



Maskwacis Youth Perceptions of Strength and Resilience: A Photovoice Project

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INTRODUCTION

There are more than 600 First Nations communities in Canada, with over 60 Indigenous languages (Statistics Canada, 2013). All First Nations have their own unique cultures, traditions, ways of life, and identities. With an international reputation for multiculturalism and inclusion, there are myriad venues for celebrating and honoring Indigenous cultures throughout Canada. However, Canada also has a long history of colonialism and exclusion that continues to impact Indigenous peoples today (Henry & Tator, 2010). This is manifest in the multiple health, social, economic, and educational disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (Adelson, 2005; Gracey & King, 2009). Narratives around these disparities are widespread, and contribute to negative perceptions about Indigenous communities and cultures, as well as stereotyping and discrimination (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Lajimodiere, 2013; Ly & Crowshoe, 2015; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012).

Negative stereotyping and discrimination can have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, and children in particular (Priest, Mackean, Davis, Waters, & Briggs, 2012). Further complicating this picture, Indigenous children develop within multiple contexts in Canada (i.e., urban, rural or on-reserve, traditional or non-traditional) that may, at times, be incongruent with one another. As a result, Indigenous children may receive contradictory information about who they are, how they fit into their heritage culture and the dominant culture, as well as the meanings associated with being a visible minority, and may have difficulty reconciling such information during the course of their development in order to form healthy identities (Corenblum, 1996). This is important because a strong cultural identity can be a protective factor against suicide in Canadian Indigenous youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Proulx, 2008), and is associated with more favorable outcomes related to school attendance, school

readiness, and academic achievement (Muhajarine, Puchala, & Janus, 2011; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000).

Important to fostering strong cultural identity is affirming and celebrating Indigenous cultures (Dobia et al., 2014). This can support Indigenous children's sense of connectedness to their communities (Ball, 2008). However, Indigenous youth have described feeling frustrated with the lack of representations of their culture in mainstream society, including educational systems (Lee and Cerecer, 2010). Indeed, societal attitudes and educational policies regarding Indigenous peoples have, for the most part, been negatively oriented (Beresford, 2012).

Addressing negative attitudes and stereotypes about Indigenous communities and cultures will require education and awareness-raising to elevate understanding on the part of non-Indigenous people (Bailey, 2016; Mellor, 2004). It is also arguably critical for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together on such initiatives, and to involve young people in opportunities to learn about their cultures and represent the strengths of their communities in meaningful ways (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016).

THE MASKWACIS COMMUNITY

The Maskwacis community consists of four Nations: Nipisihkopahk (Samson), Kisipatnahk (Louis Bull), Akamihk (Montana), and Neyaskwayahk (Ermineskin). These neighboring Plains Cree Nations have a combined population of approximately 15,000 with roughly 53% of the population aged 17 or under. The Nations are governed by independent chief and councils, and have separate education directors and schools. National media attention has focused on high rates of crime and gang violence in Maskwacis, largely ignoring the rich and vibrant Cree culture that threads the four Nations together. In Maskwacis, Cree history, culture, and language are featured prominently in traditional community ceremonies and cultural events that regularly take place.

Community Elders view their culture and language as a means to combat the social and public health problems that face Maskwacis community members as a result of the destructive impact of colonization, residential schools, and forced assimilation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

Negative media reports have painted a bleak and inaccurate picture of the Maskwacis community, highlighting instances of violence and gang activity. In the face of such negative attention, community members and Elders identified the importance of reframing perceptions of the Maskwacis community. As such, the aim of this project was to facilitate youth exploration and promotion of their community strengths through creative photography. Toward this aim, two research questions were addressed:

1. How do youth in Maskwacis view their community strengths?
2. To what extent can photographs be used as a tool for reframing perceptions of an Indigenous community?

The current project directly engaged Indigenous community members in addressing the research questions.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PHOTOVOICE PROCESS

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The current study followed a community-based participatory research approach (CBPR; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) that attended closely to the relationships between partners and aimed to benefit the partners involved (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). Indigenous communities have a history of involvement with research approaches that have neglected to recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge, reinforced unequal power relations

among researchers and participants, and operated on an outside researcher-defined agenda rather than collaborating with the community to achieve social change (Schnarch, 2004). For this reason, CBPR is often well suited for use in Indigenous communities, because it levels power relations between researchers and participants by involving all partners equitably in the research process (Starkes & Baydala, 2014). Our research approach also focused on collaboration, recognizing multiple forms of knowledge and expertise, and working towards changes that benefited the community (Boser, 2007; Israel et al., 1998; Malone, Yerger, McGruder, & Froelicher, 2006). In addition, community members generated the research questions for this project, and all forms of knowledge translation involved both community and academic partners.

PARTICIPANTS

Two Elders and eleven youth were engaged in this project. The Elders had a strong presence in the Maskwacis community and agreed to participate as part of their ongoing involvement with the Nehiyaw Kakeskewina Learning Society (NKLS), who represented a community partner organization for the project. Our research team also drew upon existing relationships with Maskwacis schools for assistance in identifying youth to take part in the project. More specifically, school principals and teachers identified six students who they anticipated would have sufficient time and interest in project participation.

After schools identified students to take part, the project coordinator visited students at their respective schools to discuss the project and ask if students were interested in participating. All students expressed interest and provided verbal assent. Next, the project coordinator and NKLS executive director (from the Maskwacis community) visited students' parents at their homes to garner consent for their children's participation, as all participants were under the age of majority. Parents were offered a small gift as a token of appreciation for their support. Two of the six original

youth recruited for this project were unable to complete the project due to family circumstances and moving away. This left four youth who schools originally identified for the project.

To increase our sample size, we engaged the Ermineskin Alternate School in the project. The school's principal identified seven youth to take part. The project coordinator and NKLS Executive Director visited the school to relay information about the project to the youth, and students provided their own consent as they were all at least 18 years old.

TRAINING

Photovoice begins by providing community participants with cameras and training in photography. For the current project, two experienced Indigenous photographers separately provided training to youth participants in order to build the youths' capacity to capture artistic and meaningful photographs. These included Ingrid Kelln, a well-known photographer and councillor in the Maskwacis community, and Bert Crowfoot, who is a nationally renowned Indigenous photographer, founder and CEO of the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society, and publisher of a number of Indigenous magazines.

In addition, two community Elders provided mentorship and guidance to youth in recognizing and appreciating their community's positive assets. These highly respected Elders were Kisikaw Ksay-yin and Wilson Okeymaw.

CAPTURING AND SELECTING PHOTOS

Photovoice has been demonstrated as an effective means for empowering youth to explore and take action on issues important to their communities (Wilson et al., 2006). Part of the aim of this project was to empower youth to recognize and promote their community strengths and resilience. Toward this aim, youth worked with the project coordinator over a series of ten sessions

to explore their community and capture photographs. Youth also captured photos on their own time. Based on their training with professional photographers, mentoring from Elders, and work with the project coordinator, youth captured photographs with the intent of reframing Maskwacis as a strong and vibrant community that its members could take pride in.

Next, youth worked with the project coordinator to select photos that showcased the community's strengths and resilience. In total, 40 photos were chosen, and the youth provided descriptions for each of these photos. Images were then edited using Adobe Photoshop to enhance color contrast and help the subjects of photos stand out against their respective backgrounds. Selected photos were used to create photobooks for distribution at each of the photo exhibits, and for wider community distribution.

PHOTO EXHIBITS

The photovoice research method was developed as a means to communicate messages to policymakers, and a primary method for such communication has been holding photo exhibits (Wang & Burris, 1994). Using youth-selected photos, an opening exhibit was held at the Ermineskin Elders' Centre, where photographs were revealed to the wider community. The aim of this exhibit was to honor and strengthen the voices of Maskwacis youth, and to cultivate a sense of pride in the wider community. Approximately fifty community members were in attendance, including Grand Chief Tony Alexis and Chief Randy Ermineskin. Wetaskiwin Times, Ponoka News, and Ermineskin News representatives also attended and published articles on the project.

Next, a one-week photo exhibit was held at the Wetaskiwin Hospital. A celebration was subsequently held at the University of Alberta (U of A) Faculty of Extension gallery, which opened a 2.5-week photo exhibit. Approximately 50 attendees were present at the opening event, including faculty and staff from the U of A, ACCFCR, and Edmonton Journal, who published an article on

the project. Thereafter, photos were displayed at the U of A Hospital McMullen After Hours Gallery for 9 weeks. In order to document the impact of the photo exhibits with respect to reframing perceptions of the Maskwacis community, brief questionnaires were distributed to viewers.

As a result of media coverage, requests for additional photo exhibits were made by the Maskwacis Cultural College (MCC) and Red Deer Regional Hospital Centre. A celebration was then held at MCC, where approximately 150 community members visited to learn about the project and view the photos. The Hawk Radio station also attended and broadcasted the event live. Finally, all 40 photos were gifted to the Red Deer Hospital for permanent display throughout the hospital. An opening event was held to celebrate the arrival of the photos at the hospital, which approximately 50 community members from Red Deer and Maskwacis attended, including Tracy Lee, Aboriginal Health Lead with the Alberta Health Services' Aboriginal Health Program, and Allan Sinclair, Executive Director of the Red Deer Hospital. A Red Deer newspaper and radio station also covered the event. The aim of exhibiting these photographs in neighboring non-Indigenous communities was to build awareness and understanding of Maskwacis community strengths and assets, and to build respectful cross-cultural relationships.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from (1) photos and accompanying descriptions, and (2) questionnaires were analyzed separately. Holding multiple sessions with the youth allowed for data collection and analysis to occur concurrently. Wang and Burris (1997) have described three general methods for analyzing photovoice data. These include (1) selecting photos, where participants choose the photos that they deem to be most representative of their experiences, and that they wish to be publicly displayed; (2) contextualizing, where participants provide descriptions of their photos; and (3) codifying, where data are sorted into codes, categories, and themes. All three of these methods were used for the

current project. Steps involving selecting photos and contextualizing occurred during group sessions with the youth. After group discussions, the project coordinator began codifying based on the selection and contextualization that took place in the group setting. Emerging codes and themes were then discussed during subsequent group meetings.

The codifying stage was carried out in alignment with the process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2007). The ultimate goal of thematic analysis is to identify and report patterns (i.e., themes) within data. This is carried out by 1) becoming familiar with the depth and breadth of the data through active immersion (in this case, viewing photos); 2) producing initial codes to meaningfully group the data; 3) looking for overarching themes and sub-themes among the codes; 4) reviewing and refining themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) completing final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007).

Thematic analysis was carried out for photos and accompanying descriptions as well as qualitative questionnaire data. Simple descriptive statistics were used to analyze numerical questionnaire data.

FINDINGS

PHOTOS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Youth provided descriptions for the 40 photos that they selected to characterize their community strengths. Analysis of the visual content of photos and their accompanying verbal descriptions resulted in four themes, as depicted in Figure 1.

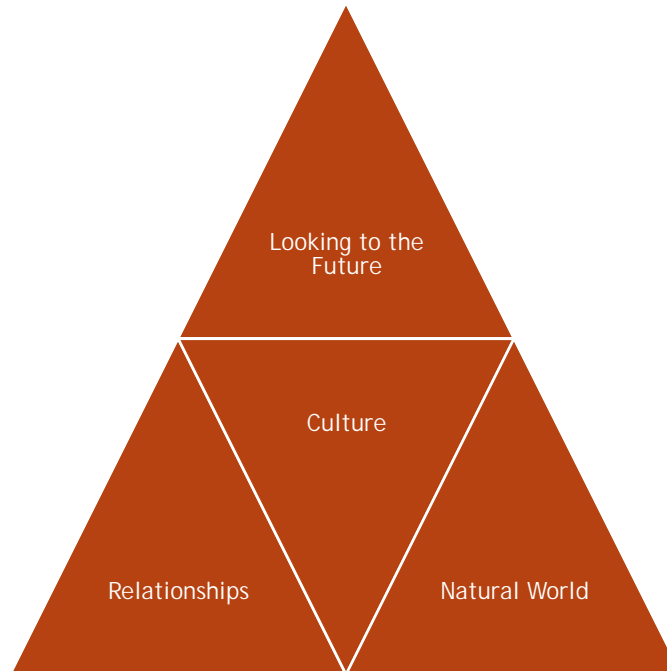


Figure 1. Themes from photos and descriptions.

CULTURE

Eleven photos fit within the **culture** theme. With regard to Images 1, 2, and 3 below, youth participants communicated that they wanted people to know about the traditional ceremonies that are available to them as members of the Maskwacis community, that pow wows and other traditional events are common and well-attended, and that there is ample evidence of traditional culture in the community. These are two more examples of photos taken by the youth that fit within the culture theme. With respect to Image 3 in particular, one of the youth commented about how cultural pride is a strength of the community, and that this picture demonstrates pride in the faces of the pow wow dancers pictured.



Image 1. Youth pow wow dancer.



Image 2. Adult pow wow dancer.



Image 3. Waiting pow wow dancers.

Images 4 and 5, below, depict tipis. According to one of the youth, “*Cree people use 13 poles to make the structure of the tipi. There are 13 moons in one year. And for every pole in that tipi, there is a teaching: Respect, Obedience, Humility, Kinship, Cleanliness, Good Child Rearing, Happiness, Sharing, Strength, Hope, Control Flaps, and Ultimate Protection.*” Overall, youth participants agreed that tipis represent an important aspect of the Cree culture, and therefore, a strength of the Maskwacis community.



Image 4. Teepee against blue sky.



Image 5. Tipi poles.

Images 6 and 7 show beading, an important cultural activity in the Cree culture. According to one of the youth participants, Image 6 depicts *“beading a lanyard using a loom board. Beading takes a lot of time and dedication. Beading teaches us patience.”* This participant also described image 7 by stating that *“this piece is a headband medallion, a part of the Male Grass Dance regalia.”*



Image 6. Loom board.



Image 7. Beaded medallion.

Images 8, 9, and 10 show examples of the Cree language in and around the Maskwacis community. With regard to Image 8, youth participants felt that including Cree language on signs entering and exiting the neighbouring town of Wetaskiwin showed respect for the Cree culture. In describing Image 9, another participant stated that, *“this sign directly showcases the community’s*

willingness towards reviving our Cree language by bringing it into everyday life.” Image 10 displays a quote written by Elder Kisikaw Ksay-yin.



Image 8. Wetaskiwin sign.



Image 9. Yield sign

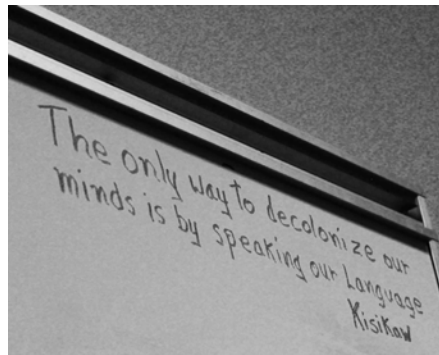


Image 10. Elder Kisikaw’s quote.



Image 11. Dream feather.

With regard to Image 11, a participant explained that, “*this is a dream feather that hangs above one’s bed, similar to a dream catcher. I had picked the ribbon colors and feather and assembled it myself.*”



Image 12. White berries.

In describing Image 12, a participant noted that, *“the color contrast draws a comparison to both the medicinal and traditional uses of plants and roots in our culture.”* As another participant explained, *“Berry picking is another unique part of our culture.”*

Overall, youth explained that they took pictures representing their Cree culture and traditions because the ability to celebrate culture is an important strength of the Maskwacis community. Ceremonies, traditions, and symbols such as pow wows, beading, tipis, and traditional language, represent the significance of Cree culture in Maskwacis.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Ten photos fit within the theme of **looking to the future**. According to the youth who took part in this project, schools in Maskwacis represent a significant strength. Images 13 and 14 show Ermineskin and Louis Bull schools respectively. With regard to these images, one participant noted that, *“the schools’ architecture shows symmetry and bold colors: common characteristics that distinguish traditional designs and patterns utilized by Cree people in regalia and clothing. It also shows cultural influences and directly reflects the curriculum and values taught, embracing the Cree culture and traditions alongside western values of the modern world.”* Another participant noted that, *“our schools are a way of giving us a future.”*



Image 13. Ermineskin School.



Image 14. Louis Bull School.



Image 15. Ermineskin School Hallway.

Image 15 was captured inside of Ermineskin School. A participant stated that this was “*a helpful reminder in the schools that directly translates to our lives.*”

Participants also captured photos of youth. In describing Images 16 and 17, a participant stated that she had taken the photos to demonstrate that, “*youth in our community are amazingly talented at all kinds of different things. We have bright futures if we want them.*” In discussing Image 18, a participant stated that, “*children are a huge strength in our community...they are our future.*”



Image 16. Youth scooters.



Image 17. Youth skateboarding



Image 18. Smiling toddler.

In addition, youth captured images that they metaphorically described as representing a future orientation. With regard to Image 19, a youth participant expressed that, *“growing up here, we have a long road ahead of us, but we always have the choice to take the road to success.”* As for Image 20, a youth described that, *“in order for there to be light, you also need some darkness. So challenges and hard times can lead to growth.”*



Image 19. Gravel road.

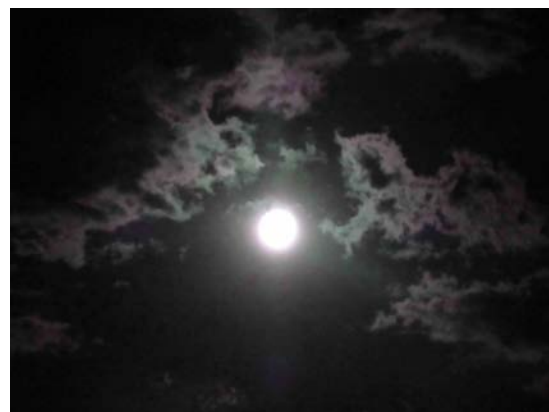


Image 20. Moon at night.

Finally, with regard to Image 21, a youth participant described that, *“This picture represents that we can all grow upward and thrive,”* while in description of Image 22, a participant noted that, *“To understand the animal you must understand where it comes from. This is an atîm. They are man’s best friend and the protectors.”* As another participant noted, *“This atîm looks like he’s looking forward to the future, as we all are.”*



Image 21. Trees with autumn leaves.



Image 22. Atîm.

In sum, youth captured ten photos that represented their community’s ability to look toward the future. According to participants, important elements of the community’s future include school, youth, and successfully navigating challenges.

NATURAL WORLD

Twelve photos fit within the theme of the **natural world**. As participants described in relation to Images 23 through 26, *“some people think that Maskwacis is a scary place at night. These pictures show it can be beautiful here at night.”* Another participant noted that, *“our connection to Mother Earth is about new beginnings, like these sunsets.”*



Image 23. Fiery sunset.

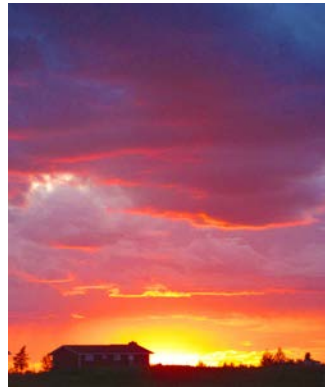


Image 24. Pink and purple sunset.



Image 25. Orange sunset.



Image 26. Sunset against trees.

In describing Images 27 through 30, participants expressed that, “*in our community, we have a deep appreciation for Mother Earth.*” As another youth described, “*we have respect for nature, and these pictures symbolize that respect.*”



Image 27. Brown reeds.



Image 28. Pond with tall grass.



Image 29. Dandelion.



Image 30. Autumn leaf.

With regard to Images 31 and 32, a participant explained that, “*growing up in a community that teaches us Cree culture, we see all creatures and parts of nature as being important, not just humans.*”



Image 31. Bluebird.



Image 32. Red flower.

In describing Images 33 and 34, a participant noted that, “*these pictures show how peaceful it can be to connect to the outdoors. In Maskwacis, there’s lots of space for exploring the outdoors.*”

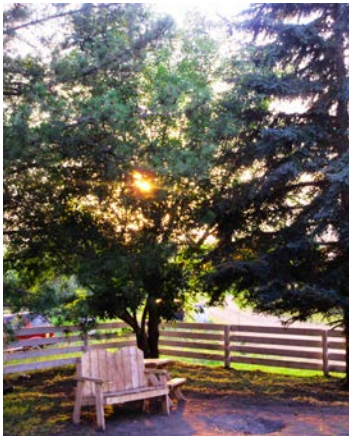


Image 33. Bench outdoors.



Image 34. Row of trees.

Overall, youth captured twelve photos that fit within the **natural world** theme. Participants discussed their connection to Mother Earth, respect for nature and all of its creatures, and feelings of peace in spending time outdoors.

RELATIONSHIPS

Six photos fit within the theme of **relationships**. In describing Images 35 and 36, a participant explained that, in the Maskwacis community, there are opportunities for engaging in games and social activities that build relationships. With regard to Image 35, a participant explained that, *“Chess is a complex game of strategic skill. This photo was taken during a lunch meeting of the chess club at the school.”* As for Image 36, *“I like how we can participate in traditional activities if we want to, and doing these activities can help us make friends and relationships.”*



Image 35. Chess game.



Image 36. Hand games.

In describing Image 37, a participant noted that, *“this tree represents a family and community and how we all share the same strong core and deep running roots.”* Another stated that, *“this picture is all about love, which we have a lot of in our community.”* In response to Image 38, *“Maskwacis can be a really fun place to be. This picture is all about positivity.”*



Image 37. Tree with heart.



Image 38. Children jumping.

With respect to Image 39, a participant described how, *“there are gathering places where we can come together and take pride in our community.”* Finally, in describing Image 40, a youth noted that, *“the symmetry and color contrasts of these houses represents the distinction between two homes. Yet how they can draw similarities in their structure and location...people who live here visit each other a lot in their homes, and we all share Maskwacis as our home.”*



Image 39. Ermineskin community garden.



Image 40. Houses.

In sum, participants captured six photographs that, based on descriptions, reflected strong relationships within the Maskwacis community. According to youth participants, gathering places, family, and social activities represent strengths of the community with respect to relationships.

QUESTIONNAIRES

In total, 392 questionnaires were distributed. Participants were asked a number of questions related to the photo exhibit and the community of Maskwacis. Data analysis did not result in significant differences among responses between data collection sites. Accordingly, questionnaire data from all sites (i.e., the Maskwacis exhibit, Wetaskiwin Hospital, Faculty of Extension Gallery, and U of A Hospital) are presented together.

NUMERICAL DATA

First, survey respondents were asked whether they had heard of the community of Maskwacis before viewing the photo exhibit. 76% ($n = 298$) of respondents indicated that they had

previously heard of the community, while 24% ($n = 94$) of respondents reported that they were not aware of the community before attending the photo exhibit. Second, respondents were asked whether they were aware that the community of Hobbema had recently changed its name to Maskwacis. 68% ($n = 265$) of respondents indicated that they were aware of the recent name change, while 32% ($n = 127$) of participants reported that they were not aware of the name change before attending the photo exhibit.

PREVIOUS IDEAS ABOUT MASKWACIS

If respondents indicated that they were previously aware of the Maskwacis community, they were asked to provide an open-ended response to the question of what their ideas about the community were. One hundred ninety-one responses to this survey item were provided. Data analysis resulted in three categories for this survey item; namely, (1) *troubling social issues*; (2) *working through challenges*; and (3) *positive perceptions*.

One hundred sixteen respondents provided responses that aligned with the category of **troubling social issues**. These responses generally indicated that participants perceived the Maskwacis community as a place where crime, violence, gangs, drugs, suicide, poverty, and gangs are prominent. As one respondent from the Wetaskiwin exhibit stated, *“The media tends to show that the community is all looking for trouble and handouts and not able to care for itself in reliable ways...the gang problems and abuse problems on the news makes me fearful and troubles me.”* A respondent from the Extension exhibit felt that Maskwacis was *“not a very nice place to raise children.”* A respondent from the U of A Hospital noted that, *“There are lots of children from broken homes, a lot of poverty, and abused Aboriginal women.”*

Forty-five respondents provided responses that aligned with the category of **working through challenges**. Within this category, respondents reported perceiving Maskwacis as a

community that was striving to overcome negative social issues. As one respondent from the Extension exhibit expressed, *“I knew it was a community that is working at making itself a better place to be.”* A respondent from the Wetaskiwin Hospital described the community as *“a troubled place trying to rebuild.”* An attendee at the Maskwacis event felt that Maskwacis was *“working on improving life for all.”*

Responses from thirty respondents aligned with the category of **positive perceptions** about the Maskwacis community. These responses mainly described Maskwacis as a place with a strong culture and resilient members. As one respondent from the Extension exhibit stated, *“It’s a well-established community with strong cultural ties.”* At the Wetaskiwin Hospital, a respondent described Maskwacis as *“a close-knit community based on family and relationships.”* A respondent from the U of A Hospital, who identified as having worked in the community, described Maskwacis as a place with *“creative energy and an insight to bring back their need for balance between mind, body, and spirit.”* At the Maskwacis event, a respondent stated that, *“The media portrays us as a place of trouble and loss, but this is not reality. There’s a lot of talent in our community.”*

CHANGES IN IDEAS

Respondents were asked whether viewing the photo exhibit had changed their ideas about Maskwacis. Two hundred and fifty-three responses were recorded for this item. All but 17 respondents indicated that viewing the photos had improved their views of Maskwacis. Of those respondents who indicated that their views had not changed, most stated that they previously held positive views of the community, and that the photos had reinforced these views.

Eighteen percent of respondents ($n = 46$) indicated that viewing the photos helped them understand that Maskwacis was a community with rich **culture and pride**. As one respondent from the Wetaskiwin exhibit stated, *“I didn’t realize this was such a proud and traditional community.”*

Seventeen percent of respondents ($n = 42$) commented on how the photos made them aware of the **talent and creativity** in the community. As one respondent from the Extension exhibit stated, *“it made me aware that there is a lot of talent and skill in this community.”* Fifteen percent of respondents ($n = 39$) felt that the pictures made Maskwacis seem more **relatable** to them. As a respondent from the Extension exhibit expressed, *“These are very relatable images. Makes me feel ‘like’ the youth rather than seeing the community as an ‘other.’”* An additional 15% of respondents ($n = 39$) referenced how viewing the photos made them aware of the **beauty** in Maskwacis. According to a U of A Hospital respondent, *“It looks like people who live here see their community as beautiful. The photos make me think the community is beautiful too.”* Thirteen percent of respondents ($n = 34$) mentioned that the photos helped them to view the community in a **hopeful and uplifting** light. As a respondent from the Maskwacis event noted, *“The photos gave me hope that our youth are willing and ready to change the image of our community.”* Another 9% of respondents ($n = 22$) indicated that the photos made them think of Maskwacis as a place where **opportunities were provided for youth** to express themselves and participate in community projects. As a respondent from the Wetaskiwin exhibit stated, *“it makes me think of Maskwacis as a place that offers worthy projects for the youth to do.”* Finally, 6% of respondents ($n = 14$) noted that viewing the photos had **positively changed their views** of the community, without providing detail. For example, a Wetaskiwin respondent stated that, *“It changed my ideas a lot, in a good way.”*

DESCRIPTIONS OF PHOTOS

Survey respondents were asked to provide three words that came to mind when they viewed the youth’s photos. A total of 905 words were provided, and are represented by six categories. These include (1) **visually appealing**; (2) **uplifting**; (3) **spiritual**; (4) **cultural**; (5) **relational**; and (6) **future-oriented**.

Twenty-nine percent of responses ($n = 260$) focused on the **visually appealing** nature of the photos. Words such as *beautiful*, *vibrant*, *creative*, and *colorful* were placed in this category. Nineteen percent of responses ($n = 174$) emphasized that the photos were **uplifting**. Words such as *positive*, *happy*, *celebratory*, *inspirational*, and *empowering* were included in this category. Respondents also described the **spiritual** aspects of the photos, with 18% of responses fitting within this category ($n = 165$). Words such as *Creator*, *peaceful*, *serene*, and *spirit* were included in this category. Similarly, 13% of responses ($n = 120$) described the **cultural** aspects of the photographs, with words such as *heritage*, *tradition*, and *cultural pride* emanating this category. An additional 11% of responses ($n = 103$) provided words that fit within the **relational** category. These included words such as *connections*, *community-minded*, *family*, *love*, and *relationships*. Finally, 9% of responses ($n = 83$) focused on how the photos appeared to be **future-oriented**, with words such as *change*, *progress*, and *new beginnings* included in this category.

SUMMARY

In total, 392 surveys were distributed to photo exhibit viewers. Nearly 100 survey respondents had not previously heard of the Maskwacis community, while over 100 were unaware of the community's recent name change from Hobbema to Maskwacis. It should be noted that surveys were distributed on 13 days at each of the first four photo exhibits, although photos were displayed at each of the exhibit locations for a total of 86 days. Therefore, the number of survey respondents does not represent the total number of people reached by the exhibits. It is likely that far more passersby were made aware of the Maskwacis community and its recent name change than those who chose to respond to the survey.

Respondents mainly referenced negative pre-conceptions about the Maskwacis community regarding troubling social issues, although others perceived the community as working through

challenges, and some cited positive perceptions. This speaks to the need for the current project in aiming to address negative pre-conceptions. The majority (93%) of respondents provided examples of ways that viewing the photos had positively changed their perceptions of the Maskwacis community. Respondents also provided descriptions of the photos from their perspectives.

PROJECT SUMMARY

This photovoice project was undertaken in response to concerns from Maskwacis community members about the negative perceptions that are widely held about their community. The aim of this project was therefore to positively reframe perceptions of Maskwacis. This was not to ignore the current social issues that Maskwacis struggles with (e.g., crime, health disparities), and that can largely be traced to colonization. Rather, this project aimed to provide a more complete picture of the community by uniquely focusing on its strengths. To this end, two research questions were posed; namely, (1) How do youth in Maskwacis view their community's strengths? And (2) To what extent can photos be used as a tool for reframing perceptions of an Indigenous community?

HOW DO YOUTH IN MASKWACIS VIEW THEIR COMMUNITY'S STRENGTHS?

With respect to the first research question, the content of photos taken by eleven youth from Maskwacis, as well as youths' descriptions of the photos, were analyzed using thematic analysis. This resulted in four themes that described the strengths of Maskwacis according to youth. Strengths reflected the community's strong **relationships**, commitment to **culture**, the beautiful **natural world** that is a part of Maskwacis, and the community's ability to **look toward the future**.

Three hundred and ninety-two survey respondents, who provided short descriptions of the photographs, corroborated these themes. Descriptions were sorted into six categories, focusing on the photos as **visually appealing, uplifting, spiritual, cultural, relational, and future-oriented**.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN PHOTOS BE USED AS A TOOL FOR REFRAMING PERCEPTIONS OF AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY?

This project provides foundational support for the use of photographs to reframe perceptions of an Indigenous community. Ninety-three percent of survey respondents cited positive examples of how the photos changed their perceptions of Maskwacis. These examples, analyzed using thematic analysis, focused on **culture and pride, talent and creativity, relatability, beauty, hopefulness, and opportunities provided for youth** in the Maskwacis community.

In addition, **an unprecedented number of people viewed the exhibits, attended photo exhibit openings, and responded to surveys**. Our original goal was to distribute 100 surveys, which we far surpassed. In addition, our project received media coverage that was more widespread than we anticipated. **In total, eight news articles were published on the current project** by the Edmonton Journal, Wetaskiwin Times, Ponoka News, Red Deer Express, Red Deer 105 radio station, Ermineskin News, U of A Department of Pediatrics, and Alberta Doctor's Digest. As a result, **we held more than the planned four photo exhibits for a total of six exhibits**, as media coverage resulted in additional requests from the Maskwacis Cultural College and Red Deer Hospital. We also continue to receive requests from photo exhibit sites and community members for additional photobooks.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Our photovoice project opens up possibilities for related future research directions. In particular, future research could use a larger sample of youth in order to explore the impact of project participation on youth themselves (for example, with respect to youth resilience). In addition, established pre and post measures could be used to examine the impact of viewing the photos on photo exhibit attendees. Additional methods such as photo elicitation could also be explored.

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