



CIHR funds research testing the psychological benefits of culturally based doulas to support Indigenous expectant mothers

Written by Emily Winters, BSc, MSc (Regina)

Dr. Jaime CIDRO is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology, Canada Research Chair in Health and Culture, and co-director of the Aabijjiwan Indigenous Research Lab. Dr. CIDRO and her team were recently awarded a CIHR Project Scheme grant for the Indigenous Doula Project, a project aimed at developing and test a program by through which Indigenous women would undergo doula training to provide support for Indigenous women who must travel from their communities to urban centers to give birth. I recently had the pleasure of meeting (virtually) with Dr. CIDRO to learn more about this important work.



Dr. Jaime CIDRO

What will be a doula's role in the Indigenous Doula Project?

We use the term 'doula' because it's the most commonly used term, but amongst us, we actually use the term 'birth worker'. How the birth workers are really working is prenatal, birth, and post-partum. So they're connecting with mom, as advocates, as people that they can get information from, to help them navigate systems. Once they're in the delivery room, they're there as a support also, as an advocate. You know, our moms experience racism in the hospital so as a layer of protection, I guess, and an advocate in those really important and crucial times during delivery. Then also postpartum to support mom with all those things that happen after baby comes.

And it's not just moms, it's actually family. We're trying to look at it as a family model and one of the pieces that we're really trying to do better job of addressing is gender diverse families as well. [...] Essentially, that's what our doulas are there for: prenatal, delivery, and postpartum. So kind of a traditional doula model, but beyond that, we're interested in this idea of being a good relative. We had done interviews a couple years ago with a first group of doulas that came out of a pilot project and so we interviewed all those doulas and that's what those doulas were saying to us – the reason they were doing this work is they were women themselves, moms themselves. They just wanted to be a good relative. So that's the other piece, we just want our doulas to be good relatives.

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You've written about the importance of Indigenous self-determination. How would you describe the ways in which the Urban Indigenous Doula project is rooted in Indigenous self-determination?

Well, I think, you know, from a researcher perspective, we've been asked to do this work – directly asked, you know, by partners. I'm always uncomfortable when people ask me to talk about it, because I don't like anyone to get the idea that this is my project – I just kind of facilitate relationships – facilitating the rolling out of the work, right. So I think as a researcher, that's part of self-determination – being told by the community what they need, and figuring out ways to make that happen. Our Kishaadigeh project is looking at ways that community organizations consider research, or data storytelling, or whatever it is that you want to call it, and how they can be supported in figuring that out. So the work is really about resourcing them directly. In my mind, self-determination is directly resourcing, and stepping back and engaging in evaluation components that we've all designed together. So, not me setting up the evaluation, but as a team of organizations, how do we think we should measure success? And my job is just to tick the boxes. I think self-determination is about community and driving the work from cradle to grave, and as a researcher, just being there in a supportive role. And trying not to take the credit for things – I try not to be the one presenting, or if I do I'm dragging someone else with me. Because I think it's just not good practice to be the one to be the face of things all the time.

What does community-driven research mean to you? Why is research guided by relationships important to you?

Because I think, if you're not doing that, then you're just... wasting a bunch of time. And we don't have time to be wasting. It's about being respectful of people's time. I've been working with the same people for a long time, and that's because we have the same motivation and ethos around it. I only work with Indigenous community members and scholars, because we all have a similar approach, which is putting the community first and providing and being a facilitator – almost like a contractor in a way. When you're not doing that, when you're not engaging well in relationships and when you're driving it, instead of having partners drive it, then you're just wasting time and you're wasting money. On top of that, you're perpetuating this idea of “researched to death”. The bottom line is, when you hear communities saying that “we've been researched to death”... reality is you need research, you need numbers, you need nuanced information. So you may as well do it better, than not doing it at all.

What sorts of changes do you hope will result from the Indigenous Doula Project?

What I hope to see, first of all, is a really strong, urban, Indigenous doula birth worker program. A program that is strong in so far as being well-connected to community partners, with strong referral systems, and doulas who feel so emboldened to advocate for their moms and their families, and just the confidence to do that. And moms that are confident, when they need that hospital or the birth center, they feel good about their pregnancy, about their delivery, and then they're going home and feeling confident as moms, and that their babies stay with them. You know, that's our

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goal, really, is that moms come away feeling like that. Because we know those zero to five years,- those are just the most critical periods for our human development. When our babies are surrounded by stability, love, their culture, and all of those things, we know how that sets them up for life.

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