Indigenous Insights: An Evaluation Podcast
Season 1 Episode 16: Melissa Tremblay
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Gladys Rowe (00:04):

Tansi. Greetings. Welcome to Indigenous Insights. I'm your host, Gladys Rowe, and I'm so grateful you are here. Each episode I sit in conversation with Indigenous evaluation practitioners, leaders, researchers, and scholars who are working in, thinking about, and supporting Indigenous evaluation, to share the learning they've experienced along the way. My hope is that these episodes allow you to reflect on how to design, implement, learn from, and support evaluation by with and for Indigenous families, communities, organizations, and nations. Join me and my guests as we open up our evaluation bundles to share what we've gathered in our journeys and bring them together into this space. I hope in these stories you will come to understand how we can collectively contribute to decolonial futures and strengthen Indigenous resurgence.

Okay, today I'm here with Dr. Melissa Tremblay, who's an associate professor in the faculty of education at the University of Alberta. She is a Métis scholar, born and raised in rural Alberta. Melissa has a background in program evaluation, program management, children's mental health, and working with Indigenous children and families using community-grounded methods. Melissa has worked in the field of evaluation for over 10 years and maintains a private evaluation practice. Her research and clinical background is focused on children's mental health and working with Indigenous children and families from a strengths-based perspective. Her research interests are primarily focused on exploring the development, resilience and mental health of Indigenous children, youth, and families, as well as the use of arts-based methods with diverse populations. Melissa's research takes a relational, community-based, participatory approach and has allowed her the privilege of working in partnership with Indigenous peoples, communities, schools, and agencies across the country. Welcome, Melissa. I'm so glad that you are able to join me today.

Melissa Tremblay (01:59):

Thank you. I'm really glad to be here.

Gladys (02:01):

Wonderful. So before we jump into our conversation, I'm wondering if there's any other way that you wanted to introduce yourself into this space?

Melissa (02:08):

Sure, thanks. So as you mentioned, my name is Melissa Tremblay. Tremblay is my married name, but I was born Daniels, so Daniels was my last name up until I got married. I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and my family has longstanding roots in Alberta, west of Edmonton, mostly in the Lac Ste. Anne Métis area of the province. So my family is part of the Lac Ste. Anne Métis community and my dad is Cree Métis and my mom has French and Norwegian roots. So that's where I kind of fit into the mix. I come from a big family, so I have two brothers and two sisters and I grew up in a family where we were quite close with aunts and uncles and cousins. And I myself am a mom to three children. I have a six-year-old son, a four-year-old son and an almost two-year-old daughter. And professionally I'm just really fortunate to work in the faculty of education here at the University of Alberta, but it's the faculty and program where I was trained as a school and clinical child psychologist and as a researcher and evaluator. As a faculty member now I have a lot of latitude to be able to work on projects that are grounded in community, so I'm really grateful to be able to do the work that I do.

Gladys (03:21):

Thank you so much for sharing about the relations that you bring and all of the different roles that you have in doing your work and in taking care of future generations as well. I would love to learn a little bit more about how you came into this space of working in Indigenous evaluation. What did your journey look like to get here?

Melissa (03:42):

Sure. Yeah, so I would say I got into this field when I was working on my master's degree. So I was a graduate student under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Gokiert and I started my master's in 2010, so about 13 years ago now. And at the time Rebecca was working with Bent Arrow, which is a nonprofit organization that serves Indigenous peoples in Edmonton area. And we were working on a project around understanding the social emotional competencies of Indigenous children and youth and the multiple worlds that they walk in in order to develop in socially and emotionally healthy ways. And in my undergrad I had participated as a research assistant in different research projects that were quite experimental and didn't necessarily have the human element. And so I just remember as a grad student being introduced to the world of community-based research and evaluation and just being so grateful for that door being opened to understand that, hey, research doesn't have to be purely clinical or experimental and learning about the intersections between research and evaluation.

So that was as a master's student. I also worked for Alberta Health Services as an evaluator of children's mental health programs for a number of years and then really missed the community-based and Indigenous community-grounding side of evaluation. So, after working there for a

couple of years, I went and worked at the University of Alberta again, in the faculty of medicine with Dr. Lola Baydala who was implementing with community members from the Maskwacis community about an hour south of Edmonton. They were implementing and evaluating a life skills program. And so I worked as an evaluator for a number of years with that program and just absolutely fell in love with this really community-grounded, relational way of working and then was able to do an evaluation project as well for my dissertation and continue on from there. So just serendipitous opportunities that came my way and I haven't left the field of evaluation or Indigenous community-grounded work since then.

Gladys (06:14):

Beautiful. That's quite the journey. And I also started my master's right about the same time as you did and thinking about, you know, my own journey or kind of accidental fall into research and evaluation through an invitation into community work and really fell in love with it, I think in the same way it sounds like you have in terms of moving into and supporting Indigenous communities and youth and families.

Melissa (06:41):

I was just gonna say I really like how you put that kind of falling into this work but also feeling at home with this work and so not really wanting to leave.

Gladys (06:51):

<laugh>. Yeah, I definitely feel that a lot. So when you think about all of these different experiences that you've had supporting evaluation with Indigenous communities, have you been able to like feel or see or implement some common threads of what Indigenous evaluation looks like from the work that you've been doing?

Melissa (07:14):

I think so. And at the same time, I think that's a tension that I've run across is that, yes, there are certain principles and ways of working that we can apply in different communities. So for example, using a relational kind of approach, providing space for community members to be able to take leadership roles and guide whatever the metrics are that we're using as evaluators. And also recognizing that a lot of these things are community specific. So even if I might have some overarching principles in mind like relationality and accountability and humility, I can never go into a new community context thinking that I know what's going to happen, what's going to appeal most to people in terms of the way that we do our evaluation or think about even the concept of Indigenous evaluation. So I'm always thinking about the overarching principles that may apply in different contexts, but also recognizing how each community that I work with is really unique in a lot of ways.

Gladys (08:27):

Yeah, that's so important in thinking about how you show up to do the work and whose priorities and voices are driving what needs to be done.

Melissa (08:38):

Yeah, it's always a balancing act. I think especially in my role as an academic, I do have to maintain accountabilities to my institution for example, or to the different funders that are funding my research and evaluation work. And at the same time recognizing that the priority for me is also privileging community accountability, I guess I could say. So, like you said, prioritizing what community members or whoever the people are that I'm working with want to see in terms of the approaches that are used, the products that we end up with, the processes that we go through.

Gladys (09:21):

So when you think about some of those tensions that you carry, in terms of the different roles and responsibilities and accountabilities, do you have any kind of aha or learning moments that you maybe have processed as a result of balancing all of those pieces?

Melissa (09:39):

Yeah, that's a great question. Something that I've been thinking about recently is being really clear the terms that we're using. I think that's always important, especially when we're working in this field of Indigenous evaluation. I think there's so many different evaluation approaches that are out there now and gaining credibility. So we need to be clear about what kinds of evaluation we're using and the language that goes along with that. So for me, sometimes we use Indigenous evaluation, that term, to describe two different things. They could also be overlapping, but sometimes we use the term Indigenous evaluation to describe evaluation that's maybe taking place in partnership with Indigenous communities or being done with an Indigenous organization or Indigenous peoples. But doing evaluation with an Indigenous organization or Indigenous peoples doesn't always translate to doing evaluation in a way that incorporates Indigenous evaluation principles.

So when I use the term Indigenous evaluation, I mean evaluation that prioritizes relationality, as I've mentioned, that makes space for community to take the reins and lead aspects of an evaluation, that they have expertise in approaches, that have accountability to community at heart, and that really center Indigenous ways of knowing. So Indigenous evaluation is not the same as participatory evaluation, for example, because participatory evaluation does not necessarily incorporating Indigenous evaluation principles and ways of knowing. So I think just being really clear about expectations and language and what we mean when we say that we're using certain approaches helps to navigate some of those tensions. I also think being aware of the systems that we're embedded in and the limitations of those systems is really important. To be clear, I work within a really colonial institution as an academic institution, right? And so me being able to reflect on that and understand the limitations of that I think also helps to navigate the tensions, and also having colleagues who get it as well and are able to reflect with me has been incredibly helpful.

Gladys (12:13):

Thank you. All very important points that you're raising and I really appreciate you speaking to coming to a common understanding of what is meant when we say Indigenous evaluation,

because I do think, you know, that spectrum really clearly exists out there in terms of what do we mean when we say Indigenous evaluation? Yeah, there's these varying experiences. And so it makes me think about some of the important work that is being done to differentiate it and thinking about evaluation done by us, with us, for us and incorporating ways of knowing, being, and doing as the foundational starting point. And also, you know, that there are other approaches within evaluation that might be helpful and/or useful, but for me it's really thinking about that starting point. Where do we begin from and how does that then inform all of the other choices that we make within an evaluation project?

Melissa (13:15):

Yeah, I really like that. Where we're starting from, I think is really key, and also speaks to what's come before us to maybe lead to this whatever context it is that we find ourselves in with evaluation. So, yeah, I would totally agree.

Gladys (13:35):

Yeah, great point. So when you think about why Indigenous evaluation is important, maybe broadly and also for yourself, why is this an important thing to be talking about focusing on privileging?

Melissa (13:50):

Mm-hmm. I mean at the core I think Indigenous evaluation is important so that stories about Indigenous peoples, communities, and programs can be told by Indigenous people themselves. And the metrics that we often use when we're doing more conventional evaluations often don't mean much to communities. So we may have externally defined targets for the number of people served, or we may use our validated questionnaires pre- and post-program to be able to say something that perhaps a funder wants to understand about a program to determine if it's quote unquote working or not. But those pieces of information, although they serve a purpose, may not be the most important ones to the people on the ground who are delivering those services or the people that are receiving those services. And so when we work in a relational way to co-create different metrics and ways of understanding a program or a project or whatever it might be that we're evaluating, then we can end up with learnings that mean a whole lot more to the communities that we're working with, I think, than if we are using approaches that are defined by non-Indigenous people, if that makes sense.

Gladys (15:32):

Yeah, absolutely. And I really feel like there hasn't been that awareness in the history of research and evaluation and thinking about what is actually meaningful for the people who are contributing and how will this make a difference? And so that shift is so important. When you think about the work that you've been doing with different communities, I'm wondering if there are some offerings you can bring forward for Indigenous evaluators who are thinking about and are doing work in this way. Like what is important to begin to think about when they're starting a new partnership or project and really want to work from this foundation that you're talking about?

Melissa (16:19):

So I think a number one consideration as a new partnership or project is getting off the ground would be time, because it takes a lot of time to do good evaluation work in partnership with communities or community organizations. It takes time to establish relationships and to work in a way where people feel like they can trust each other. And I know for myself, I was trained doing experimental research to start out with and trained really conventionally as a psychologist and a scientist practitioner; we are driven by the western ideal of productivity, right? So if I'm taking time to just hang out in community or drink tea with people or share a meal, just have conversations that may really have nothing to do with the project that we're working on, that might be seen as really unproductive, right? It might be seen as wasting time or not using time effectively.

But those informal interactions, I think, are some of the most important for building relationships, and knowing who each other are, knowing who the people are that we're working with, so that we can start to understand what's important to them, why they do the work they do in the way that they do. And all of these things are so important to doing good evaluations. So I think being prepared to spend a lot of time and wear different hats as well. So spending time at cultural ceremonies for example, if you're invited to be able to do that, is such a privilege. And although it may not be something as an academic I put on my annual report in terms of productivity, it's more important than anything. So, yeah, being able to spend that time and have patience and let things unfold the way that they're supposed to and letting go of control of how quickly things happen. I know it can be easier said than done, but that's probably my number one learning.

Gladys (18:46):

Wonderful. Thank you for all of those different examples about the importance of relationship and it speaks to some of the points that you're making earlier about, you know, accountability and relationality and being in that community space in a good way. I want to shift a little bit because in your introduction I had shared that you do some work using arts-based methods and I'd love to explore that a little bit, and I'm wondering if you have some examples that you might be able to share about how arts-based work shows up in your evaluation work?

Melissa (19:21):

Sure, yeah. The first example that comes to mind is when I was doing my dissertation work, I worked with the Terra Center for Teen Parents, which is an amazing organization in Edmonton that serves teen families. And I was evaluating their supportive housing program. And so what we had originally planned is a few different things, but one of them was we wanted to be able to assess the developmental functioning of children in the program at certain time points. So essentially we wanted to know are they developing on track with their milestones at program entry and maybe a year later? And we found that they [the parents] were just really not interested in having an outsider wearing a clinical hat assessing their children. Some of them were concerned about where – even if we were very upfront about what we were doing with the information, they still didn't trust that what we were going to do with the information; they worried about having their children apprehended even if someone was to misinterpret something.

And so that kind of fell flat. We didn't have as many teen parents participate in that side of our evaluation as we had expected or hoped for. So what we ended up doing was shifting gears to do a photo voice process. We implemented a photo voice process for our evaluation. And so what that looked like was asking teen parents to take photos in response to an evaluation question, which was essentially how this supportive housing program was helping their children develop in healthy ways, however they wanted to define healthy. And it really took off; we would meet with them on a biweekly basis after they took photos and they would share why they took certain photos. And I was there as a group facilitator, and the first round that we did this, a postdoctoral fellow, Dr. Bethan Kingsley, was there as well. And they really took the reins on directing conversation during our biweekly groups.

They [parents] shared really important and impactful information. Some of their photos were really powerful, and we also had them do some artwork during our groups as well if they wanted to. So things like drawing an outline of a person's body and on the inside of the body writing things about how they believed or the way that they saw themselves as a parent, how they felt inside as a parent, and on the outside the ways that they felt other people saw them as a teen parent and just how that played into the supportive housing program model and the ways that they were raising their children in healthy ways and how that impacted their children's development. They shared some really powerful information through their photos and also through their artwork. And it was just really a great learning for me that I thought that I was going to go in and do pre and post assessments of their children and that wouldn't be a problem, but really that was not what they cared about or wanted to know is these outsider-defined metrics. They wanted to share information on their own terms and be able to have some self-determination and control over the process and the information that they were sharing. So that would be an example of a shift to be responsive to the participants we were working with to use more arts-based methods.

Gladys (23:22):

Thank you for sharing that. And it really highlights that sometimes evaluation doesn't exactly go as planned and it's important to reflect as a practitioner on what's going on here? why might this not be working? And some of the points that you brought forward around control and voice and self-determination, what important recognition and the resulting shift in how you engaged with and gathered story from people in that program. It sounds like an amazing learning and I'm so glad to hear about the incorporation of art into that work.

As a practitioner who's been working in community for over a decade now, what are some of the challenges that you have noticed in implementation of this evaluation? What are some of the things that are holding us up right now that might be barriers to this work?

Melissa (24:23):

Yeah, something that I see as a barrier or a difficulty is when we have these beautiful programs that are implemented and maybe they're first implemented primarily as a research or evaluation project. So we walk alongside community to begin a project, implement it, it's going really well, we can demonstrate some important outcomes, but once the research and evaluation funding comes to a close, then the sustainability of the program becomes really difficult to secure,

because the program was funded as a research or evaluation project in the first place. So that is a challenge for sure. It's something that's not insurmountable, but I think we need to be paying attention to sustainability from the outset of a project. If it's originally conceived of as a research and evaluation project where program implementation is accompanying it, I also think we can flip that where it can be really important to first and foremost fund program implementation and then research and evaluation is an aside.

So maybe there's a time limit to the number of years that research and evaluation is taking place, but we know after that's done the program is still going to be implemented in whatever iteration that might look like. So hopefully as an evaluator we've documented learnings and contributed to evolving the program or project or initiatives so that it doesn't look the same necessarily as when it started, but at least we know there's sustainability for when we as evaluators are no longer involved.

I also think capacity building is kind of a hot topic right now in evaluation, and in an Indigenous evaluation space, that term is used a lot, and I think we can't take for granted what that means and what that can look like. So we can go into an Indigenous evaluation context and people that are implementing the program or people in community are really interested in learning about evaluation from external perspectives, and that's great, but that's not always the case, right? So capacity building can also mean as an evaluator my capacity is being built to understand the community on a deeper level and some of the needs that are there and the strengths that are there as well. So that can be a challenge too, to figure out what that idea of capacity building means, especially mutual capacity building.

Gladys (27:32):

Thank you. Yeah, two really important pieces. When I was really embedded in some of the work that I was doing in the north end of Winnipeg, one of the things that we kept hearing over and over is the frustration with like these quote unquote pilot projects that keep being funded in communities and they're there for a short amount of time and then they disappear. And so people just keep – you know, it contributes to the distrust of organizations, of evaluators, of researchers, when we know, going back to what you said earlier, it takes time to build evaluation relationships and also it takes time for trust to be built in other areas, like in the programming. And so I love the idea that you shared there around sustainability being a challenge and also an opportunity for evaluators to think about how sustainability can be built right into the beginning of something.

Melissa (28:31):

Yeah, absolutely. And so I think it does come back to what's driving a given program or project or initiative. If it's research and evaluation that's driving it, then we have to be really intentional about sustainability, more so than if it's program implementation that's driving the initiative.

Gladys (28:51):

Yeah. And then the capacity building piece, you didn't quite go in the direction – I've been thinking about capacity building as well, but in a different way. And so, capacity building, I think about how you shared about leaving more behind in a community than you take away, like

that reciprocity piece. And I've also been thinking a lot about capacity building in terms of the field of Indigenous evaluation capacity building because there needs to be more of us <laugh> doing this work. And so I'm wondering if you have any thoughts – just because I'm going to throw it out there – around building the field of Indigenous evaluation and capacity for doing this work. If you've been thinking about this question and if you have any thoughts on it.

Melissa (29:33):

Yeah, I think when the work of Indigenous evaluators is uplifted and made visible and valued, that helps to support and strengthen the field as a whole and maybe open up opportunities for emerging Indigenous evaluators. I mean I think ideally we would get to a place where we stop taking for granted that western non-Indigenous ways of doing evaluation are the standard. An Indigenous evaluation is sort of othered. I feel like we often have to get special permission from a funder or feel like we're pushing a funder or my institution, for example, to conduct an evaluation using Indigenous or community-generated standards of rigor. And ideally I think that would be flipped, where if we're working with an Indigenous community or we're an Indigenous evaluator doing community work, we'd see Indigenous evaluation as the standard. And so that's a whole perspective shift and systemic issue. But I think ideally, when we see that happening, that will open up opportunities and strengthen the field as well.

Gladys (30:50):

Yeah. And so thinking about emerging Indigenous evaluators and thinking about the fact that so many of the stories that I've been hearing as I have conversations on this podcast and in the work that I do in meeting other Indigenous evaluators, I'm not sure any of us intended to end up where we end up <laugh> in terms of working in this field. So if you were to share some insights with emerging Indigenous evaluators or if people who might not even think that evaluation is something that's important, what would you like to share with them about this work?

Melissa (31:27):

I think what I would want to share about this work is that it requires deep listening and engagement and just how transformative and powerful that can be both personally and professionally. I also think sometimes when we're doing work in community and really providing space to use methods or approaches that are not conventional academic approaches, sometimes it can be uncomfortable. But I've heard Dr. Janet Smiley, who is an Indigenous physician, I heard her talk once about using our discomfort as a learning tool. That just really stuck with me. I love that. And I think about that with evaluation as well. So sometimes when we're doing things in new ways, we can use the discomfort that comes along with that as a learning tool. So confronting our discomfort and being curious about it. So what makes me worried about taking this new approach? what am I afraid of essentially?

Because I think we have a responsibility to really work in ways in evaluation that cause changes because the status quo isn't working for Indigenous people, whether we're talking about health and wellness. So we have a responsibility to take into account the knowledge, the wisdom, the lessons that are imparted to us by the people that we're working with, which will come about from deep listening and engagement, but is not always comfortable. So it's not always – you

know, when I first started out in evaluation, it was like collect this information, synthesize it in a way that makes sense to people and tie a bow on it. But that's not always the way that an evaluation shapes out when we're doing things in a relational way. It can feel messy and uncomfortable, but that's okay, and that's maybe where some of the most important learning and transformation takes place.

Gladys (33:50):

Thank you. That's definitely something that I've experienced, just getting comfortable with being uncomfortable <laugh> and to notice like why that's coming up and where it's coming up and in trying and in building new ways of working. That's such an important invitation. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

Melissa (34:11):

Mm-hmm.

Gladys (34:13):

We're kind of getting to the end of our time together and I wanted to open it up as I made this invitation and reached out to you and wanted to learn more about your work and so thankful that you said yes. I'm wondering if there's any bubbling things that you wanted to make sure to leave the listeners with as we close off our time together. What else do you want to make sure to share with them?

Melissa (34:38):

I guess just how incredibly hopeful the world of evaluation can be, how rich the learnings can be, how many different opportunities there are to do this work in a good way and what an honor it is to be invited into different community spaces to do evaluation work. So how important it is to hold those invitations with deep integrity. Also, I think when we're doing this work, we can take a critical look at the colonial mentalities that really infiltrate a lot of evaluation approaches, as someone who works a lot in the area of health research and evaluation, and as a psychologist as well, clinicians and evaluators and researchers. We've done a lot of pathologizing of Indigenous people. And so when we can dismantle that and question that and come up with new ways of working, that's really healing and that can contribute to rebuilding new and different approaches. So I see a lot of hope in that.

Gladys (35:53):

Beautiful. Thank you so much for those closing reflections. I am so grateful to be able to share this time with you today and I'm so happy that we got to connect. Ekosani again.

Melissa (36:06):

Yes, thank you so much. It was really an honor to be able to chat with you today.

Gladys (36:16):

I am so glad you spent time with us today.

I have a few notes to wrap up this episode. If you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on your favorite streaming service, including Pod Beans, Spotify, and Apple Podcast, so that you don't miss an episode. Also, this podcast is self-supported and I'm hoping to make the work more sustainable. So if you're finding the content interesting and valuable, please consider supporting Indigenous insights through Buy Me a Coffee. You can find the link in the show notes. Finally, I would like to extend an invitation. If you are someone who has an interest in Indigenous evaluation and would like to have a conversation on this podcast, I would love to hear from you. Please send me a note and we can connect about your work, what you're learning, and the questions you're thinking about. That's it for this week. I look forward to sharing this space with you again soon. Ekosani.