

Transcript of Interview with Marion Maar

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My name is Marion Maar. I'm an associate professor and founding faculty at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine. Overall, my work there is focused on collaborating with Indigenous people on the creation of safe health services. Before my work at the medical school, I was employed by Noojmowin Teg Health Center for eight years, and in my work there, I worked with the First Nations on Manitoulin Island on health research and program evaluation. So I was really excited about being offered the opportunity to be the external evaluation lead for the leading— Promoting Life Together Collaborative. And I was excited for many different reasons, you know. I was really looking forward to learning from all the people on the guidance group, I was excited about, you know, the challenge of incorporating guiding principles into an evaluation framework, in collaboration, again, with everyone on the guidance group and in collaboration with the teams at the local level. So it was something I was really looking forward to. So as in most health organizations, evaluation was already embedded in all programs at CFHI, and those evaluations, though, were— really relied on predetermined indicators and performance measures. So in my many years as an evaluator, I've learned that mainstream evaluation frameworks often simply don't fit northern, rural and Indigenous services.

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So, the frameworks are usually designed with an urban program in mind. So, what happens then is that when they go into a different context, such as rural, remote or Indigenous communities, they just don't measure success well at all. So when you then put into this, yeah, new context, also, diverse cultures, different program philosophies that are based on Indigenous worldviews, for example, then the assumptions on which the mainstream evaluation framework was initially based, they're simply inappropriate. And if you use them, you will usually come to quite false conclusions about whether or not the program is working.

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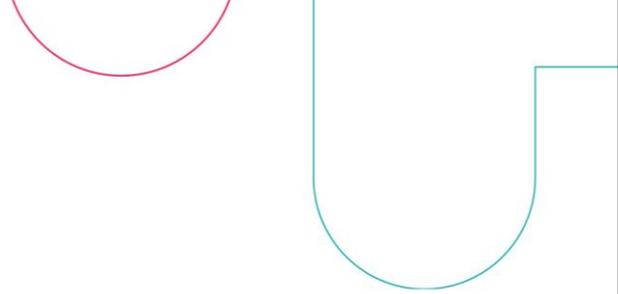
So, despite this being true, I find that a lot of times there's tremendous commitment and loyalty to those standardized measures within mainstream, even though you probably won't get the correct answer and the correct advice from the evaluation if you are using those indicators. So, similarly, at CFHI, the NIH team actually had to engage in quite a bit of internal advocacy for us to be able to change evaluation policy and practice. That change really was needed and that advocacy was needed as well. So, you can't get there, you can't get to a good evaluation framework with Indigenous programs until most of the times you change that policy that already exists. So, as a result then of that advocacy work, the PLT became the first collaborative to develop its own evaluation framework using a participatory approach.

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As we then created the framework in collaboration with the guidance group, it wasn't just simply a matter of substituting, you know, old performance measures for new performance measures. That's really not something that we were going to do. A whole lot more was required. So it was clear to us right at the beginning that we should not be focusing on people, I mean counting people, counting meetings or services within a specific time frame, which is something that's normally done with performance measures. That simply wasn't the right approach for what we were trying to do. So many of the phenomena that are responsible for success or failure of services in Indigenous communities are just much more complex, and they're also more abstract. So, for example, how do you count respect for Indigenous worldviews in an initiative? Or how do you measure the level of cultural humility? Or how do you measure people's understanding of how colonial history can negatively impact health services? And this was the challenge. And this is what we were very happy to tackle. What we did is instead of counting things, we collected information on the quality of our meetings, the quality of, and the sincerity maybe even of integrating Indigenous worldviews, integrating Indigenous ways of doing, listening to Elders, respecting ceremony. It was those kind of things that were really important, as was the quality of the relationship, and what would happen in those instances when there was a struggle in the relationship, when there were different views, you know. This is when it's most important that we work on figuring out what the way forward is in a good way. And the evaluation framework was intended to capture just that.

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Some of the other really important things to capture were the innovations. Sometimes we didn't know at the beginning, really, what the intervention would be like. For example, the coaching. At the beginning, we thought the coaches would probably be, you know, providing support by teleconference, maybe once a month, maybe every other week. But quickly we realized more support was needed in order for, especially the mainstream organization, to get to a level of readiness where they could work effectively and respectfully with the Indigenous organizations. So this then took the coaches to actually spending quite a bit of time in the community, working with people and really being focused on experiential learning. And that learning was then supported by webinars that were very, very specific to the learning needs of each of the teams. So, again, this was an important part of having a process evaluation to sort of show how we did things, why we sometimes adapted and really, under what circumstances these different interventions worked. So, we relied a lot on qualitative methods in the data collection, and that allowed us to create a very rigorous, valid evaluation with lots of data that we collected, not only on, you know, the normal things that you normally collect data on in an evaluation, but also looking at the guiding principles, whether or not they were actually incorporated into the programming, and in the way we conducted the collaborative. Was there respect for Indigenous



knowledge? If so, what did that look like? And what did we have to watch out for? How could we build on strengths of culture and how did we, how can we measure success in a way that maybe the local communities would agree with? And that was possible because of our process evaluation design.

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There were other things that were really important as well. So, for example, we certainly promoted or made space for Indigenous research methods to be used in the evaluation. So early on, myself and Marriette Sutherland provided a workshop on how the teams could explore that and even how our own group, the seventh team, and the guidance group, could explore that. So that meant, for example, that instead of doing focus groups, we conducted learning circles. So a learning circle, for example, is an Indigenous research method. It's based on a traditional sharing circle, but it was adapted by the Anishinaabe knowledge keeper, author and scholar Herb Nabigon. So, while a sharing circle is something where, you know, everybody can share what's on their mind, where everybody's given the time to really talk about their concerns. But normally in a sharing circle, nothing that you say should really leave that circle. The learning circle is specifically designed to be used in research or in program evaluation, to see how things are fitting and to allow everyone to share what's currently on their mind. So, from that perspective then, the evaluation became more than just, you know, data collection. It became what Herb Nabigon calls a quest for truth and healing. So the evaluation research that became connected with ceremony as we came together to share what we had learned, but not only that, also to resolve issues that might have arisen as two or more worldviews were kind of collaborating together in an ethical space.

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Our focus on process evaluation and on collecting data on what was working and what wasn't working, using qualitative research, allowed us to document many of the processes, many of the things that we believed later on were needed for quality work and for quality relationships to build. So that was one of the most important aspects. And we really came to that conclusion that the process of creating sustainable relationships was really the main indicator of whether or not the interventions would work long term. And it was also part of the sustainability. If there was a good relationship, we believe they have a really good chance of becoming sustainable themselves. So this was then the true indicator of success. So we shifted from counting things and trying to perform in a standardized manner to understanding how, why and what worked, and under what circumstance, because every community was different. So we really had to learn under what circumstance did those things work, and how can such a collaborative begin to transform people? Because that's one thing we were seeing too. It wasn't necessarily always systems that were being transformed, but it was people. And then our hope is for sustainability, that those people will begin to transform the whole system in the future.