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Maternal instincts

Dedicated polymath Jennifer Leason is making a difference balancing between motherhood the world of academia

June 16, 2017



About

Name

Jennifer Leason

Role

Alumna

Program

Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies (IGS) (<http://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/current-students/igs.html>), individualized option

Faculty

College of Graduate Studies (<http://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/welcome.html>), and Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Sciences (<http://www.ubc.ca/okanagan/ikbarberschool/welcome.html>) (Unit 1: Community, Culture and Global Studies) (<http://ccgs.ok.ubc.ca/welcome.html>)

Campus

Okanagan (<http://you.ubc.ca/ubc-life/okanagan/>) (Kelowna, BC)

Education

Doctor of Philosophy (2017)

Master of Arts IGS, UBC Okanagan (2012)

Bachelor of Arts Psychology, University of Saskatchewan (2000)

Hometown

Hudson Bay, Sask.

“I’ve been shown that my indigenous perspective, theory, methods, and ways of knowing are valued. Who I am brings something unique and valuable.”

JENNIFER LEASON MEANS MUCH TO MANY. Mother, Aboriginal, researcher, listener, PhD graduate. She has been both teacher and student. She is an advocate for women, and for Aboriginal communities. She is an optimist.

But the life of a polymath is not without its struggles. Dedication to meaningful work and her desire to find balance between being a working mother in the world of academia ignites her passion and commitment for doctoral research.

Her goal is to create a model for change and cultural safety for Indigenous women’s maternal and reproductive health. Her two young boys, generations of family, and a close Aboriginal community provide inspiration.

“I think being grounded in my relationships and community helps to bring the community and academic worlds together,” she says. “It’s a balance, or *gwayoshkawin* (Saulteaux word for ‘balance’), between theory and practice. For more videos see [www.ubco.tv](http://ubco.tv) (<http://ubco.tv>)

“My research is about bringing the academic community and greater community together for a dialogue, in a way that makes sense for people.”

Aboriginal women are traditionally undervalued in Canadian society, Leason says, but that’s antithetical to her experience in Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies at UBC’s Okanagan campus.

“I’ve been shown that my indigenous perspective, theory, methods and ways of knowing are valued,” she says. “I didn’t have to change who I was to fit into a PhD program. In fact, it was recognized that who I am brought something unique and valuable.

“Often times the struggle to maintain a balance would get the better of me. However, I was comforted by my support system, especially my sister and the voices of Elders who once told me, ‘Jen, there are Elders who wake up every day praying for your success. Everyone is rooting for you.’ To know that everyone is rooting for your success inspired me to keep going—no matter what.”

DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Leason’s doctoral research was focussed in the Okanagan Valley on the social determinants of health (SDH)—the social and cultural issues that affect Indigenous women’s health—among Métis and First Nations women.

Her particular focus was women's reproductive health and their experiences of maternity (from antenatal to postpartum care), and the kinds of constraints, barriers, and discriminations that prevent them from accessing appropriate reproductive care.

"When you look at the literature in Aboriginal people's health, specifically Aboriginal women's maternal and reproductive health, the health disparities and inequalities are alarming," Leason says.

"I wanted to understand what was happening because there are so many gaps in the data and literature. And then my interest grew to exploring why it's happening and how we can collectively create solutions at a community level."

CROSSROADS TO UBC

Straight out of high school, Leason pursued neuropsychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Then she worked for Correctional Services Canada in a maximum-security prison; taught English as a second language in South Korea; and returned to Saskatchewan, where she worked in social services and mental health services.



Leason soon teamed with EKJUT, an NGO that uses grassroots women's groups to teach *Adivasi* (Aboriginal) women in India basic midwifery skills to reduce infant mortality rates.

"After seeing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in Canadian systems, such as the correctional system, welfare and mental-health systems, and then witnessing what was occurring in maternal and reproductive health in India, I recognized the parallels Indigenous women across continents were experiencing in terms of disparities and inequalities," Leason says. "I wanted to understand why."

So she applied for graduate school at UBC Okanagan and received funding support from the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR), Kloshe Tillicum, UBCO, INDSPiRE, BC Association of Friendship Centres, and Métis Nation BC.

Dr. Naomi McPherson, associate professor emeritus (Anthropology) and Leason's former supervisor, describes her as "an exemplary role model for all UBC graduate students, especially for First Nations and Métis students at UBC Okanagan. Jen is an extremely talented, intelligent, and humane young woman who is already making a difference."

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

One of the research projects Leason completed in 2012 analyzed Aboriginal women's responses to the 2009 Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey (MES) conducted by the Public Health Agency of Canada and Statistics Canada. The MES study consisted of 300-plus survey questions that examined women's prenatal, labour and birth, and six months post-partum experiences.

"The MES stated that it was particularly interested in results from vulnerable populations such as recent immigrant women, Aboriginal women, and young mothers which would be released in focused publications. However," Leason says, "the focused publications were never produced."

So she and her committee—UBC Okanagan professor McPherson, Métis Nation British Columbia Health Surveillance Manager Dr. Peter Hutchinson, and Dr. Patti Janssen from UBC Vancouver—made an application to the Canadian Research Data Centre to gain access to Statistics Canada's raw data.

"It was a great exercise and learning experience for me in conducting quantitative research and understanding current public health research and the inclusion/exclusion of Aboriginal women."

To learn about the context of Aboriginal women's maternity experiences, Leason conducted qualitative interviews with 10-15 Aboriginal mothers postpartum and one focus group with 10-12 early childhood educators, teachers, and staff from *Snc'c'amala?tn*, a daycare/school on the Okanagan Indian Band (the Okanagan word means "where the children are"). Participants came through the Okanagan Nation Alliance, Kelowna Métis Community Services, the Vernon Friendship Centre, and *Snc'c'amala?tn*.

DIALOGUE & DATA

Leason's MA thesis reflected on the health inequalities among Indigenous peoples in Canada and the historical role of the residential school system.

Her doctoral thesis focussed on understanding women's experiences from their point of view, and to contextualize the complex, interrelated SDH.

"Through dialogue," she says, "we can gain an understanding of Aboriginal women's maternal health priorities, issues, areas of focus and intervention, as well as identify gaps and next steps in research, policy and programming."

Leason's MES analysis illustrated Aboriginal women's overall positive birth experiences, lower C-section rates, and higher rates of unassisted vaginal births and breastfeeding initiation.

The MES, however, also underscored a number of important issues including the exclusion of subpopulations of Aboriginal women.

It raised concerns about SDH and lower socioeconomic status on maternal and reproductive health and health pathways, the impact of stress and the severity and frequency of stressors, as well as higher rates of violence and post-partum depression. And it highlighted the need for public health awareness and support to address maternal smoking and second-hand smoke exposure, nutrition, and folic acid intake and awareness.

These and other findings speak to future generations of women and children through inclusion, dialogue, and gwayoshkawin—balance.



ENDING NEGATIVE CYCLES

Jennifer Leason has a mixed heritage and a huge extended family from both sides.

She hails from Hudson Bay, urban small-town Saskatchewan, and self-identifies as Saulteaux-Métis Anishinabe-kwe. Her dad is Ukrainian-Norwegian. Her maternal Indigenous roots stem from Duck Bay, Pine Creek First Nations (Camperville, Manitoba).

"My dad has four sisters and my maternal grandma has six sisters, and my mother and sister have always been huge influences in my life. I've always been surrounded by strong women. And then all of a sudden the Creator blesses me with two sons. I think that's the Creator's way of instilling balance within me.

"Sometimes I struggle with how much my work and school takes me away from my boys."

When the mommy-guilt weighs heavy, Leason recalls the words of her faculty supervisors Naomi McPherson and Patti Janssen: *Your boys will know, Jen. They'll know the sacrifices you made to be here and the sacrifices you made to give them the life and privilege they have. They will see your work. They will see you are a role model. They will understand.*

"Deep down, I know that I am teaching my sons a valuable lesson: it's about ending the negative cycles that have plagued our families and communities through education, opportunity, and advocacy," Leason says.

"They'll see that it's about the greater good and working to ensure the voiceless are heard. It's important to me to teach them respect, not only for themselves and Mother Earth, but also for women. And to help them understand the important role that they play as the next generation."

Why Graduate Studies?



(<http://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/currentstudents/igs.html>)

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UBC’s Okanagan campus is an innovative hub for research and learning founded in partnership with local Indigenous peoples, the Syilx Okanagan Nation, in whose traditional, ancestral and unceded territory the campus resides. The most established and influential global rankings all consistently place UBC in the top three per cent of universities in the world, and among the top three Canadian universities.

The Okanagan campus combines a globally recognized UBC education with a tight-knit and entrepreneurial community that welcomes students and faculty from around the world in British Columbia’s stunning Okanagan Valley. For more visit ok.ubc.ca [\(https://ok.ubc.ca\)](https://ok.ubc.ca).

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Innovation Precinct Annexation 1 (IA1)
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