From the Guest Editors

"Meeting of Minds and Heart": Quality of Life Research and Community-Engaged Scholarship

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The complexities and the paradoxes of modern life abound as we move further into the 21st century. At no time in the history of humans have we been able to connect with other humans anywhere in the planet so conveniently, yet increasingly many of us feel disconnected from our neighbours living next door or down the road from us. Modern conveniences at one time promised to offer us ample leisure time, yet today our lives are busier than they have ever been. We are exposed to constant streams of information, every minute of every day, without necessarily achieving greater understanding or insight from this information. In some parts of the world, while people who were once in deep poverty have been lifted up, in other parts, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. In the most telling observation of all, our lives have never been longer as they are now, yet they are not necessarily lives of the highest quality. These incredible paradoxes, and what to do about them, frame the content of this theme-issue.

In this issue we set out to build a collection of research papers, commentaries of relevance, conversations that pique our interest, and reviews of books, with two central ideas of interest. One, we focused on the ever-relevant concept of 'quality of life' (the 'good' life) as an organizing theme. The quality of life concept is not a new concept for us at the Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR) at the University of Saskatchewan, having directed studies in this area in Saskatoon, Canada, continuously since 2000 and having contributed to this literature over the same period (Kitchen and Muhajarine, 2008). (More on this research can be found in the Report from the Field article by Holden and Muhajarine.) The genesis for this theme-issue, however, is found in a conference that CUISR convened in May, 2014, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. This conference, *Quality of Life: Towards Sustainable Community Futures,* designed to

showcase local, regional, national, and international research, community practice, and other initiatives, drew together over 150 participants for thoughtful dialogue and sharing, and several of the papers presented at the conference are represented here.

Researching and writing about quality of life is important, but it does not inevitably change anything. This is where the second driving idea for this volume comes in: the perspectives and methods of community-engaged scholarship. In recent years there has been a rebirthing of sorts, in academic circles in particular, under various names, of the simple idea that generation of new knowledge and new interpretations of the human condition should not occur without the deep and meaningful engagement of the very people who would stand to benefit from this knowledge. Therefore, all of the content included in this volume attests to the imperative of engaged scholarship, or simply, a way of producing, disseminating, and applying knowledge that breaks down barriers and renegotiates relationships between those who have traditionally produced knowledge (i.e. university researchers) and those who used it (everyone else). The insights gained through engaged scholarship are immediately relevant, emphatically rigorous (as a result of collaborative research design and implementation), understood by academics and non-academics like, and can be acted on because it provides answers to questions that non-academic partners have had at the outset.

This meeting of quality of life and community-engaged scholarship and intervention is the cornerstone of this collection. Accordingly, a majority of the papers presented in this volume report on projects that delve deeply into determinants of quality of life in a manner that engages community members and organizations, who together are able to act on the knowledge created. This convergence of quality of life research and engaged scholarship is important as it opens up space for learning from and being inspired by real-life quality of life projects, broadly defined, that are deeply connected to the locality or the context in which they occur.

Quality of life projects, or 'happiness research' to put it in another way, has come a long way in recent decades; some might argue that there is plethora of publications out there on this topic. We agree. For example, in the tradition of quality of life research at a national scale, we have included a very timely and interesting conversation in the Exchanges portion of this volume with Professor Bryan Smale, director of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing project. However, in this issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal* our intent was to showcase selected exemplars of work that, in our view, represents the intersection of quality of life and engaged scholarship and in doing so, offers us lessons on projects whose sole goal is to make a difference in the lives of people who are engaged in that project and the communities that they represent. For example, within these pages you will encounter how public schools in Vancouver work with their communities to improve the quality of children's lives through secure and sustainable food systems and experiential learning; how community-based research in Alberta can meaningfully engage youth in high-risk conditions; in a northern Saskatchewan Métis community, how the community perspectives are taken into account to promote health in a school setting; how social work education can better

support social justice-based practice in Ontario; in inner-city Saskatoon, how a post-secondary classroom opened up to create space for respectful and mutual learning by engaging with youth who were involved in the justice system; how the Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach, in the northern region of Quebec, empowered themselves to conceive, develop, and implement a community well-being monitoring process in the context of a major mining industry in their community; in the heart of Toronto, how a university program opens up to work with a community service agency so that students and community work with each other towards mutually beneficial outcomes. These are some of the stories reported here from the space between quality of life research and community engagement.

A line of inquiry that is presented within these pages is one that does not usually get the attention it deserves in community-engaged scholarship—the negotiation of power differences when academics and their partners in non-academic settings agree to work on projects. The 'power' that we refer to in community-university partnerships is neither unidimensional nor static; rather it is imbued with multiple facets and is dynamic. The power and advantage conferred with the university researchers' ability to access and control resources (i.e. grant funding), in relation to community members, often sets the tone in these partnerships; if not confronted directly, these differences may even be exacerbated and have counter-productive results from and on the partnerships.

The on-the-ground analysis of power distribution in community-university partnerships as presented by Buhler et al., Iwasaki et al., Chambers et al., and Mantyka and Engler-Stringer, for instance, is much more complex and subtle. There are multiple lines of cleavage that divide (and unite) people based on who is in the know, what they know, what experiences they have, and what resources and information they are able to routinely access. The power differences are not only between university academics and community organizations, but they are present also within the university and within the community. In fact, some of the most glaring and contentious power differences are present in the community—between small and large organizations, between culturally-based organizations and mainstream ones, and between health and other sectors. These differences call for deliberate and thoughtful engagement between academic and community partners to rebalance the power differentials as they begin to work as partners. Papers by Buhler et al., Iwasaki et al., Chambers et al., and Mantyka and Engler-Stringer provide us examples on how this negotiation is done on-the-ground.

A second theme running through the papers in this volume speaks to another issue, not often discussed. This is about whose questions are researched and reported. In traditional academia the questions—the hypotheses—come from the researchers themselves, as they are conventionally taken to be the experts, those who are 'in the know' and have the training and skills to do research. For quality of life—community-engaged research to be true to its purpose, researchers have to relinquish their hold as the originators of the question, and let the research questions come from the

community. The origins of the questions are important because as the questions go, the type of methods and style of dissemination will follow. Several papers in this volume showcase the research questions, or the intervention idea, were co-conceived by university and community partners, ensuring greater commitment to see the project through by both parties in equal measure. McShane et al., for example, describes a partnership that focuses on evaluation of programs, within an academic training model, 'applied learning ecosystem,' run by a community-based addictions treatment centre as a method to serve the needs of both the centre and the university. This and other papers in this volume are exemplars of true democratization of research that could benefit all.

The democratization of research is an especially urgent concern in relation to groups that have been historically marginalized and that have often felt "researched to death." The colonial history of research proved especially damaging to Indigenous people within and beyond Canada, treating them as rich sources of data while constructing them as problems to be solved, denying or dismissing their knowledges, and diverting attention from mainstream responsibilities for their fates.

If there are significant gaps between GDP growth and wellbeing, a flat-lining of wellbeing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, shifting priorities and troubling trends in Time use, Environment, and Leisure and culture, as well as inequities within regions and groups (see Exchanges section), gaps in life opportunities and wellbeing experienced by Indigenous people in Canada compared with the average Canadian remain a particular challenge. These gaps are well documented in, for instance, the Community Well-Being Index: Report on Trends in First Nations Communities, 1981-2011 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2015) and in the differential rankings in the United Nations Human Development Index. While Canada typically ranks in the top ten countries, Aboriginal peoples in Canada would place 63rd, according to Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde (cited in Mackrael, 2015). Yet national studies such as the Environics Institute 2010 survey document Aboriginal people's strong aspiration to improve their quality of life and reduce barriers to education, income, and government policy.

In response to ongoing gaps in quality of life outcomes, Indigenous researchers and communities have been acting on elders' advice to begin "researching ourselves to life" (as cited in Castellano, 2004, p. 98). Along with the United Nations and other international, national, regional, and local bodies, they have been rewriting protocols and ethical guidelines to protect Aboriginal interests and promote their benefits, including the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) (Schnarch, 2004). Research priorities are now to ensure research designed by, with, and for Aboriginal peoples, and to listen to and learn from Aboriginal voices.

These research priorities, including community engagement, are well reflected in a number of articles in this issue. In the article by Klinck et al., the Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach of northern Quebec developed indicators of their own design to track the impacts on quality of life of mining development in their

territory. Their monitoring will not only help the nation make decisions to support community wellbeing but will also increase understanding of the impacts of mining on Indigenous peoples worldwide. Health promotion in a Métis community in northern Saskatchewan is at the heart of the article by Oosman et al. which takes a participatory action research approach to engage Métis community members and knowledge in designing health interventions. The interdisciplinary community-based classroom on the theme of justice described by Buhler et al.—"Wahkohtowin" or "kinship" in Cree—documents co-learning as the re-experiencing of community so necessary to quality of life. Reflecting critically on structures that produce and reproduce inequality and disadvantage, participants including University and Aboriginal high school students and justice-involved Aboriginal youth worked and learned together to practice solidarity and imagine a quality of life based on equality and justice for all. Similarly, the contribution associated with Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming underlines how arts and culture have the power to change individual and community quality of life. The collaborative art piece "Grow" on the issue cover reflects the youth's understandings of factors foundational to improved quality of life.

The type of research and interventions reported here are incredibly difficult to do—it takes a long time to bring to fruition, many things are not under a researcher or intervenor's control possibly leading to lower success, funding is hard to come by, and academic institutions are stuck in their traditional ways of rewarding, which allows little room for acknowledging excellence in community-engaged scholarship. How do we then sustain this research? In other words, how do we take it up another notch and do it better? This question needs to be looked at from at least three angles. What can university do differently? What can community do differently? And finally, what can funders do differently?

First, within academia, the base of stakeholders in community-engaged scholarship has to be broadened. Professors, students, administrators, and staff who are practitioners of engaged scholarship or are keen supporters of the same need to be mobilized. When you broaden the base of stakeholders, you can broaden the base of interest and capacity. We have also to look for ways of broadening the base in the community. We need to bring new organizations into the fold, especially organizations that are respected, that are dynamic in the community. The community organizations that are brought in need not necessarily be the big organizations—but they need to be big in heart and big in intent and ability.

But there is another critical change we need to make in the university. We have to change some outdated policies and practices. Universities are steeped in tradition, and many academics don't look with strong favour at community-based research. Typically, development and advancement offices at the universities are very keen on these partnerships, but there is a different tone at the college and university review committees—the committees that pass judgement on whether an individual has proven his or her worth as a university professor, in order to be tenured, promoted,

or given merit increases. They don't always view community-based research as important or as rigorous research. There has to be a change in that mindset and practices. There have to be specific standards of excellence put in place that can be used to evaluate community-based research. These and other issues such as the capacity and preparedness to support and execute engaged research at a very high level, are the focus of the paper from Cheng et al. Reporting results based on a survey of members from one university, this paper indicates how far we still need to go to support engaged research and interventions that matter to people.

Turning to what the community can do to enhance engaged research and interventions, we would submit that they need to own research a little more. This would involve not just simply handing over data to an academic, or facilitating data collection, or signing a letter of support for a research project; rather, we need our community partners to help set the agenda for research. We need our community partners to be open to change if the research results tell them a different story than they thought was happening. We need to have our community agencies set aside resources for evaluation research so research becomes part and parcel of the programs that they deliver. Research becomes what they do, too, instead of just being the recipients of research findings.

At the end, we have to ask why we are committed to an approach that integrates Quality of Life with community-engaged research. We are committed to this project because what is at stake is much more than research, more than writing a report or getting a publication or mentoring a student. The enjoyment one gets from working with and getting to know different kinds of people, building relationships that endure, and contributing to a regeneration of new scholars with new priorities, all matter. Most importantly, this research is about helping to make our communities a better place for all—academics included—at present and in the future.

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