



**DESCRIBING
AAJIIQATIGIINGNIQ AS
AN INUIT CONSENSUS
METHODOLOGY IN
HEALTH RESEARCH**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indigenous knowledge has for decades been marginalized by Western scientific research. Decolonization in health research requires recognition of Indigenous methodologies. Health research that seeks to establish agreement about a subject often relies on consensus methods. Researchers have previously used Western consensus methods to embed Indigenous knowledge, and more specifically, Inuit knowledge. This lay report concerns a study that aims to go one-step further. Instead of embedding Inuit knowledge in a Western consensus method, we characterize Inuit knowledge as a consensus methodology. The purpose is to use Inuit ways of knowing to wholly direct research. We use group meetings and individual interviews with Elders and other senior community members in Arviat, Nunavut to describe the Inuit knowledge principle of *aajiiqatigiingniq* as a consensus methodology in health research. Findings reveal an informal and unhurried meeting approach focused on sustained individual and community wellbeing in a variety of contexts. Consensus is achieved through the addition of group members, respectful and open communication, and personal engagement. This study brings Inuit time-tested knowledge to the forefront of Arctic health research.

INTRODUCTION

With the creation of Nunavut more than two decades ago, Inuit established a place for Inuit knowledge and ways of being—*Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ)*—in governance and in the science, policies, and programs that affect Nunavummiut. This sets the stage for a long overdue decolonization process as Inuit revitalize authentic cultural teaching, beliefs and practices and begin to reassert their *IQ* cultural systems.

IQ describes cultural, environmental, spiritual and social knowledge grounded in a wholly and holistic Inuit worldview. The term has been translated into English as “that which tries to capture past, present and future experience, knowledge and values of the Inuit.”¹ In the context of Nunavut health, for example, *IQ* is considered crucial to a better understanding and delivery of care. Health practices and programs informed by Inuit knowledge can help Nunavummiut live healthier lives.²

¹ Tester, F., & Irniq, P. (2008). *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Social History, Politics and the Practice of Resistance*. *Arctic* 61(1): 48–61.

² Tagalik, S. (2012). *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: The role of Indigenous knowledge in supporting wellness in Inuit communities in Nunavut*. Retrieved from <http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/docs/fact%20sheets/child%20and%20youth/Inuit%20IQ%20EN%20web.pdf>

Yet, advancing *IQ* in contemporary times isn't simple. We identify three complications which contribute to the challenge:

1. The Inuit cultural—and mainly oral—ways of passing knowledge among and between generations has been profoundly interrupted by decades of colonial interference.
2. *IQ* is contextual; its expression, as much as its content, affects its meaning. Describing *IQ* in a static, written form risks altering how *IQ* is understood.³
3. Finally, profound differences in Inuit and Western ways of knowing means characterizing *IQ* in a manner that can be appreciated by non-Inuit is a delicate exercise—even as successfully integrating Inuit and Western health care research, programs and delivery is essential.

This report tells of an effort to characterize just one area of *IQ*'s vast scope: *Aajiiqatigiingniq* is one of eight guiding *IQ* principles and a pillar of Inuit understanding and knowledge.⁴ Our description does not overcome the issues affecting *IQ* mentioned above, but it attempts instead to outline the characteristics of *aajiiqatigiingniq* that can help researchers recognize its significance and usefulness.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) has been translated into English as “that which tries to capture past, present and future experience, knowledge and values of the Inuit”⁵

³Karetak, J., & Tester, F. (2017). Introduction: Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, truth and reconciliation. In J. Karetak, F. Tester, & S. Tagalik (Eds.), *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: what Inuit have always known to be true* (pp. 1-16). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

⁴Nunavut Department of Education. (2007). *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: education framework for Nunavut curriculum*. Iqaluit: Nunavut Department of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/files/Inuit%20Qaujimajatuqangit%20ENG.pdf>

⁵Tester, F., & Irniq, P. (2008).



INUIT VALUES IN ARCTIC HEALTH RESEARCH

For decades, research aimed at understanding and improving health for Canada's Inuit has been dominated by Western scientific thinking. In particular, health studies have relied on biomedical ideas that isolate physical illnesses from other realms of experience: Mental and emotional health received little attention, while spiritual, cultural, social, and community well-being received almost none.

Western approaches have always been an uncomfortable fit in Nunavut's communities. They risk failing to recognize what's relevant to Inuit health or misinterpreting health study findings. Mental health research offers a worrying example: While many Indigenous communities are thought to experience more mental health issues than non-Indigenous Canadians, mental health studies in these communities have been rarely initiated or conducted by the communities themselves.⁶ *IQ* definitions and understandings of wellbeing are not being used to ground research approaches and Western ideas and stereotypes of Indigenous people, meanwhile, can cloud the picture and even create barriers to treatment.⁷

Fortunately, the situation is changing.⁸ These days, more health researchers recognize the need to decolonize research, emphasizing Inuit values, voices, participation, and leadership. Fitting this realization with current Canadian health research and policy, however, is tricky. Describing *IQ* for people unfamiliar with this Inuit approach to inquiry can play a critical role.

This lay-reader report and its characterization of the *IQ* principle of *aajiiqatigiingniq* is intended to help.

⁶Waldram, J. (2004). *Revenge of the Windigo: The construction of the mind and mental health of North American Aboriginal peoples*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

⁷Nelson, S. (2012). *Challenging hidden assumptions: Colonial ideologies as determinants of Aboriginal mental health*. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health; Nelson, S., & Wilson, K. (2017). The mental health of Indigenous peoples in Canada: a critical review of research. *Social Science & Medicine* 176, 93-112.

⁸Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., & Smith, L. T. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of Critical and indigenous Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.



CONSENSUS RESEARCH AND IQ

For people familiar with Western research traditions, it's helpful to recognize where Western and Inuit approaches align. One of these places is the use of consensus to improve understanding.⁹

In Western research, consensus methods aim to put expert opinion together with available evidence to fill knowledge gaps.¹⁰ Generally, these methods explore areas of expert agreement.¹¹ In health research and medicine, there are several consensus methods including the nominal group consensus technique.¹² In essence, this method first gathers independent opinions from experts and then brings them together in a group to discuss and evaluate them.¹³

IQ has its own consensus tradition: *Aajiiqatigiingniq* develops agreement as a way to comprehend and resolve a community-relevant problem. The process of *aajiiqatigiingniq* begins with group discussions so that a shared understanding of the issue at hand is achieved. It is only with this in place that individuals are best able to contribute their own experiences and ideas in the solution-seeking, consensus-building process. One of the four big laws (*maligarjuaq*) for Inuit is to maintain harmony.¹⁴ In the health care context, the process is closely tied to the Inuit idea that *inuutsiargniq* (i.e., “wellness”) comes from community support for and inclusion of individuals as well as from community harmony.¹⁵

⁹Ferrazzi, P., Tagalik, S., Christie, P., Karetak, J., Baker, K., and Angalik, L. (2019). *Aajiiqatigiingniq*: An Inuit consensus methodology in qualitative health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1-9, DOI <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919894796>. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1609406919894796>; Chatwood, S., Paulette, F., Baker, R., Eriksen, A., Hansen, K. L., Eriksen, H., ... Brown, A. (2015). Approaching *Etuaptomuk*—introducing a consensus-based mixed method for health services research. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 74:27438; Healey, G., Noah, J., & Mearns, C. (2016). The eight *Ujarait* (rocks) model: supporting Inuit adolescent mental health with an intervention model based on Inuit knowledge and ways of knowing. *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 11(1), 92–110.

¹⁰Bobrovitz, N., Parrilla, J., Santana, M., Straus, S., & Stelfox, H. (2013). A qualitative analysis of a consensus process to develop quality indicators of injury care. *Implementation Science* 8: 45.

¹¹Jones, J., & Hunter, D. (1995). Consensus methods for medical and health services research. *British Medical Journal* 311, 376-380.

¹²Fink, A., Kosekoff, J., Chassin, M., & Brook, R. H. (1984). Consensus methods: characteristics and guidelines for use. *American Journal of Public Health* 74, 979-983.

¹³Humphrey-Murto, S., Varpio, L., Gonsalves, C., & Wood, T. J. (2017). Using consensus group methods such as delphi and nominal group in medical education research. *Medical Teacher* 39, 14-19.

¹⁴Tagalik, S. (2012).

¹⁵Tagalik, S. (2015). *Inuit knowledge systems, elders and determinants of health: harmony, balance and the role of holistic thinking*. In M. Greenwood, S. de Leeuw, N.M. Lindsay (Eds.). *Determinants of Indigenous peoples' health in Canada: beyond the social* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON:Canadian Scholar's Press.

Researchers have previously argued that Western consensus methods are well suited to Indigenous health research in the Arctic.¹⁶ They have used these consensus methods to embed Indigenous,¹⁷ and more specifically, Inuit values and knowledge¹⁸ in the process of reaching agreement. It's an important start.

For this project, however, we aim to go one-step further. Instead of embedding Inuit knowledge in a Western method, we characterize a principle of *IQ* as a methodology to direct research using Inuit ways of knowing.¹⁹

¹⁶Chatwood, S. et al. (2015); Healey, G., Noah, J. & Mearns, C. (2016).

¹⁷Chatwood, S. et al. (2015).

¹⁸Healey, G., Noah, J. & Mearns, C. (2016).

¹⁹Ferrazzi et. al. (accepted).

²⁰Humphrey-Murto, S., Varpio, L., Gonsalves, C., & Wood, T. J. (2017).

*Nominal group consensus: In Western research, the nominal group consensus method involves face-to-face interactions within a group of 5-12 experts. The experts independently respond to a nominal question before discussing it amongst themselves. It's a four-step process that begins with individuals generating ideas in response to a question, a facilitator mapping these ideas using a round-robin format, discussion, and a vote to gain agreement.*²⁰



“DESCRIBING AAJIIQATIGIINGNIQ”: THE STUDY

In October 2018, a team of Inuit and non-Inuit researchers spent nine days in the Nunavut community of Arviat exploring the *IQ* concept of *aajiiqatigiingniq*. Most of the research team were residents of Arviat. The project brought together leading Inuit Elders and other senior community members to describe this Inuit consensus decision-making process in the context of individual and community health. The study marked the first time since colonization that Arviat Elders had gathered specifically to discuss and agree on the characterization of this *IQ* principle for purposes of Wellness Court research. Wellness Courts are concerned with improving mental health and for Nunavut, require consideration of Inuit epistemologies.²¹

Three group meetings were facilitated in Inuktitut by an Arviat team member. The team member is both a member of the Aqqiumavvik Society and a well-respected Nunavut facilitator who has worked with Elders for the past 20 years. These meetings were filmed and audio-recorded in Inuktitut and English. Individual interviews with participants were conducted between the first and second group meeting by the Inuk facilitator and a University of Alberta team member.

²¹Ferrazzi, P., & Krupa T. (2016). “Symptoms of something all around us”: mental health, Inuit culture, and criminal justice in Arctic communities in Nunavut, Canada. *Social Science and Medicine*, 165:159–167.



THE PARTICIPANTS:

Twelve participants representing two generations came together to discuss this vital *IQ* principle. Three were raised “on the land” and have lived experience of *aajiiqatigiingniq*, and six were from a colonized generation of Inuit with limited direct lived experience with *aajiiqatigiingniq* but with indirect knowledge of the traditional decision-making approach. Three others were senior community members but younger than the Elders. These had some exposure to their parent’s solution-seeking approaches within their families. There were an equal number of males and females in the group. Ages spanned from 51 to 85 years.

DESCRIBING AAJIIQATIGIINGNIQ

Aajiiqatigiingniq is a multi-purpose Inuit way to reach consensus on issues affecting personal and collective well-being and healing.²²

Earlier accounts by Inuit Elders suggest *aajiiqatigiingniq* is essential to *suvuliqsuqtuq*, or the role of the community in ensuring a person will have a good future.²³ That is, *aajiiqatigiingniq* restores harmony to the individual and group when faced with a threat of disruption.

Other characteristics of *aajiiqatigiingniq* revealed by Elders and community members in our study are wide ranging and are discussed below:

Applications of *aajiiqatigiingniq* are varied

Reasons for using *aajiiqatigiingniq* decision-making in Inuit communities are varied and include planning seasonal moves or hunting excursions, preparing for life change such as marriage or illness, confronting wrongdoing, identifying individual life goals, or planning for collaborative and collective work.

The focus is on wellness

Despite its wide application, the focus of *aajiiqatigiingniq* is wellness, often expressed in terms of making individuals or, especially, the community well or “whole” again. Wellness is a core aspiration of IQ ways of being since it underlies and establishes successful cultural sustainability. All aspects of life --- socialization, living together, productivity, hunting, good health, and spiritual connectedness rely on harmony within the group.²⁴ It is this focus on harmony, which defines wellbeing in all its applications.

The consensus group size and scope increases as needed

Aajiiqatigiingniq as a process begins at the individual and family level and grows in size (i.e., increasing the number of community members involved), seriousness and scope until the issue being considered can be resolved.

“No matter who you are, if this person had something in his heart, if he doesn’t get help or healing, that hurt is going to stay with him all the way to his or her adult life.”

– Participant

²²McGrath, J. (2005). *Conversations with Nattilingmiut Elders on conflict and change: Naatattiarahuarnira*. (M. A. Thesis). Ottawa, ON: Saint Paul University; Tagalik, S. (2012).

²³CSS, Department of Education, Government of Nunavut. (2005). *Elder Advisory Meeting Notes*. Aug 24-27th.

²⁴Tagalik, S. (2015).

Respectful, open, and trusted communication is essential

The *aajiiqatigiingniq* process ensures participating Elders and community members feel welcome to offer opinions with each person given an equal opportunity to speak and each voice given equal weight.

Storytelling (narrative) is central

Aajiiqatigiingniq consensus development involves agreement arrived at mainly through storytelling, recounting of personal experiences rather than offering opinions not grounded in real life events. For Inuit, knowledge is mediated by experience.

Personal engagement by the consensus group members is a hallmark

Similarly, accounts of lived experiences by the Elders ensured participants in *aajiiqatigiingniq* consensus building were personally engaged in the resolution or healing rather than remaining dispassionate arbiters of what should be done.

Consensus development is not structurally formal or hurried

Aajiiqatigiingniq is not structurally formal but nevertheless appeared to retain a deep sense of authority and fairness without the strictures of formal consensus demanded by the scientific literature and requiring significant time.

“If a person did something wrong or was in trouble, the parents would try to correct him. If that didn’t work, then the other members of the family would be involved. And if that didn’t work, the Elders would be seeking outside help so that the person in the middle can be helped.”

– Participant

APPLYING AAJIIQATIGIINGNIQ TO HEALTH RESEARCH

In Western health research, consensus methods improve the accuracy and reliability of research by assessing agreement among experts.²⁵ The process is formal and considered untrustworthy if it doesn't include key features, such as anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback, statistical group response and structured interaction.²⁶

For Inuit, this definition of consensus is not sufficiently agile and is arguably culturally restrictive. While *ajiiqatigiingniq* shares a reliance on experts—that is, Elders as Knowledge Holders—the Inuit consensus process achieves its authority, credibility, and rigor in a manner different from Western methods.

Indigenous research methodologies are based on cultural practices, beliefs, and ways of being that are integral to an Indigenous understanding of the world.²⁷ Indigenous research begins with a deep understanding of language, belief-based methods and the conceptual understanding around cultural terminology.

Essential to *ajiiqatigiingniq*, for example, is the value of collective experiences, which lead to wisdom. This is known as *isumaliuqatijiitsinirningma*, or making decisions together in the Inuit way, and includes *aaqiksuiqatigiit* (fixing together), *uqamanggatigiit* (talking together), and *aivaqatigiit* (arguing together/discussing heavily).

Ajiiqatigiingniq is characterized by a slow, respectful, narrative style that reflects the Inuit tradition of *ikajuqtigiinniq*, or cooperating to help each other. Decision-making avoids *inutuujjigginniq*, or being individualistic, and assumes that all participants rely on *naalangniq*, respectful listening in the right relationship. The authority of the process is bolstered by a spirit of *inummariktituuqtuq*, or staying true to Inuit core values and beliefs.²⁸

“Everybody would have a chance to speak up. What he or she thinks is the best way to find a solution.”

– Participant

²⁵Campbell, S. M., Cantrill, J. A., Hann, M., Roland, M. O., Quayle, J. A., & Shekelle, P. G. (2001). Consensus methods in prescribing research. *Journal of Clinical Pharmacy and Therapeutics* 26(1), 5–14; Humphrey-Murto, S., Varpio, L., Gonsalves, C., & Wood, T. J. (2017).

²⁶Humphrey-Murto, S., Varpio, L., Gonsalves, C., & Wood, T. J. (2017).

²⁷Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd / University of Otago Press.

²⁸McGrath, J. (2011). *Isumaksaqsirutigijakka: Conversations with Aupilaarjuk towards a theory of Inuktitut knowledge renewal*. (Doctoral Thesis). Ottawa, ON: Carleton University. Retrieved from <https://curve.carleton.ca/4c28533b-efed-4916-8a04-0dceb591265c>; CSS, 2005

EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF IQ

Aajiiqatigiingniq is one of eight guiding principles of IQ. All principles are considered cultural processes aimed at helping Inuit society work well. These principles are instilled through a process called *inunnguiniq*, or making capable human beings. Taken together they are a very holistic and tightly interwoven worldview and way of governing.

1. *Pilimmaqsarniq* is a process of learning skills to contribute to the community.
2. *Piliriqatigiingniq* encourages community members to work together for shared goals.
3. *Qanuqtuurunnarniq* is a process for developing deep and innovative thinking.
4. *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq* is a process for ensuring relationships with others are respectful.
5. *Pijitsirniq* is a way to promote compassion and meeting the needs of others.
6. *Tunnganarniq* is a process for creating an open, inclusive and welcoming society.
7. *Avatimik kamattiarniq* encourages for sustainable social/ environmental stewardship.
8. *Aajiiqatigiingniq* creates consensus to ensure well-being and harmony.

Importantly, *aajiiqatigiingniq* is both methodical and unhurried. It reflects *paningniq tuavijinirlua*—the notion of carefully planning without rushing—to achieve *niqiqainnarniq*, or securing a change or new way.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Western research can avoid pushing Indigenous knowledge aside by incorporating Indigenous methods³⁰ and recognizing a space for Indigenous methods only. Yet, many Indigenous methods are not well known or described outside of Indigenous communities.

As a cultural process, *aajiiqatigiingniq* is a careful and thoughtful practice that seeks consensus solutions to individual, family, and community issues. Although necessarily incomplete, this report's description is intended as one-step toward illuminating IQ's vital importance and bringing this time-tested knowledge to the forefront of Arctic health research.

Further research is needed to better understand the characteristics of *aajiiqatigiingniq* for application in research as an Inuit-specific methodology and to begin to comprehend the nature and significance of cultural differences in consensus approaches.

²⁹Tagalik, S. (2012); McGrath, J. (2011).

³⁰Smith, L.T., Maxwell, T.K., Puke, H., Temara, P. (2016). Indigenous knowledge, methodology and mayhem: What is the role of methodology in producing Indigenous insights? A discussion from Mātauranga Māori. *Knowledge Cultures*, 4(3), 131-156.

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