on a variety of topics including climate change, innovative research methods and media, search and rescue, food security, health systems design, Inuit childrearing philosophy known as Inunnguiniq, and adolescent mental health. We have published reports, commentaries, magazine articles and, most recently, an app for cell phones and tablets. The knowledge produced by our centre is shifting dominant worldviews and health research paradigms to include knowledge and evidence from our communities. It is being applied to change policies, develop interventions, and support programs throughout Nunavut. For example, the Inunnguiniq Parenting Program is an evidence-based intervention developed at our centre that is based on Inuit childrearing perspectives. Policies in Nunavut have shifted to allow room for this program and training in health, social services, justice, and early childhood education fields, as well as to support its implementation at the community level. Another example would be a project we are working on to explain Inuit family perspectives on end-of-life care to develop a tool for clinicians to prompt them to ask culturally-appropriate questions about end-of-life care that are responsive to the needs of Inuit patients and their families. Reaction to this knowledge from our community members, our leaders and politicians, our health practitioners, and the research and academic community is overwhelmingly positive. We are helping to fill a significant gap in the scientific, research, and academic communities, which often miss the epistemologies, methodologies, and perspectives of our Northern communities and way of life.

We have also faced, and continue to face, challenges in reaching our full potential as a competitive and thriving community-led research centre. Three of these struggles are outlined below.

Three struggles

We need core funding. For 12 years, our research centre has existed on proposal-based funding. It is a testament to our strengths that we have been competing for research grants for 12 years and have been successful with them. However, because research grants typically don’t cover overhead costs that would normally be covered by a university, we often struggle to pay our rent and utilities costs year to year. There have been years where we were on the cusp of closing our doors due to lack of funds to cover basic costs. We are lucky that we have a dedicated core staff who believe in...
our collective strength, despite the fact that none of them have job security. In the long-term, this is not sustainable. Core funding is needed to secure basic operating costs and salaried positions, and to allow the centre to expand into different areas of innovation, rather than pursuing revenues to pay the rent.

**We need infrastructure and internet.** Our research centre currently works out of an old renovated house, which we have turned into an office. It’s cozy and comfortable for us. However, we have reached a critical point in our growth where we need to expand to develop an archive, library, data repository, and meeting and training spaces, as well as accommodate the seven staff working in our tiny building. Commercial office space is 2-3 times the cost of our current office and unaffordable for a community research centre with no core funding. One of the most significant barriers to reaching our full potential is internet access. We have to have two different internet service providers because at any given time, one is not working or has reached its bandwidth cap. The internet is painfully slow, and our connectivity can limit our participation in or delivery of webinars, videoconferences and other-web-based sharing platforms. In the age of information and information technology, the state of telecommunications in Nunavut is in drastic need of improvement for research, business, and the people of Nunavut. Nunavummiut need to be able to utilize tech resources to their full potential in designing new and innovative products and interventions. As the tech gap between southern and Northern regions grows, it will only result in making those resources more difficult to access and use.

**We believe in ourselves. We need others to believe in us. We need to break from the discourse that paints the North as a place that is incapable of leading scientific research.** The Arctic has been the subject of increasing resource extraction, research activities, political debate, and press coverage. Media reports often refer to the Arctic as a “vast wilderness,” “barren land,” “untouched landscape,” and “isolated ice-covered world.” Our Arctic is not a barren, untouched, icy wilderness: our Arctic is home. Stories about the Arctic often feature maps that omit the dots that show where our communities are located. Our people and livelihoods are an afterthought – if they are even a thought at all. We live here, grow up here, love here, and thrive here. We try our best to live in harmony with the wildlife and the lands that have sustained Arctic peoples for millennia. We may have small populations, but we are inventive and resourceful, and we have opportunities and capacity to be innovative if we can get out from under the cloud of discourse that consistently tells us we are not capable.

As a Nunavut-led research centre, we have the opportunity to celebrate the values of our communities and families, such as pijitsirniq (to serve others willingly) and to be truly Inunnguinaaq (a capable and contributing human being).
Our summer office

Aqarniit (Northern lights) over Iqaluit
the privilege of serving our communities, as well as seeing the results of our work in the world around us. We see our families and community members achieve better health and access to programs and services. We are striving to use our skills to make a positive contribution to our communities, and we get to see it happen first hand. That has been, and continues to be, the most rewarding part of this journey.

Dr. Gwen Healey was born and raised in Iqaluit, Nunavut, where she continues to live, work, and raise her family. She and the late Andrew Tagak Sr co-founded the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre in 2006, and she continues as its Executive and Scientific Director.

Ms. Oopik Aglukark, originally from Arviat, NU, is a youth board member for the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre Board of Directors.

Ms. Mona Belleau was born and raised in Iqaluit, NU and is the current Chair of the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre Board of Directors.

Ms. Moriah Sallaffie is originally from Nome, Alaska and is the Youth Research Coordinator for the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre and an avid fisherwoman.

Mr. Taha Tabish is originally from Pakistan and grew up in Toronto. He moved to Nunavut several years ago and is the Health Technology Innovations Research Coordinator for Qaujigiartiit.

References

A workshop on revitalizing Inuit childrearing philosophy in Cambridge Bay, hosted by our centre.