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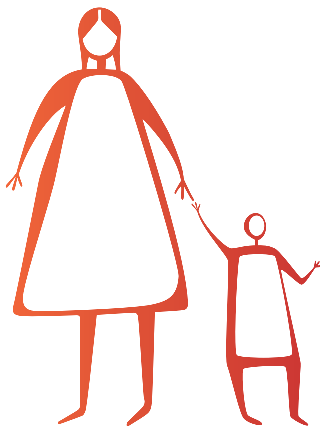

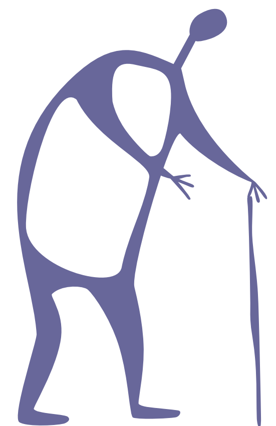

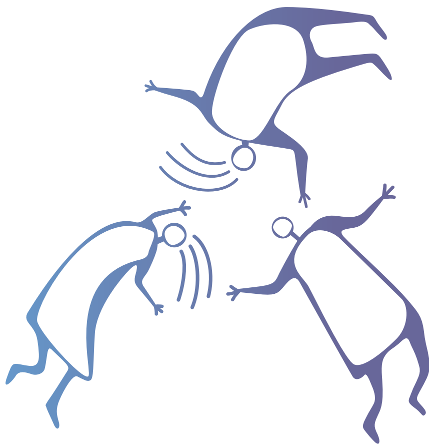

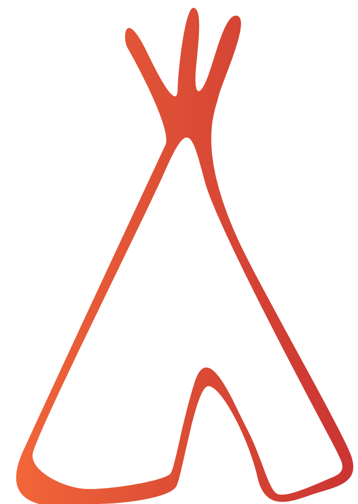

First Nations Child & Family Caring Society

First Peoples
Child & Family Review

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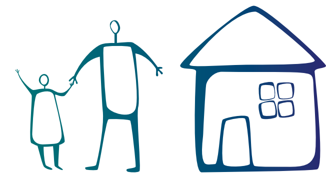

Foreword

Madelaine McCracken and Brittany Mathews

Coordinating Editors of the First Peoples Child & Family Review

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Volume 17, Issue (1) of the *First People Child and Family Review* puts forward articles that disrupt Westernized approaches in social work and counselling practices to provide systemic solutions that integrate cultural wellness and lived experiences from Métis and First Nations, and non-Indigenous expressions. Although written separately, the articles interconnect in ways that cover professional duties, critical self-reflection, and how to best support First Nations, Inuit, and Métis wellbeing and provide equity-based and culturally respective care. The authors encourage readers to act and revise their practices within their respective environments that impact First Nations, Inuit, and Métis wellbeing in Canada.

The issue begins with Nicole Roy, who is a Métis scholar. Her work is entitled, *The Use of Indigenous Research Methodologies in Counselling*. Roy posits that the 4Rs, "Responsibility, Respect, Relationality, and Reciprocity," embedded with Indigenous research methodologies, can both be used to shake the core of Westernized wellness practices. Roy's work reflectively values kinship and relational processes that are imperative and need to be practiced within counselling and psychotherapies.

Similarly, Monique Auger, Carly Jones, Renée Monchalin, and Willow Paul shed light upon Métis intersectional identities through Métis methodologies, including self-locating themselves as Métis peoples in their article. Their collective work is called, *"It's in my blood. It's in my spirit. It's in my ancestry": Identity and its impact on Wellness for Métis Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender Diverse People in Victoria, British Columbia*. The authors gathered twenty-four stories of self-identifying Métis peoples, weaving together the participants' thematic cultural and living experiences. The authors found participants had shared understandings of the imperative of community and self-responsibilities, caring for the land, and relationships with kinship frameworks, all proposed to recentre balance and wellbeing.

Ralph Bodor (*wîcîtasow— ally),* Terri Cardinal (*nêhiyaw — Cree)*, and Kristina Kopp (*nêhiyaw-âpihtawikosisân — Métis)* created an audio-visual learning experience with permission through protocols in ceremony and in relationship with various First Nations community members who

are Knowledge Keepers, wisdom holders, language speakers, and Survivors of Indian Residential School System. Their collective work, *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon: Healing Through Ceremony*, offers a vital and critical learning approach gifted to support social workers who serve First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada.

The final article of the issue is by Lauren Kalvari, who is a White settler social worker and is currently a researcher. In her article, *A Critical Reflection: Exposing Whiteness in Child Welfare Practice*, Kalvari engages in a self-reflective practice navigating experiences she encountered as a social worker in the early 1990s. She addresses implications and solutions for White settlers working in the social work field and how to decolonize their practice through critical self-reflection, which Kalvari offers as a critical first step prior to working with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

These articles weave together to offer readers critical insights into disrupting Westernized approaches to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit wellbeing and instead center equity-based and culturally respective approaches. The articles remind us of our vital responsibilities to work towards equitable, fair, and social justice-based approaches and principles to support First Nations, Inuit, and Métis wellbeing across Canada.

In good spirit,
Madelaine McCracken and Brittany Mathews

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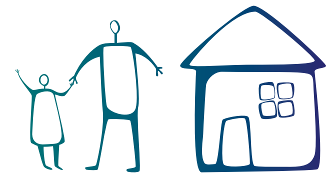

The Use of Indigenous Research Methodologies in Counselling: Responsibility, Respect, Relationality, and Reciprocity

Nicole Roy

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Abstract

The values of "Responsibility, Respect, Relationality and Reciprocity (the 4Rs)" in Indigenous research methodologies inform the core principles of Indigenous kinship systems. This is most often understood as the interconnectedness to land, relatives, animals, and spirits. Despite ongoing systems of oppression, Indigenous kinship values have not only survived but continue to demand a rightful a place within our education, health, justice, and welfare systems. Through critical self-reflective praxis, I explore how the values of "Responsibility, Respect, Relationality and Reciprocity" that guide Indigenous research methodologies (IRM) can disrupt Western based psychotherapies and counselling practices that too often reproduce harm onto Indigenous peoples. The 4Rs upheld in IRM strengthen kinship by centring the values that promote the beauty and intelligence of Indigenous knowledge systems and generations of knowledge holders.

Keywords: responsibility, respect, relationality, reciprocity, decolonizing, counselling, Indigenous methodologies

Introduction

As a result of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada (2015) *Calls to Action*, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) has recently increased its focus on how to better serve Indigenous peoples across Canada (Ansloos, 2019). The TRC (2015) call upon Canadians and peoples living in Canada to urgently improve Indigenous mental and holistic health services. This aims to raise awareness of Indigenous teachings on mental health (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2016). As a result of the increased awareness of Canada's colonial history and its devastating and ongoing impacts on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples, the evidence is pushing for Indigenous sovereignty within government, learning institutions, organizations, and

healthcare providers to re-examine and re-think ways of relating within and to these systems. it offers how we can re-imagine quality care from Indigenous lenses. The emergence of health and wellness research led by Indigenous peoples to address evidence-based disparities in the health and well-being of their own kin and communities. This speaks clearly to the methodological shift required and as called upon us from the TRC (Bedi, 2018; Corrigal Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet, 2019; Stewart, 2008; Yu et al., 2019).

A critical re-examination is required on how the TRC (2015) *Calls to Action* are needed and perceived to draw on Indigenous worldviews and encourage scholars, counsellors, and therapists to take a step back and reconsider moving from transactional to relational approaches (Lines & Jardine, 2018). For example, in a study on Indigenous women's economic security and well-being, research showed the importance of examining Indigenous realities "through the lens of community sustenance, relational accountability, harmony and well-being to ensure our collective survival" (Chisan, Bourque, et al., 2016, p. 3). As a Métis woman who has worked in the social work and counselling field for ten years, I have felt, witnessed, enacted and advocated for the necessity of "decolonizing methodologies" at the forefront of systemic change. I have a responsibility to re-examine my internalized colonized lens and to draw on the strength of my experiences, my ancestors, and my Indigenous colleagues, relations, and mentors that can serve to improve Indigenous health and wellness (Anderson, 2006; Corrigal Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet 2019; Macdougall, 2017; Smith 2012). By doing so, I am able to affirm the process which Dr. Kim Anderson (2006), Métis Cree scholar, depicts as "… to resist, reclaim, construct and act" (p.16). With this Call to Action (TRC, 2015), this paper will explore my personal and professional process of resisting an office/clinic mindset of counselling, and moving toward a community-engaged relational approach rooted in IRM ethics of cultural care, relevancy and social context.

Drawing on my personal experiences and what I have learned from the Indigenous community members during my one year of service at a not-for-profit organization, I hope to create a better understanding of the urgent need to improve Indigenous mental health services in Canada. To support me in this process, I will draw mainly on Indigenous-led research in an effort to contribute to the advancement of Indigenous peoples' perspectives on health and well-being (McCubbin et al., 2013). Through my personal experience framed within an Indigenous critical theory, which is applied for explicit purposes (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008), I hope to give new meaning to what I have learned around what "counselling" for Indigenous peoples is. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the disruption of the dominance of Western-orientated psychotherapies and counselling practices that can be harmful to Indigenous peoples (Ansloos et al., 2019; Bedi, 2018; Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010; Quinn, 2019; Stewart, 2008; Yu et al., 2019), and offer suggestions for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous counsellors' practices.

Situating the Self

With the growing body of literature on Indigenous research methodologies, I am learning that, as Indigenous peoples, “we no longer need to leave ourselves, our lives, our stories and ways out of the research” (Gaudet, personal communication, May 21, 2020). We can include ourselves in the research process and, more specifically, in counselling sessions because, as Kovach (2009) notes, our experiences are valid and part of our process of doing work “in relation” (p. 67). Kovach (2009) speaks of “self in relation” (p.67), which is a deep acknowledgement of Indigenous worldviews, values and life principles. “Self in relation frames knowledge as co-production located in the developments of ourselves in relation to others” (Smith, 2012, p. xvii), which reframes counselling to a relational perspective that values the dignity of the self. Organizations that continue to use language in referral and intake processes that perpetuate biased, colonial views and harmful stereotypes, does not best serve Indigenous peoples.

My article speaks to the need to re-examine these long-standing systems and processes. An example is placing emphasis on an individual’s “status” or “non-status” and living on or off-reserve to determine the services the individual is entitled to. I continue to honour Indigenous peoples with whom I have come into relation through my work. It is they who teach me about strength and resilience. They teach me about the strength of family and community, of kindness, and of using our hearts to speak (Absolon, 2011). Sharing space for the pain caused by residential schools, child welfare, mental health, poverty and other traumas will be explored throughout this paper, but first I will situate myself as a voice to “resist, who I am not, reclaim, where I have come from, act, what my responsibilities are and construct where I am going” (Anderson, 2006, p. 16). These four principles within my identity (Anderson, 2006) guide my process of decolonization that Dr. Poki Laenui’s (2006) explains through the stages of denial/withdrawal, destruction/eradication, denigration/belittlement/insult, surface accommodation/tokenism and transformation/exploitation.

Suggesting counsellors apply the principles of Laenui and Burgess (2000) in the counselling process can create space for mourning (an essential phase of healing), dreaming (exploring one’s own cultures and aspirations for the future), commitment (release from colonial oppression and committing to the desired direction) and action (proactive steps taken by consensus of the people). Taking from Absolon’s (2011) acknowledgement that research has been part of Indigenous culture through gathering and discovering knowledge, I recognize that counselling is research, and also that my Métis mother, aunties, and grandmothers need to be acknowledged as researchers. My aim is to “move beyond research narratives that limit the possibilities and hope for Indigenous people and communities and move toward desire-based research that recognizes, and sometimes revitalizes, power already held in communities” (Smith, 2012, p. xvii). The method of “storying with peoples and communities” (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019) also merits deep consideration as an effective approach to counselling. Oral tradition is vital in Indigenous culture and holds the belief that “knowledge is of no use if it does not serve relationships” (Anderson, 2016, p. 46). Situating oneself

is a way of being described in Indigenous research methodologies (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2010). Gaudet (2019) speaks to how our mothers taught us to way-share where we are from, who we belong to, and our relations. I suggest that counselling begin this way. This has been central to my work with Indigenous peoples throughout my experiences as a counsellor and social worker but also, beyond that, as a Métis woman.

My given name is Nicole Roy and I come from a small farming community in Hoey, Saskatchewan that is part of the surrounding Métis communities: St. Louis, Batoche, Bellevue, St. Laurent, and Duck Lake. I am the sixth generation of Métis Red River women to create and support life along the South Saskatchewan River. I am a mother, a daughter, a sister, a niece. My mother is Carole Roy (Gaudet), who is the daughter of Norma Morrison, who is the daughter of Auxille Lepine, who is the daughter of Marguerite Boucher and Caroline L'Esperance. Church and state practices and policies of assimilation aimed to instill feelings of shame, confusion, and embarrassment within generations of Métis families after 1885 (Campbell, 1983). Given that the strength of our way of life was and is kinship, severing ties with our teachings and ways of being was strategic (Anderson 2016). My Métis existence was not discussed in my family growing up. This demonstrates the dominance of the assimilation (Strega & Brown, 2015). Living in between a Métis and a francophone community, my mother chose to send us four children to the francophone school. It was there that I began to feel like the "other" and experience feelings of shame and failure. Unsettling these myths (shame, "other," failure) that I had created within myself due to these remaining ties that could not be severed, I found strength, like my ancestors before me, that we as a family and community continue the resistance with our ways of visiting with both the land and with relatives, sharing and caring for each other (Corrigal-Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet, 2019).

Having worked in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, in human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) care and hospital patient care for the last eight years, I made the decision to work in a not-for-profit organization as a new walk-in counsellor in the year of 2019. Excited to work in my own way, free from the constraints of policies and protocols of our healthcare system, this position was to provide an opportunity to go out into the community and learn from the people. I was saddened to find. However, the same power that imposes Western knowledge on our intakes, assessments, and psychotherapies, brought a return of those feelings of shame and failure deep within. This shame further entrenched my complicity with the Western paradigm, which further silenced my discomfort. Although difficult, I am now, more than ever, equipped to resist (Anderson, 2006) these challenges as they do not suit my vision of counselling that honours Indigenous history, teachings, and cultural stories as the core of understanding mental health and healing.

Situating myself is important in my counselling work with Indigenous peoples as knowing where you've been and where you come from in order to know where you're going is interconnected with cultural identity (Simard, 2019). Through sharing, learning-by-doing and visiting with Indigenous peoples (Corrigal Flaminio et al., 2020), community members and through my education, I have

found that reclaiming my cultural identity has brought spiritual awareness, healing, and wellness into my life. This leads me back full circle to the importance of my work with Indigenous peoples as I explore how to incorporate my healing journey of reclaiming the beauty of my Métis identity (Anderson, 2006; Simard, 2019; Quinn, 2019) and relational well-being (McCubbin et al., 2013) into my work with the people. What is important to me is learning from Indigenous peoples whom I meet in my work, including my own relatives, to explore what aspects from the models of counselling do and do not work for them. Introspecting my own participation in any form of oppression ensures I am always reflecting inward on my own lived experiences.

Unpacking my own privileges is also important in situating myself when working with Indigenous peoples as there is a great deal I have not experienced in regards to oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). I have never experienced poverty and food insecurity or overt racial profiling. Having a Catholic upbringing, I recognize the influence religion has had on my ancestors, along with the generational impacts on myself. However, I have parents who have supported and loved me to the best of their ability through all parts of my journey. I have never experienced violence or abuse, but was raised in a patriarchal home. I have never feared homelessness or eviction. I am privileged because I am able to continue my education and because I can pass as a white person. Therefore, I recognize the privilege of identity shifting through my employment, relationships and education, as I have not had to consider internalized oppression surrounding race (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). With this unpacking, I recognize that I will never be able to fully understand some of the challenges that other Indigenous peoples face because of their darker skin, nor do I have experience with the Indian Act, which controls services and resources available to them. However, as a Métis scholar/counsellor, I have a responsibility to use these privileges to dismantle oppressive policies in our systems through kinship networks and "shared mutual responsibility to each other" (Macdougall, 2017, p. 5). It is also my responsibility to speak out about social injustices within my educational setting and profession, which I hope will contribute to improving Indigenous mental health services in Canada. Even more so, I also have the responsibility to learn more about my Métis identity and history with the guidance of my relatives, community, and the Indigenous peoples I serve.

The 4Rs in Indigenous Research Methodology

Understanding the developmental stages of Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM), I recognize the impact colonization has had on psychotherapies and counselling, as well as the influences this has had on my own education and work practice. Wilson (2008) provides a timeline on how Indigenous peoples started developing Indigenous research methodology. The first stage sees Indigenous researchers working solely from a Western paradigm. The second and third stages move toward the integration of both Western and Indigenous paradigms, and the fourth stage has "Indigenous researchers illuminating their own worldview using Indigenous paradigms" (Wilson, 2008, p. 29). My Aunty, Cindy Gaudet, gave me an understanding of this movement when she

explained the difference between completing her master's and doctoral studies. She noted there was very limited research on Indigenous research methodologies (Gaudet, personal communication, May 23, 2020). This clearly shows how Indigenous researchers are breaking new ground and making space within the Western paradigms for their methods (Wilson, 2008). This further suggests an effort to engage Indigenous scholars, counsellors and therapists in our ways of doing and being within our communities. This final stage in IRM affirms the value of contributing my counselling work from an Indigenous lens within the prominent Western based therapies.

As Absolon (2019) provokes, "Indigenous peoples are in a state of resurgence and revitalization. We are recovering, re-emerging and reclaiming our knowledge base" (p. 80). My heart extends to my ancestors, my grandmother, my mother and my aunties who have paved the way for me to resist, reclaim and act as a scholar, counsellor, researcher and especially, as a Métis woman (Anderson, 2006). These women are my teachers, my leaders and my support in my counselling work. They are always with me throughout the counselling process. The tenets of Indigenous methodologies relay the importance of understanding Indigenous peoples as having their own ways of being and doing that need to be respected. These tenets are as follows:

Holistic Indigenous knowledge systems are a legitimate way of knowing. Receptivity and relationships between researcher and participant are (or ought to be) a natural part of the research methodology. Collectivity, as a way of knowing, assumes reciprocity to the community. Indigenous methods, including story, are legitimate ways of sharing knowledge. (Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 53)

Reflecting on these aspects of research, I realize that this is what shapes counselling with Indigenous peoples; that is, understanding and respecting their knowledge systems. I create a trusting relationship by being open to new suggestions and ways of knowing. I contribute to the collective through the sharing of our knowledge and placing emphasis on Indigenous history and stories as being the most valued form of sharing knowledge. These aspects form the foundation of counselling with Indigenous peoples. Equally important is that we recognize that, as human beings, we make mistakes. It is vital to acknowledge when we fail in order to grow from these experiences.

The 4Rs in IRM are "Responsibility, Respect, Relationality and Reciprocity" (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Strega & Brown, 2015), and have unknowingly informed my value system and, therefore, my counselling practice. Responsibility in Indigenous research involves demonstrating how research gives back to the individual and collective good and implies knowledge and action in serving others (Kovach, 2009). I have a responsibility to take action against individual and systemic oppression, speak up about social injustices and utilize my privileges to resist, reclaim and act as an Indigenous scholar, counsellor and a Métis woman (Anderson, 2006). As an example of these challenges, when I was working as a clinical social worker in a maternity setting, I witnessed the extreme Child Protection Act allow no contact between mother and child, and no mother's rights after birth. No hold, touch or coo (even with the supervision of at least three nurses in the area) left this mother completely broken. Although First Nation Child and Family Services in Saskatchewan upholds

Indigenous sovereignty within this system, the wait time for an Indigenous advocate leaves many mothers alone in her time of need. The challenge to speak out against this type of injustice can be crippling to a worker, and not speaking out degrades us even more because we know it's wrong and yet must follow system policies.

Respect goes beyond acknowledging cultural competence in that it involves the principles of respecting cultural knowledge, being responsible for carrying out the roles of teacher and learner, having humility in asking permission, and giving thanks in receiving (Absolon, 2011). In counselling, this takes place at the outset in our introduction and in our questioning surrounding the present concern/situation, which is in line with Indigenous research where they respect the space to share in storying (Kovach, 2009). Relationality, from an Indigenous worldview, holds that relationships between all life forms exist within the natural world (Fellner, John, & Cottell, 2016; Kovach, 2009; Stewart & Marshall, 2015). As such, a foundation of trust in counselling is based on having an understanding of the connection between counsellor and participant and making meaning of this special gathering (Absolon, 2011). Ermine (2007) explains the space we occupy when meeting someone new and building a relationship, along with the importance of ethic in this space when in it comes to the capacity to know what harms or enhances our well-being. Reciprocity is not just a political understanding nor an individual act, but the very worldview in which the researcher or counsellor becomes immersed that holds the key to knowing (Absolon, 2011). In counselling, this refers to giving as much as it does to receiving. This may look like meeting in neutral spaces, bringing food/drink, offering sage/smudging practice, as well as ensuring an understanding of the confidentiality and consent of sharing together.

Responsibility in Counselling

You cannot decolonize without having an understanding of colonization, and this is vital when working with Indigenous peoples (Simard, 2016; Stewart & Marshall, 2015; Quinn, 2019). Strega and Brown (2015) explain how research that is related to Indigenous peoples requires "minimally, a critical analysis of colonialism and an understanding of Western scientific research as a mechanism of colonization" (p. 4). This aligns with any work that aims to support, be of service to or help Indigenous peoples, such as counselling. As such, non-Indigenous counsellors working with Indigenous peoples should have a thorough knowledge of how systemic racism that continues to exist today stems from colonization.

Poka Laenui and Hayden Burgess (2000) explains the steps of colonization as:

1. Denial/Withdrawal: The colonial people look down on Indigenous peoples as lacking culture, moral values, and having nothing of social value.
2. Destruction/Eradication: Physically destroying and eradicating all physical representations of the symbols of Indigenous culture.

3. Denigration/Belittlement/Insult: As colonization takes a stronger hold, the new systems created within Indigenous societies such as churches, health and legal systems all join to denigrate, belittle and insult any continuing practices of Indigenous culture.
4. Surface Accommodation/Tokenism: Whatever remnants of culture that have survived the earlier steps are given accommodation. They are tolerated as an exhibition of the colonial regime's sense of leniency.
5. Transformation/Exploitation: The traditional culture that refuses to die or go away is now transformed into the culture of the dominant colonial society, creating exploitative tactics on social, political and economic structures. (pp.150-153)

These steps take a great deal of study, time and effort to fully comprehend, feel, and acknowledge in Canada's living history. It is of value that we not only know about colonization, but about how we can decolonize as well. Therefore, working with Indigenous peoples who live with experiences of intergenerational trauma due to colonial laws, policies and attitudes require the ability to walk alongside one another as human beings (Quinn, 2019). Being part of ceremonies, pow wows, dances, gatherings, and prayer as part of their healing journey is part of counselling—it is part of being in service to one another.

In order to understand Indigenous ways of knowing as scholars, counsellors, and therapists, we need to critically analyze the dominant worldviews of knowledge production in order to first understand colonialism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Strega & Brown, 2015). Professions such as social work, child and family welfare, healthcare and psychology have had close relations to colonization and racism, furthering distrust by Indigenous peoples (Fellner et al., 2016; Dutta, 2018). This distrust stems from institutional power that oppresses a group of people through practices, policies and norms (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In our attempts as scholars and counsellors to alleviate the distrust that Indigenous peoples feel towards our institutions, we need to critically analyze and speak out against the institutional control and ideological domination that continue to oppress them (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). All counsellors, regardless of their cultural identity, should learn their own colonial history, and understand and clarify their own values, assumptions and beliefs regarding mental health and wellness in order to better serve Indigenous peoples (Simard, 2019). It is equally important that the process involves acknowledging positionality of living, thriving, and being visitors on Indigenous peoples' lands. As Tuck & Yang (2012) attest, this acknowledgment must move towards restoration of Indigenous lives and lands.

We must also have critical conversations surrounding "decolonization" in that this vocabulary has been superficially adopted into education, institutions and organizations, which can lead to decolonization becoming a mere metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). An example of this is when institutions mount Indigenous paintings or art and then declare the space as indigenized. When Indigenous peoples' erasure, invisibility or misrepresentation continues in "Decolonize our schools,

Decolonizing methods, or Decolonize student thinking," we fail to understand what Indigenous peoples want to unsettle and what is unsettling (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1). As the first Indigenous person to be a counsellor at the not-for-profit organization, I felt silenced in my suggestions pertaining to counselling services for Indigenous peoples. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explain how "oppression involves an institutional control, ideological domination and imposition" over a minoritized group (p. 39). Systemic racism persists within organizations that receive funding to increase their reach to Indigenous peoples and to promote their reconciliatory efforts by hiring one Indigenous staff (Ward, Gaudet & McGuire, 2020). In my case, I was a walk-in counsellor. Although increasing access and services to Indigenous peoples is necessary and needed, if there is no sincere engagement in that Indigenous-centered counselling methods and practices are respected and led by Indigenous peoples themselves, there is no structural change. The power relationship upholds the binary of superior and inferior knowledge and people. Without such structural change, we must then ask ourselves who benefits from the one-person walk-in counsellor with a check list? This is a critical question to ensure the new position does not fall to counsellors who use dominant Western-orientated models, as reminded by Bedi (2018), that may not serve the needs of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, whose needs do they serve?

Voicing my concerns in a new position and as the only Indigenous counsellor, I soon realized that real change felt impossible, or that they did not want to change, or possibly did not have the capacity to. I generously gave my time to re-imagining a change and offering it to the decision-making table, such as going out to their homes or meeting for coffee, but this was denied due to either being deemed unsafe (form of stereotyping Indigenous peoples as dangerous), or reasoning that there are not enough "clients" to support the number trajectory of valued counselling work. This form of counselling does not serve Indigenous peoples, which was to be the "real" intention of the grant and creation of this tokenized position (Poka Laenui, 2006). These are some of the isolating challenges I experienced. By isolating, I mean continuing to oppress without any recognition or admission to the ongoing harm; therefore, no dialogue, no growth, and no equity.

Respect in Counselling

Respect allows for the praise, honour, and acknowledgement of Indigenous researchers who resist, transform, and offer us ways to grow the therapeutic practices of counselling with Indigenous peoples by using alternative approaches, theories and methodologies. Incorporating Smith's (2012) four major stages of Indigenous research being survival, recovery, development, and self-determination into counselling practice enables critical reflection on how to improve Indigenous mental health in Canada. These four stages also contributed to my shifting out of the office and into the community, which connected Indigenous methodologies to my counselling practice. Understanding these stages is a form of respect to the history, traditions, values and beliefs of Indigenous peoples.

Survival

Understanding how Indigenous peoples survived settler contact, IRM looks at the "survival of peoples as physical beings, of languages, of social and spiritual practices, of social relations and of the arts" (Smith, 2012, p. 121). It is critical, as a counsellor working with Indigenous peoples, to take action regarding the basic necessities in life such as housing, food, water, transportation and health. As a social worker for many years, I have witnessed the effects that poverty, homelessness, food insecurity and mental health provision disparities have on health and wellness (Stewart & Marshall, 2015). From a critical social justice lens (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), counselling work means removing ourselves from the office and being visible within the community at shelters, friendship centres, food banks, and other sites in order to unsettle unjust systems, stereotypes and knowledge constructions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Being visible within the community by attending gatherings, social action/social justice events, and traditional celebrations is part of my counselling process as I hold myself accountable to the value of respect (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Strega & Brown, 2015). This work, however, continues to be invisible within organizations and institutions, thus perpetuating the devaluing of Indigenous scholars and counsellors in our ways of being and doing "work." Organizations are encouraged to make space for this work as part of the counselling profession with Indigenous peoples, but this does not always happen, or is done poorly, and is not funded to the full capacity it requires.

Recovery

Smith (2012) explains how "recovery is a selective process, often responding to immediate crises rather than a planned approach" (p. 121). Recovery of territories, Indigenous rights, and histories requires recognition within research (Smith, 2012), but also in counselling. Reflectively, the recovery of my Métis identity was through my family connections, stories, and being involved with my community, which brought much needed healing. The Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy (AHWS) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, found that Indigenous peoples had high drop-out rates in school and avoided mainstream mental health services (Quinn, 2019). To address this, the AHWS provided a framework for developing community guidelines for traditional healing, which recognizes that the recovery of cultural identity contributes to healing ourselves (Quinn, 2019; Stewart, 2008; Yu et al., 2019). Through the use of oral traditions, relationships with Elders and cultural leaders, sharing circles, traditional teachings and storytelling, many Indigenous peoples find a sense of belonging (Quinn, 2019; Stewart, 2008). Incorporating visiting and gathering (Gaudet, 2019; Corrigal Flaminio et al., 2020); within this framework, which will be discussed further in this paper, can provide an effective approach to serving the mental health needs of Indigenous peoples.

The recovery phase also requires counsellors to make space for mourning the history of Indigenous peoples (Simard, 2019). Simard's (2019) article expresses the importance of self-perception in identity and that identity progresses through developmental stages during which the individual gains a

better sense of who he or she is, which leads to a rediscovery of what it means to be Indigenous. It is important for counsellors to start conversations with Indigenous peoples surrounding colonialism, as well as the various forms of oppression and their impact on Indigenous communities. Quinn (2019) suggests professional associations and organizations set aside time for professional education on the impacts of colonialism, the Residential Schooling System, the 60s Scoop, child welfare and other traumas, and to develop and provide culturally sound interventions when working with Indigenous people's healing surrounding identity. One suggestion is that professional education be more focused on why we need to continue to educate on these topics as well, as they are themselves complicit forms of oppression and may cater the "settler to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We should, therefore, be guided towards anti-oppressive discussions regarding our professional education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Strega & Brown, 2015). However, this also brings many questions regarding who is to provide these teachings and guidance as we want to ensure that cultural competence and responsibility is not thrown completely on Indigenous peoples to educate within these systems. Recovery's initial phase suggests making space for mourning. However, it is also vital not to stay in this mourning for too long as it can hinder moving on to the next phase of development (Simard, 2019).

Recovery also suggests a time for counsellors, scholars and professionals to take a critical look at our institutions' policies, implementation plans, and practices that may be "culturally incongruent" (Bedi, 2018, p. 96), to ensure we are providing best practice and creating change where it is needed. We need to re-examine and rethink how our child welfare, justice, health, and education systems that serve Indigenous peoples contribute to the assurance that we are not continuing to clothe and feed systemic oppression. Again, this is part of my responsibility as an Indigenous scholar, counsellor, and as a self-identifying Métis woman, to learn from Indigenous people's realities and lived experiences (Absolon, 2019). We must also recognize the responsibility of our educational institutions in ensuring our social justice education is not positioned as something "extra" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). At this level, we hold non-Indigenous scholars responsible for learning about oppression, power and privilege. This education is vital to decolonize the ignorance of intersecting systems that disadvantage groups of people, the refusal to recognize structural and institutional power, and the invalidating claims of oppression as being over-sensitive (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Development

The next phase in Indigenous methodologies involves the mobilization and transformation processes (Smith, 2012), and aligns with my shift out of the office and into the community. In order to go out into the community and work alongside Indigenous peoples, counsellors need to understand and use a holistic approach that encompasses relational well-being of the self, individual, family, community, nation, and then society (Absolon, 2019). Holistic theory also recognizes the layers of spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements that are affected by the historical, social, political and economic layers within our societies (Absolon, 2019). As a counsellor in the community, it is vital

that I relate with the former four layers in my work with Indigenous peoples. For example, a referral is sent to the not-for-profit organization from Child and Family Services regarding children being removed from their homes due to their parents' alcohol abuse and domestic violence. The parents are therefore court-mandated to attend counselling services. According to a Western model of service, the parents would go to the counselling clinic, fill out an intake form (which may be invasive all on its own), and then have an initial meeting. Does the counsellor engage in change theory about addictions? Does the counsellor focus on the violence? What are the pre-imposed judgments on this referral? What information is gathered and what theories and methods are used? We must recognize that standardized testing and assessments that are based on Western standards of mental health and functioning are damaging and inappropriate for Indigenous peoples (Stewart, 2008).

From an Indigenous holistic theory, Absolon (2019) provides a knowledge set for practice that does not compartmentalize human experience as Western models of counselling and psychotherapies tend to do (Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010). As Absolon articulates, "practitioners that continue to apply psychotherapeutic approaches to practice that omit social and political contexts of Indigenous peoples' realities continue to pathologize, diminish and problematize Indigenous peoples" (2019, p. 10). Therefore, as counsellors, a deeper understanding and self-awareness as to how our practices, testing and assessments can present forms of oppression is needed (Bedi, 2018; Simard, 2019), and open ourselves to alternative approaches of working with Indigenous peoples.

From the example provided above, I would like to share an alternative approach to counselling from the start of the referral and intake process through to the termination of counselling (although, for me, there is never an end to the relationship and responsibilities that come with counselling). Once a referral has been obtained, the organization should honour its responsibility to connect the family with an Indigenous counsellor, whenever possible (Stewart, 2008). As the Indigenous counsellor, I would connect with the family to arrange a time and place to meet that is most convenient and comfortable for them. This can be in their home, a coffee shop, outdoors, or another mutually accessible setting, one that makes space for their comfort. I would also respect whomever the family wishes to be present in our meeting as to ensure a holistic kinship framework as guided by Absolon (2019), that supports all members of the family, the community, and the nation. In doing so, we remove the Westernized nuclear family. Upon our initial meeting, I would, as the counsellor, situate myself by location, education, experiences and reasoning for the visit. From this, we shift into relationality within the counselling session, which will be further discussed in the next paragraphs.

Self-determination

Smith (2012) explores self-determination at the centre of the stages of Respect. Self-determination is utilizing Indigenous methods, frameworks, and guidance provided by Indigenous researchers to affect the changes needed within the Western system. For example, Stewart's (2008) article provides Indigenous mental health counsellors with a voice in raising awareness, taking action

and contributing to the resurgence of Indigenous peoples' traditions and values. Stewart's (2008) interviews with Indigenous counsellors brought the pertinent themes of cultural identity, the holistic approach, and interdependence within the healing process to light, which can involve the counsellor's use of a family tree (genogram), and discussions surrounding colonialism, oppression and cultural identity. By exploring our past, our history and our families through situating ourselves (Absolon, 2011; Absolon, 2019; Kovach, 2009), we encourage the beauty of the individual's cultural identity to finally take center stage.

Self-determination also symbolizes the resilience we have as Indigenous peoples. For myself, it connects me to the beauty of the knowledge of Indigenous researchers, Elders and Aunties, and the community's continued efforts to make change happen. Determination is recognizing the works of Absolon, (2019), Anderson (2016), Corrigal Flaminio et al. (2020), Gaudet (2019), Stewart (2008), and all other Indigenous scholars and researchers that support, teach and guide us to improve our practices. As Anderson (2016) explains, Grandmothers and Aunties taught their young girls that "self-determination is to learn self-worth and self-respect" (p. 244). Through my own experiences of revitalizing my Métis identity, I discovered that my worth and respect was always within me but had been distanced through the negative construction of my ancestors' historical experiences with the white ideal (Anderson, 2016). This knowledge is a gift and can be utilized to improve the mental health and wellness of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Again, my responsibility moves me forward into the community to assist Indigenous peoples to learn self-worth, self-respect and self-determination.

Relationality in Counselling

Relationality in Indigenous research and counselling shows the power of relating and has always been a valued principle within my own lived experience. From a young age, I recognized the importance of aunties, grandparents, cousins, neighbours and friends who provided me with a sense of who I was and was not (Anderson, 2006), and a sense of belonging and knowledge about life. My Aunty Cindy Gaudet's (2019) *The Visiting Way*, *an Indigenous Methodology in Research* focuses on the significance of kinship and relationality that contributes to our wellness. Visiting and relating is a living practice that "guides the way we conduct ourselves, treat one another and learn from one another, and from the land itself" (Gaudet, 2019, p. 53). She further explains how visiting is political, and how relating is grounded in a cultural, spiritual and social context (Gaudet, 2019). I believe counselling with Indigenous people merits approaches that come from Indigenous researchers and scholars in order to gain a better understanding of what the future of mental health services needs in Canada. Organizations and institutions can better serve Indigenous peoples by honouring Indigenous ways of visiting within the counselling practice (Gaudet, 2019). My Aunty further acknowledges how "returning home," meaning going inward, is "a direct connection to kinship responsibilities" (Gaudet, 2019, p. 53), which encourages visiting as a form of relationality. Counselling can be viewed as a form of ceremony surrounding relationality in the visiting way.

Stewart's (2008) interviews with Indigenous counsellors suggest that healing cannot occur without the community as part of the individual's process. Within my master's program, we were introduced to Stewart and Marshall's (2015) *Counselling Indigenous People in Canada* in Sinacore & Ginsberg's (2015) *Canadian Counselling and Counselling Psychology in the 21st Century*. This chapter still forms a big part of my practicing beliefs as I struggle with Western mental health concepts that do not fit my worldview. As Stewart & Marshall (2015) express, "Counsellors trained in western notions of mental health do not effectively service Indigenous mental health populations and the use of the Western paradigm of mental health in an Indigenous context is a form of continued oppression of Indigenous peoples" (p. 78). Moving forward, counsellors need to have a deeper understanding of holistic theory and approaches (Absolon, 2019; Stewart, 2008), which emphasizes the importance of community in relation to one another. This also connects with the responsibility of non-Indigenous counsellors to learn their own colonial histories, values and beliefs surrounding health and wellness in order to best serve Indigenous peoples (Stewart, 2008).

Reciprocity in Counselling

The importance of reciprocity and respect within Indigenous methodologies (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009) is also connected to my counselling practice. Having healthy snacks, tea/coffee and sage for smudging are ways I ensure I not only make the meeting space comfortable, but am also offering respect, compassion and connection for our sharing. "Reciprocity is a feeling of connectedness and removes the need for empowerment, feelings of separateness or distance and the need to be in charge" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 180). Preparing myself for every encounter I will have during my day of counselling is how I relate, reciprocate, respect and take responsibility. In taking time in the morning in prayer through my smudging, setting my intentions for the day, asking for guidance from my ancestors and acknowledging my family knowledge, I attempt to ensure my heart is open and that I am grounded when going out into the community. This form of ceremonial practice is lacking within our contemporary mental health services and creates another barrier to effectively support Indigenous families and individuals (Bedi, 2018; McCubbin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2008). It is suggested that counsellors learn the techniques in offering these traditional ceremonies from appropriate Elders and Aunties in offering these traditional ceremonies. It is also suggested that institutions and organizations make space for Indigenous counsellors to practice from this traditional framework.

Conclusion

Since joining with the TRC (2015), the CPA (Ansloo et al., 2019) aim to raise awareness surrounding the urgent need to improve Indigenous mental health services in Canada. Reflective of research as counselling, this union's purpose and mission needs to be critically reviewed for accuracy and validity for the betterment of Indigenous mental health. Through "self in relation" (Smith, 2012), I've explored my lived experiences within my family history, and my work within the health and welfare systems, along with my last year as a walk-in counsellor. In writing this paper using a majority of Indigenous

methodology research, I have found that this has been in direct relation to my counselling approach with Indigenous peoples. Through the use of the 4Rs (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Strega & Brown, 2015), I have discovered that Indigenous methodology has informed a crucial part of my way of being and doing counselling. Ansloo et al. (2019) acknowledge the need for Indigenous representation within Canada's psychology and psychotherapies institutions, as well as Indigenous scholars to participate in transferring knowledge from an Indigenous worldview. Taking a step farther as a Métis counsellor is to do my work in a good way, as this contributes to the disruption of the power that Western based therapies continue to hold in Canada.

In writing this, I honour and celebrate the beauty of my family's teachings and my ancestors' guidance in the "process to resist, reclaim, construct and act" (Anderson, 2006, p. 16), according to Indigenous methodologies. Using the wealth of Indigenous methodologies, theories and frameworks has enhanced the importance of self-awareness surrounding situating myself, recognizing my privileges, and honouring my learning journey while providing service. These practices can be used as a guide for non-Indigenous counsellors as well. Conversing with Indigenous peoples on their own knowledge of history, making space for mourning within the recovery stages (Simard, 2019), standing up for the development of their own ways of healing (Smith, 2012), and assisting in self-determination (Anderson, 2006), are all aspects that require accountability in our ethics and our counselling work. Through the shift of going out into the community from the clinic setting, I am made visible in relation, in promoting social justice, and in actively engaging to understand the barriers and challenges affecting Indigenous peoples within our mental health system. I am hopeful that through these offerings, I can contribute to a deeper understanding on what Canada believes to be the urgent needs of Indigenous mental health and how to better serve those who require services.

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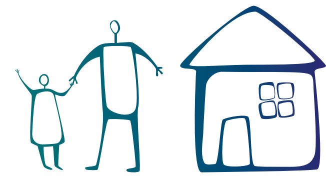

"It's in my blood. It's in my spirit. It's in my ancestry": Identity and its impact on Wellness for Métis Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender Diverse People in Victoria, British Columbia

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Abstract

This article illustrates perspectives on Métis cultural identity, belonging, and positionality, within the context of wellness. As authors, we have the privilege of sharing stories from 24 Métis women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people—living or accessing services on the unceded territory of the Lək̓ʷəŋən-speaking peoples (in so-called Victoria, British Columbia). Their stories illustrate personal and intergenerational journeys of reclaiming Métis identity, while also highlighting the importance of culture, community, family, land, and location. As Métis researchers conducting Métis-specific research, we also share our own positionalities and reflect on our responsibilities to community and to the original caretakers of the land.

Keywords: Métis people, urban, identity, culture, wellness, community

Introduction

For Métis people, connection to culture, land, and identity are integral components of health and wellness (Auger, 2016; Monchalin, 2019). Research has shown that Indigenous peoples' health is promoted and protected through the right to speak Indigenous languages, identify as Indigenous peoples, participate in land-based practices, and practice ceremony and other forms of spirituality (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012). In this way, cultural identity—which is associated with pride, connection to community, a sense of belonging, and social purpose—is a critical determinant of Métis peoples' health (Auger, 2021a).

Métis people are one of three constitutionally recognized groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada. As descendants of early fur trade relationships, Métis people have collectively developed distinct cultures, languages, identities, and ways of life (Chartrand, 2007; Macdougall, 2017). Beyond genetics, culture and kinship ties have shaped and supported Métis families and communities, as “Métis identities are nurtured and sustained by the stories, traditions and cultural practices taught by our grandmothers, grandfathers, and ancestors” (Macdougall, 2017, p. 5). As a result of violent colonial policies and practices, the loss of cultural identity has also been cited as a challenge across Métis communities in Canada (Auger, 2021b; Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). Colonialism has directly impacted the health of Métis families and communities, shaping the quality of available services as well we the barriers that Métis people often face in trying to access and receive these services (Monchalin, 2019).

With the resurgence of Métis identity, Métis people are re-discovering, reclaiming, and remembering their connection to Métis culture and community. Cultural revitalization has been associated with decreased stigma around being Métis (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). Beyond decreasing stigma, however, the resurgence of Métis ways of knowing and being contributes to healthy people, families, and communities (Auger, 2021a). This paper presents narratives on Métis cultural identity and journeys to understanding what it means to be Métis from the voices of urban Métis women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people living in Victoria, British Columbia (BC). These stories around Métis identity arose within a larger project that aimed to understand the experiences of Métis women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people living in or accessing health and social services in Victoria.

Location

Despite BC being home to over 90,000 self-identified Métis people (Statistics Canada, 2017), it has largely been constructed as a “place where no Métis have lived (or continue to live)” (Legault, 2016, p. 229). Métis scholar Legault (2016) explains that this narrative was shaped from “political, legal, and scholarly discourses centered on the expansion of colonialism through the fur trade, notions of cultural essentialism, and legal forms of recognition” (p. 229). And yet, records show that Métis people have existed in what later became known as BC as early as the late 18th century. Métis history in Victoria, BC included the formation of the Victoria Voltigeurs (1851–1858), a military unit that was formed and led by Governor James Douglas (Barkwell, 2008; Goulet & Goulet, 2008). The Victoria Voltigeurs consisted largely of Métis men alongside French settlers and Iroquois men (Barkwell, 2008; Goulet & Goulet, 2008). The Voltigeurs lived in Colquitz Creek—an area within the Saanich municipality in Greater Victoria—and this land was later “given” to the Métis Victoria Voltigeurs upon their retirement (Barkwell, 2008). Douglas rewarded their service, which often required the Voltigeurs to respond to “any hostile First Nations people” (Barkwell, 2008, p. 1). Additional narratives around Métis history in Victoria, BC tend to focus on land-ownership and contributions to the founding of Victoria (see: John Work and Isabella Ross as two prominent examples).

Today, Métis people, in BC and elsewhere, often live in urban settings (Statistics Canada, 2017). Richardson (2016) notes that many Métis people “live assimilated lives” in urban centres, where they are largely isolated from other Métis people geographically (p. 18). The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Survey (UAPS) also reported that less than one-third of urban-dwelling Métis people have a very close connection to their community of origin (Environics Institute, 2010). As the most urbanized of all Indigenous peoples, Métis people also face challenges in connecting to the land that come with living in cities. For example, Peters (2011) has described cities as “places of cultural loss and associated cultural vitality with reserves and rural Métis and Inuit communities” (p. 79). At the same time, false dichotomies of city/homeland or urban/traditional can contribute to the misconception of Canadian cities as non-Indigenous, land-less spaces rather than as active Indigenous territories where culture, community, language, and land are very much alive (Christie-Peters, 2016). In fact, many Canadian cities originally emerged in places significant to Métis and other Indigenous groups as gathering spots or settlement areas (Newhouse & Peters, 2003). For example, the city of Winnipeg, home to the largest Métis population of any Canadian city, has been a traditional gathering place for thousands of years and exists today because of its importance among many Indigenous Nations as a place to conduct trade and to participate in ceremonies (Burley, 2014; Newhouse & Peters, 2003). Many Urban Métis people across Canada are in fact living within their ancestral homelands. Nevertheless, Urban cities can be a particularly contentious place to assert one’s Indigenous identity (Lawrence, 2004).

In their research on urban Indigenous identities, Lawrence (2004) illustrates the significance of severed community ties for people whose identities are rooted in a connection to land and people. Wilson (2008) further suggests that beyond merely shaping identity, the land is part of Indigenous identity and shapes all aspects of our lives. Richardson (2016) describes displacement from land as an ongoing challenge for Métis people who, after being largely relocated from their traditional homeland, Métis “continue to be wanderers in non-Métis spaces” (p. 65). As a result of this positioning, Métis people often report that they walk “between” or “within” multiple worlds; as Leclair (2002) notes: “My people have lived for at least two hundred years within *le pays en haut,* that ‘middle ground’ between two worlds, indigenous and settler” (p. 163). The practice of walking in multiple worlds has not always been easy for Métis people and many of the participants described a feeling of isolation from both European and Indigenous communities. These experiences are rooted in Métis histories of racism and dispossession from Indigenous communities, as well as contemporary issues of isolation from both Western and Indigenous communities.

Methods

In this project we used the Conversational Method for conducting relational Métis research in an online setting. As Cree scholar Dr. Margaret Kovach (2010) articulates, the Conversational Method involves a collaborative and flexible approach to sharing knowledge through conversational-style interviews. While conversational interviews are not exclusively used within Indigenous research, they align with Indigenous methodologies and storytelling practice and allow for relational practice and reflexivity, which we used throughout the course of this research.

Self-Locating

Indigenous approaches to research emphasize the importance of sharing our positions as researchers (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Our identities and experiences shape the lenses that we use to conduct research; it is therefore both ethical and practical that we, as Métis women and researchers, each share our self-locations through brief introductions (Gaudet et al., 2020). We recognize that Métis scholars have long asserted the need for Métis women to write and (re)right our narratives, particularly through sharing stories that showcase our strengths (Leclair & Nicholson, 2003).

Monique Auger

I am Métis on my mother’s side and French on my father’s side. My family has been living as uninvited visitors on the unceded lands of the Lək̓ʷəŋən-speaking Peoples for six generations. I am a member of the Métis Nation Greater Victoria, one of the local chartered communities within Métis Nation British Columbia. My ancestors were involved in the Fur Trade, but rather than relocating to the Red River Valley after the merge of the Northwest Company and Hudson’s Bay Company, my ancestor Jean Baptiste Jollibois (Métis of Haudenosaunee and French ancestry), maintained his involvement in the industry working in forts across Western Canada. He married into the Nisga’a Nation in the early 1800s to his wife.[1] Jean Baptiste was recruited to Fort Victoria to be part of the Victoria Voltigeurs—the first police force in what is now called British Columbia, and so he and his family relocated to Lək̓ʷəŋən territory. My great-great-great-great grandfather has his name commemorated in the bricks in Bastion Square in Downtown Victoria; it was that same square that he was very likely involved in carrying out horrible acts of colonial law against the Lək̓ʷəŋən peoples. This is both a literal and symbolic truth of the violent and nuanced history that our family has come to understand as Métis people living on lands that do not belong to us.

Carly Jones

I am a proud Métis and Ukrainian woman originally from Saint Adolphe, Manitoba in Treaty 1 territory. I descend from my mother, Lynn Drobot, and her mother, Fernande Delorme. The Delorme family lineage carries a proud tradition of French-Michif community helpers, leaders, organizers and agitators including fur traders, farmers, entrepreneurs, artists, poets, lifegivers and politicians. Many of our ancestors were community knowledge gatherers in their own right and I am proud to pick up this work as a contemporary Métis researcher. I belong to the first generation in my family to be born outside of our homelands in Manitoba and have lived the majority of my adult life within the Urban community of East Vancouver, on the unceded, occupied, traditional territories of the Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and Səliwətaɬ peoples. In recent years, I have been privileged to study Indigenous Social Work at the University of Victoria on the traditional territory the Songhees, Esquimalt and

1 Her name was Suzette, Susan, or Josephine Jollibois, depending on the record source and the Nisga’a Nation is currently helping me to truly understand who my ancestors are as a process of coming home

W̱SÁNEĆ peoples. As an uninvited guest on Coast Salish territories, I strive to respect the ways of the original people of these lands and to foster good relationships with other urban Indigenous kin while maintaining close relationships with my relatives and homelands in Manitoba.

Renée Monchalin

I am of both Settler and Indigenous background, and my bloodlines flow from Métis-Anishinaabe, Scottish, and French ancestries. I currently reside as an uninvited visitor on the territory of the W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples, and was born and raised in Fort Erie, Ontario, also known as Attiwonderonk (Neutral) territory. I am a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario, coming from the historic Métis community of Sault Ste Marie. My ancestors then moved East to Calumet Island on the Ottawa River. Today, I consider my home to be the Niagara River, also known as the Onguiaahra (loosely translated to “thundering waters” or “the strait”) where I grew up. Remembering how water is our first environment, being in the waters that flow through the Niagara River is where I feel most safe, despite the strong current. My oral teachings speak to how many of my ancestors were traditional navigators of the Great Lakes waterways. This teaching was instilled in me by my father, who has a special connection with the water, and reminds me to always show it respect. Like the Niagara River, my bloodlines flow together from many directions and geographies, yet become interwoven as one, and I have the responsibility to respect all of where I am from.

Willow Paul

I am Métis Cree on my father’s side, Gitxsan on my mother’s side, and a mix of white settler on both sides. My traditional Gitxsan name is Zin Zin, a name passed on to me that once belonged to my mother. My family’s connection to our cultures have been disrupted by colonialism, as there are residential school survivors on both my Gitxsan and Métis sides. Despite these attempts at assimilation, my family has continually been resilient. Although we do not live on any of our traditional territories, we have reclaimed identity and culture in multiple ways. The journey of reconnection, relearning, and unlearning is a process of heart work that I am constantly playing with. I am a grateful uninvited guest on the traditional, unceded territory of the Okanagan Syilx people where I have had the privilege to grow up. I study Indigenous Social Work at the University of Victoria, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples.

We share our self-locations in written form in a similar way that we shared aspects of ourselves throughout the conversations that we had throughout the research process: as a team in our collective work with this research, with each of the participants during the conversations that were held, and in our process of sharing this work more broadly with our community. We also recognize that we have used our unique lenses—shaped by all of our relationships—in our process of making meaning of the stories and information that were shared with us. In sharing aspects of self, we hope to provide some insight into the lenses we used for this interpretation.

Participants

Table 1
Michif medicines used as participant pseudonyms.

Michif Medicine	English Translation
lii shaadroon	nettle
plaanten	broadleaf plantain
sasperal	wild sarsaparilla
li sayd	cedar
enn fleur di pwayzoon	hemlock
la haarroozh	red willow
aen nipinet	spruce
la gratelle	balsam
lii tii’d mashkek	labrador tea
li pchi boom	wild mint
lii bon tiiroozh	rosehip
enn rooz faroosh	wild rose
zayon faroosh	wild onion
lii paabinaan	cranberry
lii grenn bleu	blueberry
lii groo zel	goose berry
lii frayz	strawberry
li pisaanlii	dandelion
bouquets rouge	fireweed
li tabaa	tobacco
li grachaw	burdock
li kors di shenn	oak Bark
enn fleur daan loo	waterlily

For this research, we aimed to reach Métis adults who lived in or accessed health and social services in Victoria, BC, and identified as women, Two-Spirit, and/or gender diverse people. We developed a recruitment poster featuring artwork from a local Métis artist, Lynette La Fontaine, which was shared through social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram), including on the researchers’ accounts and through online community groups. In addition to the visual artwork, the recruitment poster included a description of the research, the study criteria, and contact information. As a result of online engagement, potential participants contacted our research assistant (WP), who had initial conversations with each potential participant to see if they fit the research criteria (related to gender, Métis identity, and location). In cases where participants met the study criteria and maintained interest in participating in the study, an interview over Zoom was scheduled. Within a week of first sharing the poster, we surpassed our recruitment goal, with 24 participants.

Rather than assigning participants a number, we selected Métis plant medicines that can be found on Vancouver Island (Table 1). We wanted to reflect and honour the stories shared with us in this project, as we understand that these stories are medicine (Richardson, 2016). Participants were asked if they were happy to use the Michif medicine name in association with their stories, or if they preferred to use a different name. Table 1 includes the list of Michif plant medicines and their English translations. These names can be found alongside the stories shared in the results of this paper.

Conversational Interviews

Conversational interviews were conducted by two Métis research assistants (CJ, WP). These conversations were hosted online via Zoom or over the phone, given social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. While online conversations were challenging, through reduced ways of connecting with each participant, the conversations were conducted in a way that honoured our relationships as Métis family and community, as well as the knowledge and stories shared by each participant. Open-ended, flexible interview questions were used, in a way that avoided taking a rigid approach to interviewing. For example, questions related to identity included: (1) How would you describe yourself? And, (2) What does being Métis mean to you? In true conversational fashion, these interviews involved the research assistants sharing aspects of their selves and identities, aligning with our Métis ways of gathering and sharing knowledge through storytelling and kitchen-table conversations (Flaminio et al., 2020). The conversations were around an hour in length, on average.

Each conversation was recorded and transcribed by a third-party professional transcriptionist. To ensure that participants were comfortable with their stories being shared in the research project, each participant was offered the option of having their transcription shared back with them, with an invitation to revise, add, or remove any aspect of the transcript without question. We understand this simple process as a way of operationalizing the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP™) Principles at a grassroots level, with respect over each person's ownership of their own story. This process also aligns with a process of "returning to community," which Anishinaabe scholar Dr. Kathy Absolon (2011) describes in *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know*. Participants were also asked if they were comfortable offering their direct quotes in the analysis; 23 of the 24 participants gave consent to have their direct quotes used, while one preferred to have their stories represented only in summaries.

We sent each participant a thank-you card designed by Métis artist Lynette La Fontaine, as well as a fabric face mask by La Fontaine and Anishinaabe artist Lesley Hampton. Participants were also sent an honorarium of $95 in respect of their time spent interviewing and reviewing their stories.

Thematic Analysis

Analysis refers to the ways that we interpret, or make meaning, of the knowledge shared with us in the research process. Qualitative analytic techniques are used to draw out substantive or conceptual elements and then re-integrate those elements into themes. Métis scholars Cathy Richardson and Jeannine Carriere (2017), among others, assert that thematic analysis can be utilized in Indigenous research as a form of "respectful categorization" that can "contribute to a holistic representation, much like threads woven together… contributing to the integrity of one blanket" (p. 35). They note that this method of meaning making is not exclusively owned by colonial scholars (Richardson & Carriere, 2017).

As a team, we utilized the DEPICT model of analysis, as described by Flicker and Nixon (2014), using NVivo as a tool for assisting our team-based approach to thematic analysis. We developed a codebook based on our initial review of the transcripts, and adapted it collaboratively as needed. Following our group review, we divided the transcripts for a subsequent intensive coding process with two teams. Half of the transcripts were analyzed by WP and checked by MA, and the other half were analyzed by CJ and checked by RM. We met weekly to discuss our interpretations. The thematic analysis, as a whole, was reviewed by the team to ensure there was consensus by way of a shared understanding of across the themes that arose. We recognize that a collaborative approach to analysis—inclusive of participants—would have potentially strengthened our approach to making meaning and interpretation of the knowledge and experiences shared in this research. Due to the sensitive nature of the stories shared, and the concerns around confidentiality expressed by some participants, this approach was not pursued. Instead, sought feedback from participants one-on-one through the optional verification of their transcripts, and through sharing and asking for input on a draft community report.

After finishing our process of thematic analysis, we developed a community report featuring the stories shared by the Métis participants. This report was sent out to project partners and participants for their feedback. Once finalized, the report was sent to Métis communities and local organizations for distribution to service providers and community members. Our approach to disseminating findings from this research was further informed by dialogue with a local Métis Elder, Barb Hulme, and with participants themselves.

Ethics

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria. Aligning with the Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Research Involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada, we centred the importance of protecting Métis Knowledge. Additionally, we recognize that the Tri-Council Policy Statement also falls short of fully adhering to Indigenous research ethics, and we sought to operationalize the OCAP™ principles within the context of the grassroots Métis community in Victoria, BC, while prioritizing open and transparent communication throughout the research process. We also sought and received guidance from our Elder, Barb Hulme, from project inception through dissemination.

Results

From a Métis perspective, culture and identity are inseparable. The stories shared by Métis participants demonstrate the ways that Métis culture is embedded into all aspects of life. Participants shared their personal and intergenerational journeys coming to understand and accept what it is to be Métis. They also shared specific aspects of their Métis identity—including land and location, community, family, culture and ceremony, and language—within the context of their personal wellness and experiences accessing health and social services in Victoria, BC.

Survivance and Reconnection With Identity

Participants shared many different journeys that they have had in understanding their Métis identities. A few noted that they have always known; they grew up being raised with strong Métis traditions—understanding who they are and where they come from—as one person said: “I do self-identify as Métis… that identification comes from my mom. She very much instilled that, that part of who we are in us, in all of us kids, but probably most especially in me” (plaanten).

More commonly, however, participants indicated that they were new to discovering or understanding their Métis ancestry and what it is to be Métis:

> I am learning what it means to me. I only found out about seven years ago that we were Métis and in the past year is the first time I really like started exploring what that means. So, it’s kind of starting to mean a community of other people but it’s all these other connections that I didn’t know I had. (*lii shaadroon*)

> Being Métis is actually becoming more meaningful later in my life. Growing up I didn’t really… I mean I identified as Métis but it didn’t really mean anything outside of the word Métis. We didn’t have any cultural teachings or like ceremonies attached to growing up because we weren’t really immersed in culture. (*li pisaanlii*)

Regardless of how “new” people were to learning about their Métis roots, cultural identity and connectedness was often framed within the context of recovering and ongoing learning:

> I feel like I’m still learning about my identity… with that comes a lot of learning and a lot of reflection about my own life and my own upbringing and it’s started different conversations with my mom that we haven’t had before, so that’s been really neat. Sometimes hard. (*enn rooz faroos*h)

Participants frequently spoke openly about the significance of internalized shame fostered within their families in relation to Métis ancestry and identity:

> My family hid who we were for a very long time. So my grandfather very specifically would not allow us to talk about being Métis outside of our family. And it was only after he died that my grandmother said, “You can now say who you are” …. Of course it was a big part of that family story to keep quiet because it was about survival. And I interpreted my grandfather’s telling me never to discuss it outside of the family as internalized racism and shame. And I’m rewriting that story as my grandfather loved me and my grandfather was protecting me as opposed to my grandfather was ashamed. I’m not sure my grandfather was ashamed. He might have been. That’s possible because he did experience that racism and I know that. But I’m also not sure that that’s the only reason that he kept that story quiet. (*lii groo zel*)

> I think I was 13, sitting with my grandpa, and he was carving and he was saying to me how important it was that I know where it is that I come from and my family’s quite ashamed around their history and… and that definitely comes from the impacts of colonization and residential school because my great-grandma was sent to an orphanage and removed from the community, because she was always considered a half-breed. (*li pchi boom*)

Some participants shared their honest reflections on the challenges they have experienced in terms of their cultural identity. In particular, they broadly spoke about the impacts of colonialism and assimilation on their identities:

> For me as a Métis person, I didn’t have any sense of connection and no sense of identity and was completely disenfranchised and made to be really assimilated. Like basically, I am the result of assimilation… So, because of that, knowing your sense of identity or feeling a sense of belonging… you just don’t have it… I’m in the process or reclamation but I still am bearing the brunt of not having close ties and not having a sense of connection and feeling welcomed or wanted or a part of anything. (*enn fleur di pwayzoon*)

In response to ongoing impacts of colonialism, Métis people are working hard to maintain and reclaim their Métis culture and identities. In particular, some peoples spoke beautifully about their processes of reclaiming identity, taking ownership of it through overcoming internalized shame:

> To me, it means having more of a voice than the… than my ancestors have. And when I say that, I mean, like, my grandmother. She didn’t really identity and she wasn’t proud of who she was, and she really didn’t have much of a voice. So my mom’s had a little bit more, and I in turn have a little bit more. So it’s like taking ownership of that. (*lii frayz*)

For many people, this journey of strengthening, reclaiming, and asserting Métis identity is a form of healing past, present and future generations of Métis people.

Land, Location, and Positionality

When describing themselves, participants often spoke about where their ancestors came from. In addition to sharing stories about the cities where they grew up, the Métis participants that we spoke with commonly located themselves on the Indigenous lands that they live on. Some spoke about aspects of their histories and responsibilities in relation to the land:

> I think to me it means understanding my history and my lineage and my connection to these lands and my responsibilities as well… it means something different to everybody but for me it really means embracing culture and just using Métis history and culture as a way to kind of inform, understand myself and understand kind of where I’m at in my life and how the histories that have brought me to where I am today. (*zayon faroosh*)

As Métis people, our relationship to the land has been shaped by displacement and disconnection. However, Métis women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people are also reclaiming these connections through cultural resurgence. Many of these Métis community members also spoke about the ways in which they are raising their children to have a renewed relationship with the land, and to understand their responsibilities to take care of the land:

> I understand my own family Métis ancestry and some of the disconnection from culture and how that’s impacted my family through addictions and trauma. And so right now I think I’m in the process of reclaiming my identity in terms of relationship to land, by not necessarily land ownership but, like, land stewardship and trying to bring that back and raise my children around a deeper respect to Mother Earth. (*Ii kors di shenn*)

As city-dwelling Métis, living in urban areas like Victoria, it can be more difficult to engage in our land-based practices. Some participants spoke about the need to travel outside the city to connect with the land.

> I kind of took more to it and I was more interested in a lot of the things, like trapping and going out, you know, being away out in the country. So I’m a bit of a fish out of water in the city. I’ve got one foot always somewhere else. (*plaanten*)

At the intersection of location and identity, several participants spoke about their experience of being Métis as one of “walking in two worlds.” For example, enn rooz faroosh shared their experiences of feeling “othered” or not belonging anywhere. Similarly, lii groo zel spoke about walking within and between two worlds: the mainstream society and their cultural ways of knowing. They strive for balance, but often feel “out of step.” They shared:

> When I walk in dominant society, I always feel out of step. I always feel like not quite right, I’m not quite balanced, I don’t quite fit. I’m not happy. I’m not well. I’m just never settled. And when I am following the values of my ancestors, it’s like all is right in the world.... I feel like I can’t walk in both. That if I split myself between the two worlds, I am unbalanced and so the last number of years I finally stopped saying, you know what, I want to follow the values of my Aboriginal ancestors. I want to follow the values of my Métis ancestors. And, for me, that has always felt right to me. So I’ve always tried to live in harmony and balance for myself and that is a much more collective way of being. And that has always felt right to me and that has never been valued outside of where I am. So those dominant societal values that surround me, have always told me that that’s wrong and have always told me that I am less than for being that way. And I finally realized genetically I’m wired to be that way. It’s in my blood. It’s in my spirit. It’s in my ancestry. And I am happy and I want to reclaim that and I want to stop fighting that and understand. And I now understand where it comes from instead of thinking that I’m just less than because somehow I don’t fit into this dominant society. I think, “Yeah, damn right I don’t fit in to the dominant society. And, you know what? I don’t want to.” (*lii groo zel*)

Culture, Language, and Ceremony

For many of the people that participated in this project, Métis identity also centres on our culture and ceremony. Participants spoke about participating in ceremony and cultural activities, and working with traditional medicines. One person spoke about the way that they found community through the sweat lodge:

> It's really hard not having a place where you could call home and you could go and talk about your feelings and be supported and held and loved and cherished for sharing your feelings. And that's what you get when you go to sweat lodges. 'Cause you are loved and you are supported. I could say anything I wanted to in a sweat lodge and know that I'm still good and that all my relations are right beside me, supporting me. (*la gratelle*)

Some people also shared how food is both an important aspect of culture and identity. They shared stories about learning to bake bannock with their grandparents, and in turn passing this knowledge onto their children.

Participants also spoke about the importance of Michif, and other Métis languages, as the foundation of cultural identity. Participants shared stories of the ways that their families would use and incorporate Michif in conversation:

> So in our family we use Michif. We didn't know we were using Michif but it would be funny because every time we would use a word in Michif, and my family's francophone, I would say, "Well that's not really a French word. Where does that word come from?" And my family would say, "It's an old family word and we don't talk about that outside of the family." (*lii groo zel*)

Métis cultural expressions through art and crafting were commonly discussed as an important part of our collective identities as Métis people. Some community members spoke about learning how to weave, to bead, and to tuft. Others described their relationship through appreciating the work of Métis artists and artisans.

Connection to Family and Community

For many, Métis identity also involves our connection to family and to our ancestors. Several people told beautiful stories about their grandparents and the strong relationships they had in their Métis families. Aen nipinet shared the importance of family connectedness: "Métis to me really is like family. So, my connection with my family members and my ancestors, its places being a way of living. It's culture and it's connection." These stories often involved baking and cooking, and sharing food. They spoke about trying to remember or imagine what their ancestors' lives would have been like, as well as honouring their ancestors in ways that made sense to them. For la haarroozh, connection represented ways of acknowledging their genealogy and "the journey of my ancestors and how I came to be."

As well, connection to community is an incredibly important aspect of Métis identity. Many participants spoke about the importance of belonging, sharing stories about their ways of finding, strengthening, and maintaining their connections to the Métis community in Victoria, the Métis Nation of Greater Victoria. While some participants indicated that they did not have a particularly strong connection to the community, those who did noted that the community is vibrant, comforting, and accepting. One person shared how exciting it was to connect with the Métis community for the first time: “It was exciting because it was like this whole other community… that kind of just like accepted us and showed us what it meant to be Métis.” (*sasperal*)

Connecting to community can involve gathering, feasting, and visiting. For others, community connections involve acts of service and holding space for others to find their own connections:

> I guess for me being Métis and looking at my family… right now it means a little bit of uncertainty but also lots of hopefulness because I am starting to discover different places to further learn and to connect with Métis culture and heritage. (*li pisaanlii*)

At times, however, connection to community can be challenging through the presence of lateral violence and exclusion:

> I do want to preface that I have met wonderful people in the Métis community, but as of recently it’s felt very exclusionary in certain circles… it would be nice to see Métis people being a little bit more inclusive, I think, to people who are Métis, but they’re outsiders, I guess. (*enn fleur di pwayzoon*)

Throughout the conversations, when lateral violence was discussed, it was used to describe ways of criticizing, excluding, or attacking one’s own people. This was described as a manifestation of colonialism and oppression. Participants, like li pchi boom, shared reflections that an aspect of exclusion from the Métis community may be based on colonial perspectives:

> I think being Métis is beautiful. It’s a combination of Indigenous ancestry and shared understanding with your ancestry - that developed in family anyway… unfortunately through the impacts of colonization but also through partnerships that were based on kinship and reciprocity and love, so they were really beautiful relationships in my family, and it’s something that I resonate quite strongly with because of the practices that have been passed down within my family, and some of the teachings. And, unfortunately, it’s something I don’t always like to disclose because of cultural gatekeepers and the understanding of where Métis is and my Métis family originates on the West Coast, not in the Red River, where I think there’s always this assumption that’s created that people have to be from there in order for Métis Settlements to have existed. And I have met Métis folks across the country who have disclosed that they are Métis, who have felt a lot of lateral violence in communities and have had the same hesitation that I have to talk about it. And that being said, I do have registration as a Métis person in local community. (*li pchi boom*)

Lii groo zel also shared how they see lateral violence having stemmed from the harms of colonialism. Through healing these harms, the Métis community can once again focus on traditional values and ways of caring for one another:

> Amongst ourselves, we need to care for each other better. And I think we can and I think we’re trying and I think we still have greater work to do. And so, I think, for me, that’s where my hope is, is that if we can use this to be honest with each other and say, you know, intent and affect are two different things. Right? That our intention is to walk in a good way and sometimes our affect is that we’re still hurting each other even when we’re intending to do good, that we’re still carrying some of that baggage. So, can we look at that? And can we… can we look at that in a way where we’re not shaming each other? Can we do that in a way where we’re not creating more violence toward each other? And can we figure out how we can do this differently so that we can have safer spaces? Because I really love the health and wellness [programs]. I would love to go to more of those things. But, honest to God, sometimes I have to decide; it’s like am I going to go to the drumming workshop? Or am I too scared today because I just don’t have the reserves because someone’s going to be an ass during that time, right? (*lii groo zel*)

Discussion

Métis people are survivors of historical and ongoing colonialism. The literature has detailed the many ways in which colonial attempts at assimilation have disrupted the foundations and maintenance of Métis ways of knowing and being (Auger, 2021b, Edge & McCallum, 2006). This has included, but is not limited to, Canada’s ongoing legacy of dispossession and denial of the Métis people. Despite these ongoing systemic challenges, Métis people have demonstrated their resistance and resilience. Continual and intentional work is required for Métis people to heal, while strengthening cultural capital and continuity. As Métis scholar Kim Anderson (2000) aptly notes, “Identity recovery for our people inevitably involves the reclaiming of tradition, the picking up of those things that were left scattered along the path of colonization” (p. 157). This statement seemingly resonates throughout the findings from this research, which illustrate the powerful process of reconnecting with Métis identity. In many families, Métis ancestry and identity was commonly hidden for protection and other reasons (Richardson, 2006). Métis people’s histories and experiences with colonialism, along with our unique strategies for protecting our families, have created shared stories of survival throughout a period of invisibility (Logan, 2015). Of course, this is not the story of all Métis families, as others shared their families’ journeys of intergenerational resistance and bravery, through continually asserting their cultural identities despite threat of persecution.

During the 2017 *Daniels Conference: In and Beyond the Law* at the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research, University of Alberta, Métis Elder Maria Campbell shared her perspective around identity:

> We never talked about identity and all of those types of things. I realize those are important but that’s not what I’m here to talk about. I just want to say that what is wrong with many tribes? There’s Métis from Red River. What’s wrong with Métis from someplace else; it’s okay for every other Indigenous Nation in this country to have dialects and different territories that we belong to. Why do we have to be the way that we are? Why does somebody have to tell me that I’m not Michif and I don’t speak Michif because I speak Cree? Most of the old men that I worked with spoke Cree first and considered themselves Indians, not Indians in the way we think in White Man’s terms because that’s how most of us think. We were Indians because we were people of the land, and that’s what that meant. My father called himself an Indian, but he always said, “I’m Michif. I’m a Halfbreed,” after, and he meant that he had always lived off the land. And there’s a whole different thing, when people start thinking and having all of these discussions, they are thinking in colonial western terms, and that’s what we have to stop doing.

The historic *Daniels Decision in 2016, which ruled that Métis and non-status Indians are Indians under the C*onstitution Act, 1867, found that there is no need to place a legal definition for the word “Métis.” Despite this, however, some elected Métis leaders continue to argue for continual use of boundaries, contributing to ongoing issues with Métis identity politics. Beyond issues in the politic arena, identity politics impact Métis people’s wellness; threads of this story were shared by participants in the present research study as well as in previous writing on Métis women’s identity journeys. For instance, Leclair and Nicholson (2003) share, “As Métis women, our path to self-realization can be hindered by people within our own communities. There are some who do not want to offer us the recognition and place we need. Others are living out the patriarchal legacy of our colonial past” (p. 62). Unquestionably, colonialism has intentionally infiltrated the ways in which we conceptualize our identities as Métis and First Nations people. Colonial recognition vis-à-vis the Indian Act, as well as in/exclusion in historic and contemporary treaties, serve to fracture individual and collective identities among Indigenous peoples—thereby challenging solidarity and kinship connections between Métis and First Nations. And while Métis are largely exempt from the Indian Act, Métis identity politics are highly impacted by colonial recognition politics through patriarchal notions and court decisions on who does (not) belong. In order to contribute to decolonizing our thinking around identity, we assert the need to return to our teachings, which have long been upheld by powerful knowledge keepers, Elders, and matriarchs across Métis communities.

Participants in the present study spoke eloquently about recognizing their connection to land and their location in Victoria, BC—on unceded territory of the Lək̓ʷəŋən -speaking peoples. As authors living on Lək̓ʷəŋən territory (MA, RM), and elsewhere (CJ, WP), we echo the words of our community members with respect to our gratitude to the original and ongoing caretakers of this land. We seek to understand our historical and ongoing responsibilities to be good relatives and neighbours as we seek to fulfil our relational obligations to the Lək̓ʷəŋən people. In sharing the story of *The Woman Who Married a Beaver*, Metis scholar Brenda MacDougall (2018) highlights the role of collectivism in understanding Métis identity, where kinship, family, community are

prioritized over any one individual. Our relationships are central to understanding who we are, as identity falls at the intersection of our individual characteristics, our families, our communities, our languages, our connection to land, our knowledge systems, and our spirituality (MacDougall, 2018). It is also well documented that community connectedness and cultural identity are central to health promotion for Indigenous peoples (Goudreau et al., 2008; Howell et al., 2016). Stewart (2007) illustrates the importance of utilizing Indigenous approaches to helping and healing, rooted in culture, ceremony, Elders' guidance, storytelling, and connectedness to family and community. Similarly, as Jones et al. explain (2020), Métis women and girls have always used and upheld matrilineal kinship networks as a way of sharing healing knowledges, which contribution to collective wellbeing and safety. As demonstrated by the participants in this research, Métis wellness is rooted within our ways of knowing and being, with support from our families, Elders, ancestors, and communities. As we reflect on the knowledge shared throughout these conversations, we are reminded of how Métis women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse peoples' stories are medicine; and we, as a research team, felt honoured and uplifted through the process of working through these stories and knowledges and sharing them in the context of Métis identity.

Limitations

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment was conducted online, through social media, and we recognize that not all Métis people in Victoria, BC have social media accounts. While word of mouth also may have contributed to informal recruitment, the period of time between the poster being shared online and when we reached beyond capacity for participation was a couple of weeks. With cost savings due to the inability to travel to conduct interviews, we were able to increase our capacity for interviews (from 15 to 24). However, it is likely that there were even more people who were interested in participating than we had capacity to interview. While our sampling was random—based on interest—the Métis participants (n=24) may not be representative of the entire Métis community in Victoria, BC, with a population of more than 6500 (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Conclusion

As a result of violent colonial policy and practice, Métis people's identities have been challenged—and in some cases fractured (Auger, 2021b; Monchalin, 2020). While narratives around Métis wellness have often focused on family and community deficits, the stories and healing knowledges shared in this research suggest that we return to looking at what makes us, as Métis people, well. In order to reclaim and heal our identities, we can turn to the strengths of our families and ancestors, our culture and ceremonies, and our Elders and communities. We also can dedicate our time to ensuring that the future generations—the present and future children and youth across Métis communities—are raised with a sense of pride and responsibility in what it means to be Métis. In Victoria, BC, this includes a strong understanding of our responsibility to the Lək̓ʷəŋən-speaking peoples who have cared for this land since time immemorial.

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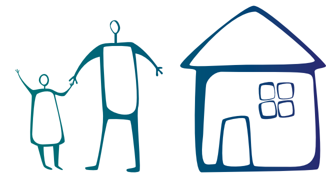

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon: Healing Through Ceremony

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Abstract

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon *(Healing through Ceremony) is an audio-visual learning experience created in ceremony and in relationship with knowledge-keepers, wisdom-holders, language speakers, and the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their descendants. In ceremony and in language, the authors met with 23 knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members who shared their experiences of "healing through ceremony." Through protocol and relationship, the knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members gave permission to the authors to have the teachings and stories recorded and documented. The audio-visual learning experience came to be understood as*

1 https://youtu.be/HUIb9kWWqhg

an experience of kiskinowapahtam *– to heal, teach, and learn by watching and doing. The teachings and stories shared in* isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon *guide social workers toward understanding how to support Indigenous communities in healing from the legacy of Residential Schools and the lasting intergenerational impacts of colonization.* isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon *supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge regarding healing and ceremony and directly impacts current and future generations through providing this knowledge to social workers serving Indigenous communities. From this teaching experience, the knowledge-keepers, community members, and authors share a collective vision that Indigenous children, families, and communities encounter social workers who understand, honour, and trust the healing that happens in ceremony.*

Keywords: isîhcikewin (ceremony), *nâtawihowêwim* (healing), Indigenous child welfare

Introduction

This document is intended to be a resource guide that complements an audio-visual/written (av/w) learning experience created and designed to share collected teachings and stories exploring the vital connection between Indigenous healing and Indigenous ceremony. While this resource guide does not align with the methods of research and knowledge mobilization commonly employed in an academic research context, the resource does reflect an Indigenous method of wisdom-sharing. Our intention is to share the teachings and stories in the same manner as they were shared with us.

The teachings and stories of ceremony and healing, shared directly by knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members, can be found in the av/w experience entitled *"isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon"* which, in the *nêhiyaw* (Cree) language, means "healing through ceremony." The purpose of this resource guide is to complement the av/w learning experience and affirm the teachings and stories shared regarding the importance of the connection between ceremony and healing within Indigenous communities. Through this audio-visual learning experience and resource guide, we hope to challenge Western definitions and concepts of trauma-informed care and support a movement toward a focus on Indigenous ceremony-based healing. It is our belief that once we become trauma-informed, it is important to ask ourselves "what happens next?" and for Indigenous communities, the response is *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* – healing through ceremony.

Our intention is to honour and place at the forefront Indigenous pre-contact teachings on ceremony, and how healing from the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the intergenerational impacts of colonization requires ceremony. In this resource, we begin by discussing the background and development of the av/w learning experience, followed by an exploration of the foundational importance of ceremony, and conclude by discussing teachings, stories, learnings, and *nêhiyaw* worldview concepts that affirm healing only occurs within the context of ceremony.

By creating an av/w learning experience, we are inviting viewers, listeners, and readers to directly share, from the Elders, the teachings and Indigenous worldviews of ceremony and healing. From this

process, it is our hope that Indigenous children, families, and communities encounter social workers who understand, honour, and trust the healing that happens in ceremony.

Background

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) documented Canada's legacy of genocidal policies toward Indigenous peoples, and social workers were among the professionals who implemented these policies. The TRC Calls to Action (2015) tasked social work educators with ensuring that students are "properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools" (p. 1) and "the potential for Aboriginal [sic] communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing" (p. 1). The urgency of social work's obligation to support Indigenous healing is heightened against the backdrop of the profession's historic complicity with colonization and its enduring negative relationship with Indigenous communities (Leduc, 2018; McCauley & Matheson, 2018).

Social work education and professional practice continue to rely on assessment tools and interventions that pathologize symptoms of transgenerational trauma (Blackstock, 2017) and privilege Eurocentric ideas about family structure, attachment, child development, parenting, health, and healing (Blackstock, 2017; Choate, 2019; Makokis et al., 2020a; Simard, 2019; Sinclair, 2019). It is increasingly apparent that these strategies offer minimal cultural insight and are likely to be harmful when imposed on Indigenous families and communities (Blackstock 2011; Freeman, 2017; Makokis et al., 2020a; Sinclair, 2019; Turner & Bodor, 2020). Adapting Eurocentric social work practices to be "culturally sensitive" is similarly problematic as this both reinforces the existing paternalistic relationship and disqualifies Indigenous knowledge and practices (Gone, 2013; Ormiston, 2014).

An understanding of the history of colonization and its devastating impacts on Indigenous communities is slowly being incorporated into current social work education. However, prioritizing only the post-European contact narrative invites social workers into a deficit-based understanding of Indigenous communities and inhibits their recognition of the depth, complexity, and vitality of pre-contact Indigenous sciences, wisdoms, and healing practices (Absolon, 2019; Choate et al., 2019; Sinclair, 2019; Simard, 2019). For the profession to survive as one that can effectively support Indigenous peoples, social workers must increase their understanding of methods and approaches developed from and within Indigenous worldviews. In addition, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges, cultures, languages, teachings, and ceremony into social work theory, education, and practice is critical decolonizing work (Duthie et al., 2013; Lindstrom & Choate, 2016; Sinclair, 2019). Makokis et al. (2020a) specifically identify "the need to focus on ceremony-informed healing or ceremony-focused care rather than trauma-based practice" (p. 40). To move from trauma-based practice to ceremony-based healing is to move from a stance of deficit-based understanding to a place of celebration and healing.

Unlike individual- and cognitive-based Eurocentric interventions, Indigenous approaches to healing are holistic, spiritually focused, communal, and land-based (Barker, 2020; Hoffman, 2006; Ross,

2014). Ceremony is the living embodiment of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as teachings, worldviews, relationships, stories, and languages are all incorporated into the experience, and is viewed as essential to health and healing (Makokis et al., 2020a; Ross, 2014). Preparing social workers for ethical practice must include providing them with opportunities to understand, respect, and honour Indigenous ways of knowing and healing though the experience of ceremony. As of yet, few social workers have experience in this crucial area of learning and practice. Settler social workers must have an understanding of ceremony-based healing, the connections and relationships with Indigenous communities to access knowledge-keepers and ceremony-holders, and be willing to participate in (and be guided by) ceremony with Elders and service users while always remaining aware of and deeply respecting boundaries.

kiskinowapahtam – The Teaching and Learning Resource

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon (Healing through Ceremony) was created in ceremony and in relationship with knowledge-keepers, wisdom-holders, language speakers, and the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their descendants. The av/w resource is understood within the ***nê****hiyaw* context as a learning process of *kiskinowapahtam* – to heal, teach, and learn by watching and doing. The av/w resource is a themed collection of teachings and stories from Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who have experienced healing through ceremony and have gone on to provide ceremony-based healing to others. The main purpose of sharing these teachings and stories in this context is to assist social workers in understanding how to support Indigenous communities in healing from the legacy of Residential Schools and the intergenerational impacts of colonization.

The development and creation of *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* was funded by the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) Trust Fund through the University of Calgary and in partnership with *kihêw waciston* – MacEwan University. The teachings and stories shared in the learning resource were gathered from 23 Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who willingly shared their experiences and understanding of ceremony and healing. It is important to note that this resource was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and our wisdom-seeking (research) team followed all health protocols and guidelines to keep ourselves, the knowledge-keepers, and community members safe.

Most of these teachings and stories shared in *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* are from members of the ***nê****hiyaw* community, however, we also heard from members of the *Nakota* and *Dakota Sioux* communities. This sharing experience affirmed that ceremony is the heart of many Indigenous communities. While protocol and language may differ between First Nations, almost every community has ceremony, suggesting that the stories and lessons shared here may resonate for other Indigenous communities.

Our wisdom-seeking team reviewed the hours of video- and audiotaped teachings, stories, and quotes that were collected to identify themes and ultimately create a 25-minute audio-visual teaching resource that provides a deeper understanding of healing and ceremony. The identified

themes were shared with and accepted by the participants prior to further development. It should be noted that after 25 years of wisdom-seeking within the *nêhiyaw* community, we have created long-term, ceremony-based relationships with knowledge-keepers and community members, and as a consequence, the knowledge-keepers and community members provided us with permission to record and document their teachings and stories. This recording is acknowledged and respected as a way to preserve and ensure Indigenous knowledge is available for healing current and future generations while also educating *wichitasowak* (non-Indigenous helpers and allies). *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge regarding healing and ceremony in order to directly impact current and future generations by providing these teachings and stories to social workers and others connected with Indigenous communities.

One aspect of our long-standing relationships within the *nêhiyaw* community has been our learning that healing happens only through ceremony. The certainty and clarity of that learning has led us to strongly suggest to social workers and others that if one is unable to support and be involved with ceremony and healing when in a helping role, perhaps one should not be working with Indigenous children, families, and communities. In response to the unfortunate yet often-repeated statement that "there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in child welfare" (or justice, or health, for example) our team has created the more accurate perspective that "there is an overrepresentation of Western world views, values and beliefs in the lives of Indigenous peoples" – and *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* was developed to address that overrepresentation.

kîkwây ôma isîhcikêwin – What is Ceremony?

isîhcikêwin (ceremony) is the heart of an Indigenous worldview and there is ceremony for every aspect of Indigenous life. Ceremony provides structure for the community and is a source of knowledge where teachings, philosophies, and traditions are shared (Makokis, 2001). These sources of knowledge, accessed through and in ceremony, include the *kiteyahk* (Elders – ceremony holders), the *oskapewisak* (ceremonial helpers), the land, the animals, and the ancestors. *isîhcikêwin* creates the opportunity for knowledge sharing and knowledge transmission. Ceremony enables both the connection to ancestral knowledge sources and the process of sharing of that knowledge by the ancestors. Ceremony creates experiential learning within a spiritual and relational process (Makokis et al., 2020a).

Ceremony is an Indigenous way of education, and this understanding is reflected in the teachings of *nêhiyaw kiskinohamâkewin,* which means to teach by "doing" or through observation, mentorship, participation, and guidance that occurs in a ceremonial, spiritual way. Ceremony is not an isolated, singular event; rather, ceremony is lived across the lifespan, integrated into every aspect of daily living, and vital for growth and development (Makokis et al., 2020a). This integration of doing, living, teaching, learning, mentoring, and guiding affirms that ceremony is a way of being. In understanding ceremony, it is important to remember that we are not just "in ceremony" but rather are "living ceremony." Living ceremony entails a different way of being in that connection is created between

mind, body, and spirit balancing the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical ways of being (Makokis et al., 2020a). This way of being, in turn, is how *miyo pimatisiwn* (the good life) is lived.

By recognizing ceremony as education and as a way of being and living, social workers can begin to appreciate the magnitude and importance of ceremony for Indigenous communities. However, in our years of work, it has often been a challenge to explain and describe ceremony to (mostly non-Indigenous) people who have not witnessed or experienced ceremony. Our response has often been that people have to experience it to understand it. One of the knowledge-keepers who shared with us, Francis Whiskeyjack, echoes this message in his own sharing: "Ceremony is a practice, a way of life that people follow to come to know themselves. It's a sacred ceremony, it's a practice, a belief. Until you practice it, you will not understand it."

Explaining ceremony is often a challenge as it is difficult to describe something that is spiritual and creates connection in ways that are not seen or tangible and instead are visceral and universal. In recognizing ceremony as the heart of community, our team often describes ceremony using a metaphor of a heartbeat. There are processes and mechanisms that keep our hearts beating that we are unaware of – unless we specifically focus our intention on them. We do not necessarily "know" our heart is beating, but we sense and feel our heart beating:

> We are rarely conscious of the beat of our heart, and we do not have to make an effort to make our heartbeat. Ceremony is like our heart and our heartbeat – it is there all the time, often not consciously, working hard to keep us alive. (Makokis et al., 2020a, p. 7)

The same is true for ceremony; there are protocols we engage in to practice ceremony and we can come to understand the teachings behind these protocols, but ultimately, we do not "know" what will result from ceremony. However, in a spiritual context, we live in relationship with ceremony and protocol, and consequently, ceremony becomes life.

When it comes to "living ceremony" or the notion that "ceremony is lived," it is also difficult to explain and describe that sense of "living" and the "life" that is gifted to us in ceremony. The act of breathing can provide another metaphorical understanding of how ceremony is life. The specific process of breathing is complex; however, if we are breathing, then we are aware that our breath gives us life and without it we cannot survive. Indigenous teachings share with us that breath is one of the four sacred elements (air, fire, water, and earth), each of which has a role in ceremony. Ceremony is like breathing; ceremony gives us life and without it, we cannot survive. When we pass on, we give our breath back to the ancestors.

Our intention of creating *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* is to share what it means to "be and live in" ceremony in order to convey the healing that happens only within the context of ceremony. In this written guide, we continue to discuss ceremony and healing based on the teachings and stories shared in the audio-visual resource. This discussion will further support social workers with the integration of ceremony into practice with Indigenous children, families, and communities.

In the audio-visual resource, many of the knowledge-keepers and community members, through the use of teachings and stories, describe ceremony by sharing their own personal healing and it is not uncommon for knowledge-keepers to answer a question with a story or a teaching. The stories and teachings shared here honour the practice of *nehiyaw kiskinohamâkewin* and exemplify how ceremony is lived and is similar to the beating of our hearts.

isihcikêwinihk ekwa nâtawihon – Ceremony and Healing

In *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon*, the knowledge-keepers and community members shared many thoughts about colonization, the Indian Act, Indian Residential Schools, the government-sanctioned outlawing of ceremony, the Pass System, and many other mechanisms and forces of assimilation, oppression, and trauma. When reflecting on this history, Arnold Alexis shares, "That's why all our communities suffer, because that was taken from us… they need to understand that… we need that back for our young people, for our grandchildren, to follow prayer again." Cynthia Cowan adds to this message by sharing, "[There are] so many broken people out there, they need to understand… the things our ancestors stood for." These teachings reinforce that it is vital for social workers to understand ceremony and the importance of children and families experiencing ceremony, where they are connected to spirit, in order to heal from the generational impacts of colonization and assimilation.

The Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who shared their stories conceptualized healing as a shared and collective journey. The teachings of healing and spirituality support the need to integrate ceremony into the practice of social work. Cynthia Cowan explains, "The stuff that I know about should be shared everywhere because … how are people going to understand our people if we don't talk about it… I always want people to go [to ceremony], I'll always hope that they connect with that spiritual part, because I definitely think that our ancestors wanted these things to still be here."

This message reminds us that, as social workers connected with Indigenous children and families, we have a shared responsibility to grow our understanding of ceremony and to embrace, practice, and trust the healing that ceremony and spirit creates. Although this message was stated earlier, it is again important to emphasize that, as social workers, if we are unable to support and be involved with ceremony and healing in a helping role, perhaps we should not be working with Indigenous communities.

nâtawihowêwim – Stories of Healing

Throughout the *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon*, the knowledge-keepers and community members share their own personal stories of healing through ceremony. These stories illustrate that when in ceremony, connected to spirit, one also learns about who one is as an Indigenous person. From the knowledge-keepers' and community members' stories, it is evident that the experiences of being in ceremony and connected to spirit were humbling, life-changing, and stripped away the years of

colonization and assimilation. Bob Cardinal describes his experience of participating in his first *matosan* (Sweat Lodge) ceremony: "I stayed four rounds, that is where I change my life, I found something there, or it found me."

Many of the knowledge-keepers and community members describe ceremony as a safe place for healing through experiencing love and connection to spirit. Teddy Bison shares "what ceremony has done for me; it has created a safe place." Jordan Gadwa adds that, in ceremony, "there is no other thought but love, it makes you feel at home, your spirit, it gives you that good feeling." With regard to colonization and the continued suffering Indigenous communities face, finding a safe place to learn about identity and spirit is paramount to healing, and that space is created in ceremony. Ashley Waditaka shares that "when you are in ceremony, there is no sexual abuse, there is no hate, there is no evilness, there is no horrible things that make you feel terrible, that bring out the worst in you." When you are in ceremony, adds Priscilla McGilvery, "you go into calmness and that's where healing happens. It needs to be in a calm place, in a place of love – *sâhkitowin* space. When there is love, there is no shame and judgment and that's when spirit comes into help."

The knowledge-keepers and community members describe ceremony as "life" or being "a way of life" that we commit to on our human journey. Bill Waditaka shares that "it humbles me, this way of life, how it keeps me sober" and Cynthia Cowan adds, "I definitely credit ceremony life to helping me be strong with not drinking and not doing drugs." These teachings reiterate that ceremony is lived, and it is a path we commit to learning and living our entire life. Francis Whiskeyjack explains that this life of ceremony begins by "being involved in ceremony and being able to start from there on that holistic path and all of that with a lot of help from the mentorship of Elders." As Bill Waditaka shares, "we all know how important it is to get our education, but to actually learn the medicines will actually take us longer." Harry Watchmaker affirms that "a life-time learning the scared teachings takes time, it is life-time learning, there is no ending."

Ceremony has been described as "a way of being" and as "a way of life" throughout this resource. For social workers, this teaching is a reminder that ceremony and a "life of ceremony" entail commitment. Finding ways to offer and bring ceremony into practice with Indigenous children and families is more than a form of intervention; it is a sacred, spiritual, and relational commitment to life-long healing. As Makokis et al. (2020a) state, "ceremony is not something you 'do'; rather, it is a process that you participate in and experience in relationship with others" (p. 17). Ceremony is healing, and healing and ceremony are life-long. As social workers connected with Indigenous children and families, it is important that we begin in ceremony, that we return to ceremony, and most importantly, that we commit to *staying* in ceremony.

ahcâhk – The Importance of Spirit

When discussing ceremony and healing, many of the knowledge-keepers and community members expressed the importance of spirituality to the wellbeing of Indigenous children, families, and communities. Priscilla McGilvery shares that "as human beings, we are vessels from which spirit

works," and Harry Watchmaker adds that "it's a mystery we are spirits, even all these kids are spirits." The understanding that children are spirits is embedded within *nêhiyawewin* (the Cree language). The term *awâsis* is understood to mean "child" – "however, embedded in this term is the root word *awa,* meaning animate, and the suffix *sis,* which indicates a smaller version of the root word" (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50). When these terms are brought together, *awâsis* more accurately means "a small animate spirit" or "a small spirit engaged in a human journey" (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50). Makokis reminds us of this teaching, including the importance of language, by sharing that "*kisê awâsisak*, these are our orphans, these are our kids that are taken, *kisê* means higher than us…which means that child is above us … that means we have to take responsibility for that child, totally love that child" (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50).

Many of the knowledge-keepers and community members shared how they are living the responsibility of nurturing the spirit of the child based on the meaning and teaching of raising an *awâsis*. Daphne Alexis emphasizes how crucial it is to "never abandon your post, those children are there, they need you, they are dependent on you, that mother bear will kill you if you touch her cubs, that's our mentality." This message aligns with the *nêhiyaw* teaching of raising children spiritually well:

> or *miyo ohpikinâwasowin,* where *miyo* means good, *ohpiki* means to grow, and *awasow* means to warm oneself over a fire… these concepts reflect the spiritual role of raising children and how one warms their own spirit so they can then nurture the spiritual fire of the *awâsis*. (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50)

Cynthia Cowan shares that, for her children, "as soon as they got home from the hospital, that night they were in ceremony, they got their name that night, when their belly button fell off days after, we took that and put it in those lodges." Cynthia is referencing the Turtle Lodge Teachings which, in our context, have been shared as *nêhiyaw* stages of development or rites of passage that encompass many teachings, ceremonies, and celebrations that are vital to practicing *miyo ohpikinâwasowin* (Makokis et al., 2020b). One key teaching, ceremony, and celebration is the naming ceremony, where the *awâsis* receive their spiritual name that reflects their gifts and purpose and is meant to guide and protect the *awâsis* on their human journey (Makokis et al., 2020b). Harry Watchmaker further adds that naming ceremonies are imperative because "it is through our spiritual names we connect to our spiritual realm."

These teachings on children or "small spirits engaged on a human journey" are critical to understanding the importance of spirit embedded within ceremony and healing. Bob Cardinal reminds us that as social workers, "we forget one thing here when we talk about these little ones, I never heard you say anything about the spirit of that child." In social work education, Western theories on development focus on mental, emotional, and physical development and often neglect the spiritual development of children, families, and individuals. As social workers connecting with Indigenous communities, it is crucial that we constantly ask ourselves, "what about the spirit of that child?" It is only through ceremony that the

spirit of the *awâsis* can be honoured, and according to Harry Watchmaker that is our responsibility, to "honour each student, each kid… because each one of them has a spirit."

Conclusion: Ceremony in Social Work Education

It is critical that social work education create space to explore the meaning and understanding of ceremony and the healing that only ceremony can bring to the lives of Indigenous families, children, individuals, and communities. *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* brings forward foundational knowledge of how ceremony is integral to Indigenous healing. As ceremony is experiential and ceremony is lived, we hope that this av/w resource supports social workers in embracing ceremony and the teachings. By sharing the importance of ceremony, this project validates that Indigenous communities hold the knowledge and learning required to create healing. This knowledge and learning are embedded within spirit, and we connect with that spirit in ceremony. George Desjarlais affirms that "it's not us losing our culture, it's us losing ourselves, our culture has always been there."

Ceremony has always been there.

ay ay, ekosi maka – thank you, that is all for now.

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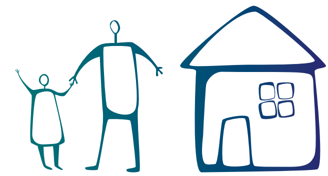

A Critical Reflection: Exposing Whiteness in Child Welfare Practice

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Abstract

This critical reflection is based on my practice encounter as a white settler social worker within the context of Child Welfare, in rural Canada during the late 1990s. This paper is in line with Karen Healy's (2001) notion of critical social work, as a means to enhance systemic and related child welfare social worker practice. More specifically this paper addresses, through a specific case encounter with an Indigenous mother, how white settler social workers are systemically entangled in perpetuating acts of oppression. This critical reflection enables the reader to become aware of how mainstream social work practice, has the ability to unintentionally harm those service receivers that it actually intends to help. This paper critically addresses discourse around professional innocence, the risks of professional knowledge, representational violence and ethical practice dilemmas, within the context of a disguised practice encounter. The relevance of this critical reflection may be seen as a social justice initiative, catered predominantly towards white settler front line practitioners. These challenges are originating from within our own practices. Our practices are historically embedded in systemic colonial forms of discrimination and racism against First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. I bring light to how white settler social workers should confront their own personal and professional pre-conceived notions, biases, and misconceptions and instead, implement anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices within their work. This process begins with critical self-reflection.

Keywords: social work, Canada, white settlers, social justice, professional development, systemic racism

Introduction

Over the last two half decades I have been involved in front-line social work clinical practice and advocacy, in both mental health and child welfare. However, while working as a provincial child protection worker in rural Canada the period during the late 1990s continues to haunt me. This paper critically reflects on my professional practice as a white settler social worker, attached to a

colonial system (Child Welfare) within the context of Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan. This reflection elucidates my multiple ethical dilemmas embedded in dominant colonial child welfare discourse. This reflection is propelled through a "white saviour complex" mentality tied into a professional role, attached to a system embedded in colonial oppression (Hughey, 2014; Jefferess, 2021). Therefore, relevance is around social justice initiatives, in unlearning dominant knowledge, and creating awareness on how privileged professional values of helping can unintentionally translate into the perpetuation of harm. Further relevance is seen in the recent horrific discovery of unmarked graves of children at the sites of former residential schools in Canada. It should be noted that white settler social workers were indirectly orchestrating this genocide (Caldwell, 1967), and therefore, this paper calls for professional accountability and complicity in continued systemic oppression through professionalism.

In this paper I apply specific aspects of a narrative and pertinent encounter during the late 1990s while employed with a provincial child welfare agency in Saskatchewan, Canada. I have not identified details to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. I want to note that I have used a combination of other similar encounters that have been intermingled in this work to make this encounter "new." Through Karen Healy's (2001), definition of critical social work, I have adapted its use in this paper. Healy (2001) asserts, "the adoption of a self-reflexive and critical stance to the often contradictory effects of social work practice and social policies" (p.2). From her approach, critical social work is a connective form of methodology to dissect this relevant and complex front-line practice encounter.

It is ultimately my intention that through critically reflecting on this encounter, the reader may become aware of how mainstream social work practice has the ability to ironically harm those service receivers that it intends to help (Rossiter, 2001). The type of critical reflection applied is also based on Stein's (2000) definition that provokes that when practitioners are unpacking their historical context and are able to culturally locate their preconceived notions or assumptions, they are then able to assess their meanings and validity, as well construct new and authentic worldviews. The relevance of this paper may be reflected in the evolving need to reinvent critical social work in that challenges are also originating from "within the canon" (Healy, 2001) amongst our own practices, our own policies and possibly even our own educators. This reflection therefore aims to place a critical gaze upon the professional role, the social worker's location, and how child welfare with Indigenous populations have and continue to be systemically constructed (Chapman & Withers, 2019). The paper unpacks discourse of professional innocence, the risks of professional knowledge, representational violence and so-called ethical forms of practice, within the context of a disguised practice encounter.

Front-Line Practice Encounter

As a twenty-five year old white settler child protection worker in rural Saskatchewan in the late 1990s, I carried a significant caseload consisting of predominantly Indigenous families; it should be noted that there is a recorded over-representation of Indigenous children in the Canadian Child

Welfare system connected to embedded colonial forms of knowledge (Trocmé et al., 2004). The specific case details in this paper includes a twenty four year-old single Indigenous mother who had extensive and ongoing child protection involvement; mostly related to child neglect linked to substance abuse. In the past, this young mother has also been placed in numerous foster care homes throughout her own childhood. She had a running record involving inter-generational trauma (her biological care-givers being part of the Residential Schooling System), addictions, an eating disorder and several suicide attempts. She had two of her three children removed from her care and placed in the foster care system.

I vividly recall with extreme discomfort my initial social exchange on visiting this woman. I sensed her distrust, her fear and her helplessness, and in turn I experienced an underlying sense of violating her boundaries. In this exchange, I intuited that I could not help due to my role, regardless of intentions. This insinuation was rather complicit in removing her voice. The following is a brief excerpt from our exchange:

> Woman: "How can I trust you, you come here acting all nice, but you are the devil."
>
> Myself: "I cannot imagine how it is for you to have strangers coming in and out of your life, judging how you parent and not understanding your ways of doing things."
>
> Woman: "Don't try to make out that this relationship is voluntary!"

Absence of Innocence

In this practice encounter, the woman clearly explains how she does not like to be hoodwinked by professionals and appreciates authenticity and trust in relationships. The implication may have been her desire for acknowledgement of the imbalance of power embedded within our dynamic; my whiteness had the structural power to take yet another child out of her care. In contrast, I performed an innocence of how dominant "the good helper role" is in social work practice and I did not realize how it was impacting this woman. Cindy Blackstock (2009) views this professional performance as an "occasional evil… (albeit unintentionally and masked by) pious motivation" to uplift the needy (p. 28). The moment I engaged with this woman as a social worker attached to a system that is linked to deep personal trauma (enacted by having her own children taken into care), and through the historical trauma of social workers being amongst the strongest supporters of the residential schools. The moment I highlighted my power and her lack thereof. I concede that there is truly no innocent space within this practice relationship (Rossiter, 2001), and I cannot conceal my complicity in re-enacting colonial ways of being that for example includes routine risk assessments and the use of running-records. These methods are deeply embedded in a system that facilitates the removal of indigenous children from their families (Donovan, 2016).

The innocence of perceiving myself as the rescuer of the oppressed, so to speak, was also seen in my charitable offers of food stamps, free clothing, and furniture… These small items possibly

took on greater meaning for myself in that I felt absolved of my role in her pain. The exposure and acknowledgment of how the performance of white settler social work can lend itself to dubious and double edged professional practice needs to be revealed; it can at the very least reduce harm, although it can never remove the risk (Rossiter, 2001).

Representational Violence

In fact, practising as a critical social worker has "burst my bubble" as I have had to rethink of viewing myself as a good helper which is at the very least emotionally unsettling (Macias, 2013). It is no wonder that this woman at risk of losing another child stated, "...but you are really the devil." She is possibly referring to what my whiteness with its attached colonial practice represents in its totality. In contrast, I am inversely referring to her in a totalizing way. The pathologized and so-called casefile running-records re-iterate labels of "mental health" and "substance abuse." Donovan (2016) views this process as representation where together we are both mutually producing the other, while creating the self.

Further this retelling of her story may in fact be enhancing her oppression. Paradoxically, a critical social worker may view the retelling of a story as a form of representational violence. For example, the moment I perform the so-called expert role by sharing another's story, for professionals to use as a study moment, is a subtle violation of sorts (Donovan, 2016). This paper is in fact an example of my retelling this encounter through my newfound suspicious eyes, one that informs a new story, outside of what I have always considered to be good social work.

Although there is this ethical dilemma around retelling this practice encounter, simultaneously it can also open a space towards greater awareness linked to justice and dignity of our service receivers (Donovan, 2016). Ethical conflicts are around the social location of whose voice is being heard, along with who is constructing the narrative being told. I acknowledge that as a white settler social worker, ownership to this story does not belong to my privilege. In other words who "owns life stories and who has access to another's story are crucial questions in struggles for the sovereignty and integrity of indigenous peoples around the world" (Haraway, 2019, p. 568). However, as a critical social worker, through deliberate and conscious attempts such as writing this paper, I am retelling this encounter whilst dwelling on the consequences of representing the other.

Risks of Professional Knowledge: Being in an "Uncertain Space"

There is inherent tension in knowing that as white settler social workers we are not immune from harming those we aim to help, yet we continue to practice with these repercussions so we can work toward social justice (Healy, 2001; Rossiter, 2011). The need for critical social work is that we need to reconstruct social work with justice as it's intended end and to accomplish this we need to become aware of "social work's unintended complicity with injustice" (Rossiter, 2011, p. 981).

The side effect of doing critical social work is that since we are separating our notion of what the profession is from mainstream social work, it can leave us confused and uncertain about what social work is outside of professionalism (Rossiter, 2011). The challenge is that dominant social work is "guided more by social works professional interest – to give social workers and social work education programs status in society – than by the interests and needs of local communities to whom we are, in theory anyway meant to be responsive and accountable" (Gray et al., 2007, p.5 6). In hindsight, even the initial identification of needs regarding this woman was grounded in forms knowledge that do not truly make room for authentic healing and simply reinforce her oppression. In this vein, mainstream social work has tended to be focused on risk behaviours, problems and deficits, whereas in essence Indigenous forms of knowledge speak to strength based approaches, a completely different point of departure (Bryant et al., 2021). For example, I recall this woman having a close relationship with an Elder in her community, and in the early stages he would take a more front-line role regularly calling and meeting with my child protection supervisor. He wanted to work collaboratively in supporting this family. However, my supervisor at the time was white heterosexual man raised in rural Canada and from my perspective, he seemed to have no real interest in accessing what could have been a strength based approach in healing; using the community as a support. As a result ethical dilemmas ensued while continuing to apply deficit based professional knowledge with all its theories at the forefront, and yet my sense of ethics (attached to strength based approaches) in the background.

However an "unsettled" space has allowed me to reframe the profession as a practice of ethics where I am committed to revealing the conflicts that are a part of mainstream social work knowledge (Rossiter, 2011). Further ethical dilemmas ensued when conducting standard risk assessments. Risk assessments are a tool of violence. In this case, they were used to ultimately provide enough evidence in the case of this woman, to remove her child. In fact, the use of mainstream standardized risk assessment tools in making child welfare decisions regarding Indigenous families has been seen as an inaccurate gauge of actual risk. It does not take into account enough socio-cultural aspects, such as the role of extended family, the surrounding traditional community (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020), or disregards strength based protective factors (Logan-Greene & Jones, 2017).

Also critical practice means exposing tensions that come from our history of professional knowledge, and using ethics to guide practice; rather than exclusively using professional theories in a vacuum (Rossiter, 2011). This vacuum, so to speak, may serve to overly focus assessments on the caregiver role in isolation. Ethics in this sense would be a vehicle or tool that allows one to consciously and deliberately re-evaluate mainstream professional knowledge. Thereby, it would deeply challenge perceptions of what social work *is* or what social work *is not*. For example, if I had not colluded with normative social work practice and constructed the story of the woman as a "substance abuser with mental health issues," I may have opened a space for a completely different story to emerge. A re-told story of "a woman with an attachment to her child and a woman who has courage, perseverance, and commitment to change, while being supported by her extended family and Elders in her community."

Furthermore, Rossiter (2011) argues that mainstream social work attempts to make sense of individuals by placing them into large categories which remove any uniqueness or authenticity. For example, the violent capture of this woman is carried out by labelling her as a perpetrator in a vacuum. As reminded by Rossiter (2011), "persons exceed their representations" (p. 83), and the profession should not assume to know the experience of the other. As such, this notion of acknowledging diversity in and of itself may ironically draw attention to categories of difference (and in turn sameness) which make oppressive claims to "know" the other (Perpich, 2008, p. 188).

Ethics in Critical Practice

This oppression was not only enacted through face-to-face encounters, but in fact it was enacted through ongoing record keeping (De Montigny, 1995). The running-records, through using traditional client centered practice, placed the critical gaze on every word, every action, and every reaction which served to perpetuate the so-called "expert identity," and in turn further dilute the client's sense of self. I recall writing court related affidavits with the authority to construct what was considered strong motivation to support the removal of her child into care. These running commentaries around "smelling of beer" or "looking dazed" were interpreted as substance abuse issues; whereas in fact it is likely other meanings could involve understandable expressions of trauma, or they could be reinterpreted as unsituated snapshots in time, not based on overall, ongoing, or contextual lived experience. I recall multiple supervision sessions to reassess supposed facts. However, these accounts were all steeped in my *whiteness* which were further verified based on my supervisors *whiteness*. Together, the colonial agency that employed us gave its stamp of approval (De Montigny, 2005).

This leads me back to the importance of ethics in critical social work practice, rather than so-called "professional knowledge in a vacuum" (Rossiter, 2011). As Rossiter (2011) believes, ethics should not originate from ourselves, but rather ethics should "come from outside the self" even originating from our service receivers (p. 985). This view that ethics which originate from the other, should guide our practice is clearly a departure from mainstream social work. Mainstream social work can possibly view ethics as originating through the social worker alone. Whereby reflecting only on the practitioner's preconceived biases, historical contexts, and cultural norms in a vacuum (Rossiter, 2011). This lens does not open spaces to expose how systemic oppressions impact social positioning. Thus, ethics originating from knowledge outside of whiteness, reveals the harm that a worker may actually cause as a result of her position of privilege or power (Healy, 2000).

In contrast, ethics originating from outside professionalism may be guided by "authentic knowledge along with principles of love, humility, truth, honesty, respect, bravery and wisdom" (Absolon, 2016, p. 54). In turn, it opens a space for greater "truth of sharing, truth of accounts, truth of accountability and truth of presence" (Absolon, 2016, p. 53). This authentic presence is an essential ingredient in critical practice; most especially by those practitioners who hold immense privilege due to their whiteness. White social workers applying these "wholistic" ethics that Absolon (2016) proposes, have the potential to evoke a culture of responsibility and accountability in critical practice.

Embrace Innocence: A Self Righteous and Guilt Free Act?

The traditional skill of self reflection has received criticism, in that ironically we reveal our dirty laundry, and expose our violations, because underlying it is a way to appease anxieties, so as to restore ourselves guilt free, without truly unsettling oppressive practice (Margolin,1997a;1997b). In fact, I question whether through this critical analysis I am guilty of patting myself on the back to cure my white fragility. In its essence, reaffirms the oppression of the other. From a place of my white settler privilege, I believed that through my proclamations of understanding the others fear and pain I was performing good social work. I have at times experienced defensive anger at being asked to address my colonial privilege where it leaves me unsettled and disengaged performance of responsibility ensues. However, in reality, nothing may change accept that once again an absolution of sorts occurs at performing a “self-critique” (Boler, 1999).

Lip Service: A Response towards Systemic Inequity?

Although this traditional practise of self reflection places the gaze on the social worker, it does not address how our service receivers, specifically those that are marginalized, are impacted by interplay of structural, material, emotional, cultural and social realities (Boler, 1999). These structural inequities, such as the poverty and inadequate housing situation for this particular woman, were factors in her inability to cope. In turn, it opened the door for her heightened visibility in child protection involvement. For example, numerous intakes were received around the children “looking hungry” or “not bathing enough.” However, these were possibly centered on structural challenges that became entangled with “protection” challenges. This lack of material support may be seen in the overrepresentation of First Nation children in care or on protection caseloads, disproportionate funding allocated to First Nation families regarding preventative supports, as well as (such as in my practice encounter) more aggressive intervention by child welfare targeted at these families (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). The latter stresses the importance of using a critical social work approach in addressing the material realities surrounding those marginalized others amongst our service receivers.

Moreover, critical practice does not allow us to continue to reaffirm the false notion of professional benevolence and morality (Badwell, 2016). The profession cannot continue to place the racist card under the table and continue to avoid our complicity with oppression by simply directing us to just keep on being client centered and empathetic, rather than addressing violence (Badwell, 2016). This mainstream notion that our profession is a site of justice and social workers are the arms that remove injustices is really a sugar coated one that hides the underlying colonialism that is still a part of professional practice (Badwell, 2016). In other words, these notions of perceived good social work through provocations of empathy, being client centered, and self reflective may in fact be a smokescreen for oppressive practice, and need to be exposed at every turn.

Navigating the Shifting of Power

Critical social work also aspires to reduce the violent impacts of an inequitable system through attempting to balance the power of social workers in relation to their clients (Badwell, 2016). The ethical dilemma I experienced is the process of shifting power to clients may ironically involve a repetition of violence, in that those in power are once again in control of the means of managing this power shift. As a strategy towards social justice, the privileged social worker should co-create a space where power shifts. Therefore, the client can retell their own story in a process that they are in control of too. The idea is that these stories are sites of both critical practice and of resistance which are necessary to challenge the centring of whiteness in social work (Badwell, 2016). In fact, as a white settler social worker, it may be integral to step aside for non-white racialized colleagues to step forward in the authentic interests of the client. This idea of stepping aside could be construed as a small gesture toward social justice. To reduce the clients' risk, it is possible that a social worker from a shared worldview may in fact interpret and assess the situation with less suspicious eyes. Further rationale for stepping aside is that service receivers may be linked to multiple historical and intergenerational experiences and as a result practice encounters, especially with whiteness in the context of child welfare, can be thwart with the reliving of previous trauma.

In this case encounter, it is possible that my whiteness was an emotional trigger of deep rooted violence, attached to my colonial social worker identity; specifically because this woman had family destroyed through the residential school system, as well as her own children removed from her care. Those white settler social workers who are unable to step aside (due to structural and systemic constraints) should be aware that "deep, humble listening creates an opening for information sharing, collaborative knowledge development, and honest communication (as well as being mindful that) social workers need to earn trust and respect with the community, which takes time due to the history and ongoing practices of colonisation" (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 34). Such acknowledgement of humility and mindfulness can be difficult, but it is not only necessary for continued relationship building, but to redress oppressive practice.

Conclusion: An Evolving and Ambiguous Work in Progress

In this paper, I have pointed towards critical social work being a contradictory practice and one that is filled with ambiguity. Boler (1999) explains that practicing critically opens an uncomfortable emotional journey, where we ought to carefully, consciously, deliberately and authentically examine assumed cultural histories, assumptions and values. This examination of our own cultural histories is always a process that is understood in relation to the histories and material situation of our clients. It is an evolving and ongoing process of *becoming* as a result of our encounters with service receivers.

Further, I am in the process of changing; my thoughts are constantly being redefined by re-telling this story and an identity shift emerges that is dependent on my underlying "willingness to change" (Boler, 1999, p. 179). My openness to change involves consciously learning how to step outside of

our privileged spaces that keep a comfortable and safe distance between ourselves and our clients so we can intimately "witness" their truth rather than remain spectators of their trauma (Boler, 1999). Being a spectator makes it easier to construct totalizing value judgements about clients (Boler, 1999). For example, the assessing of client risk in child welfare may aim to capture clients as either good parents, or as bad parents. This feeds the "binary trap of innocence and guilt" (Boler, 1999, p. 13). The ability to blame clients allows white settler social workers to avoid our own discomforts at the lived reality of the other. It perpetuates continued oppression. However, through critical practice rather than fixating on binary traps, allows us to learn to inhabit an ambiguous identity and in turn project this outwards onto our clients (Boler, 1999). It takes courage and awareness to acknowledges our complicity in the harm we may cause under the guise of professionalism. However, recognizing these ethical conflicts can also lead to a greater sense of connection with others, and possibly more meaningful social work practice (Boler, 1999).

This critical lens reveals the structural paradoxes in the foundations of normative social work; for example, when we see poverty amongst our clients rather than offer basic needed material assistance we focus on "poor parenting," or we oppose racism yet our agencies consist of predominantly white social workers (Rossiter, 2005). Rather than question how such contradictions form the very fabric of our discipline one can become deflated and even "apologetic" (Rossiter, 2005). However, through unpacking how front line practice may be constructed around the dominant culture of white settler professionalism, it points towards how our profession can possibly feed an inherent power imbalance. The latter, albeit unintentionally, reinforces oppression for those seeking social work services.

This is not to say that we should use the notion of critical reflection as a type of confessional to absolve our colonial sins then move on with a clean slate. Rather, this type of critical practice allows us the perspective to step outside of our inherent places of privilege, and view the story that is left out of previous versions. Ultimately, critical practice not only resonates more meaningfully with social justice, but it may also imbue ourselves with enough emotional resilience to shift professional practices in accordance with multiple forms of Indigenous knowledge, created through continued questioning.

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