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# **NATIVE SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL**

*Indigenous Social Work  
Practices and Theories*

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**NISHNAABE KINOOMADWIN  
NAADMAADWIN**

## PRAYER

**Boozhoo; Aanii; Wachiya; Sago; Tansi;  
Kia Ora; Kwe Kwe; Bonjour; Greetings.**

Baybaamoosay-kwe n'dishnikaaz (My Spirit Name is Woman Who Leaves Healing Tracks), Migizi n'dodem (I belong to the Eagle Clan), winiizhoo Midewiwin (I am Second Degree Midewiwin), Wasauksing miinwaa N'Swakamok n'doonjibaa (I am from Wasauksing First Nation and I live and work in Sudbury).

### **Giving Thanks**

Waynaboozhoo G'chi-Manido / Greetings Great Spirit  
Waynaboozhoo Mishoomisag miinwaa Nookmisag / Greetings  
Grandfathers and Grandmothers  
Waynaboozhoo kiinwaa nemdibiyek / Greetings to all of you who sit in  
these directions  
Odi Waabanong / East  
Odi Zhaawanong / South  
Odi Epingiishmok / West  
Odi Giiwedinong / North

G'chi-Miigwech for all you do  
for all of us who reside on Shkagamik-Kwe (Mother Earth)

G'chi-Miigwech for all you do to keep  
our n'biish (waters) clean and sparkling for the generations

G'chi-Miigwech for all you do to keep  
our air clean and pure for the generations

G'chi-Miigwech for all you do to keep  
Shkagamik-Kwe alive and well for the generations

G'chi-Miigwech for all you do to keep  
our ishpiming (Sky World) revolving in our sacred circular motion

For all these things we say; Miigwech, Miigwech, Miigwech, Miigwech.

Cheryle Partridge

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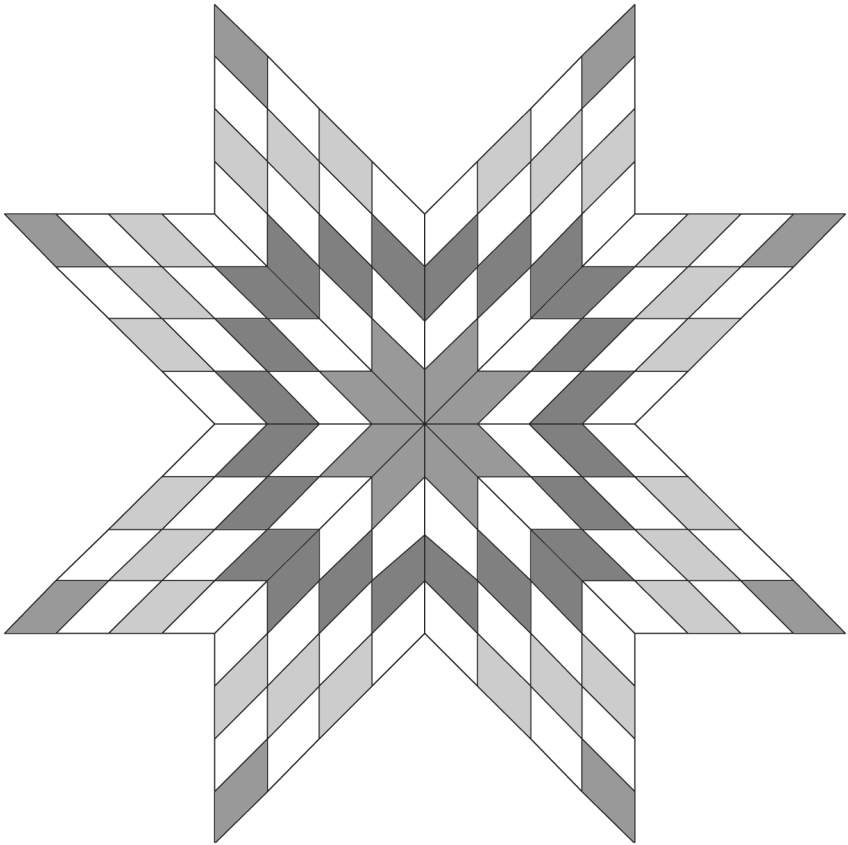
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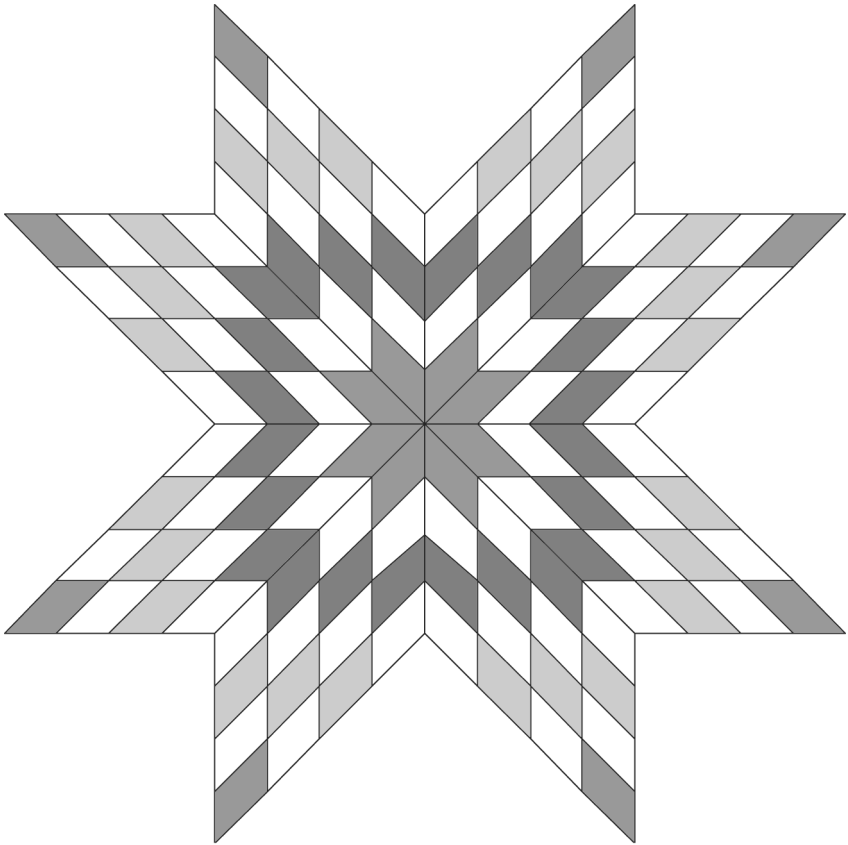
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**Theory? Theories?**

Many yesterdays have passed  
heard somewhere you cannot go back to how it was  
I see, it is not going back to how it was  
I yearned to learn about how life was  
how it was taught  
The connection to the land to the universe  
to a beginning that has survived  
in stories, legends and teachings  
Now there are theories that come from the past  
which have been there since the beginning  
which touch my heart, leading me to all the yesterdays  
Teaching, learning, teaching and more learning.  
Never ending of ways of evolving with time  
Yet, are the same as the ones taught and lived long ago  
Today, Our way of Life  
Anishinaabe

By Doris Debassige  
(student of Native Human Services)  
October 5, 2011



# **THE SCHOOL OF NATIVE HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMME**

Established in 1988, the Native Human Services Programme utilized a regional consultation process involving twenty-seven (27) First Nations within the Robinson-Huron Treaty area. The consultation formed the basis of the curriculum and distance education component of the programme.

In June 2008, the Laurentian University Senate approved the Native Human Services Unit in becoming a School of Native Human Services separate from the School of Social Work. This was the realization of a request from the community in the original consultations of 1988. In April 2008, the School of Native Human Services with the support of Laurentian University, applied for stand-alone accreditation with the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). Accreditation was granted in November 2008. The Native Human Services Programme is a fully accredited program with CASWE since 2008.

The philosophy, content, techniques and strategies that characterize the curriculum model represent a specialization for obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary as a social work practitioner with Aboriginal populations. The cultural content, practice methods and specific competencies reflect distinct realities of self-determination, cultural preservation and community empowerment.

The primary method within the curriculum model utilizes an applied approach that focuses critical knowledge in exploring strengths derived from holistic healing approaches. Other curriculum areas include: community based participatory research, Native child welfare practice, socio-cultural ecology theory in family and community systems and case management. A necessary component to the curriculum is the historic political legislative and policy relations, which have defined and continue to have impact upon current socio-economic and political rights of Aboriginal populations.

Important and unique as a teaching and learning method is the incorporation of interaction activities with cultural relevance. Holistic healing practices expose students to the role worldviews, values, beliefs, and practices play in cultural based strategies. Additional benefits to students are the insights provided by participating in a process that examines culturally related perceptions of psychological growth and wellness. Finally, such experiential based cultural practices create



opportunities for students to explore their own self-cultural awareness. Particularly relevant to this process is that such cultural based practices act as positive reinforcement in the development of cultural identity and serve to promote Aboriginal healing strategies as a source of interpretative balance, interpersonal renewal and community aspiration.

### **Native Social Work Journal**

Launched in 1997, the Native Social Work Journal is a scholarly and community-based publication committed to the preservation, revitalization and promotion of the expanding field of Native and Indigenous social work knowledge, theories and practices. Both academic and community-based researchers and practitioners have contributed articles representative of their communities, their research and frameworks for best practice with Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, Métis and Inuit groups as well as other International Indigenous groups. This journal aims to increase the volume and dissemination of mainly Native authorship and to increase the accessibility of Native and Indigenous social work scholarship. This journal provides tools for practitioners, academics, social workers, communities and others engaged in Native and Indigenous social work activities. The Native social work journals are available via print-based and online. <https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/dspace/handle/10219/378>

### **Field Education**

The main objectives of Field Education are to impart to its graduates the ability to apply professional social work methods and approaches in a manner that is culturally appropriate to Aboriginal people.

Field Education involves the establishment of field placement opportunities in Native communities. A practicum setting provides the student an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills learned in an actual practice setting. It is a planned and supervised learning experience for a 3<sup>rd</sup> year or a 4<sup>th</sup> year student, which fulfils the practicum requirements.

A Native Human Services Field Education Manual has been published to guide the students, the field instructor and the faculty consultants in the field practicum process. The manual is based on traditional Native teachings.

## **Distance Education**

The distance component of the Native Human Services Programme is offered on a part-time basis through **ENVISION**: Laurentian University's Distance Education Program. All NSWK courses are alternated each year and require professional year acceptance into the programme.

For specific information on the Native Human Services Programme contact the Native Human Services Honours Bachelor of Social Work Programme at:

Phone: (705) 675-1151 ext. 5082

Fax: (705) 675-4817

Website: <http://www.laurentian.ca/content/program/native-human-services/overview>

## FOREWARD

I recently had the opportunity to participate in several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings that are taking place across the country. Reconciliation is an interesting concept to ponder. The TRC Commissioners, Justice Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild invite the public and ceremonialize honorary witnesses to attend and hear the stories of Residential School survivors. Witnessing, in the words of Judith Herman (1997) involves “remembering and telling the truth about horrible events [as] prerequisites for both the restoration of the social order and the healing of individual victims” (p.1). In the aftermath of Canada’s colonial programs, truth telling is essential for validating Indigenous experiences. We live in a social climate where a high level of indifference exists towards the unacceptable socio-economic disparities facing Aboriginal people and that indifference serves to perpetuate the status quo through silence.

Writing and speaking out, on the other hand, have been taken up as strategies for resistance to colonization on multiple fronts<sup>1</sup> including education (Freire 1970; LaRoque 1975), history (Cardinal 1969, Campbell 1973), thought (Deloria 1969, 1995, 1999; Alfred 1999, Ermine 1995; Battiste 2000; Grande 2004, Cannon & Sunseri 2011), research (Smith 1999; Denzin 2003; Brown & Strega 2005; Wilson 2009), and literature (Fife 1998; Harjo & Bird 1997; Anderson 2001). Writing as an act of resistance to colonization forms the substance of critical pedagogy and conscientization; necessary conditions for decolonizing approaches to social work pedagogy and practice. Conscientization involves “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 170 p.3). As these articles show, we draw upon western theories and paradigms from generalist social work, however, we analyze them through a critical Indigenous lens to first challenge cognitive imperialism and disrupt hegemonic and normative assumptions that may be damaging to Indigenous people, and secondly, to make the necessary adaptations to them to ensure their cultural relevance and fit for our nations. Hence, we are engaging in critical consciousness in the liminal space that Denzin refers to as “Social Work in the Seventh Moment” defined as a time of breaking with past narratives (Denzin 2002) in order to aid and abet transformation of the conditions of oppression. Three of the articles in this issue outline Indigenous based research projects with allied colleagues, examining issues of relationship building and cross cultural collaborations while a fourth

challenges prevailing child welfare approaches that blame Indigenous mothers for losing their children rather than appropriately accounting for structural conditions of inequality. A poignant article written by a student emphasizes cultural competence as a necessary condition for effective social work practice. Of the last two articles, one outlines a Masters program that draws upon the cultural wisdom of Elders as a central feature of the Indigenous pedagogical frame while the other articulates the key concept that traditionally grounded “wise” social work practices stem from the knowledge of the grandparents and knowledge keepers, and cannot be learned like regular theory. Rather, wise practices require personal healing and experiential insight. Lastly, a brief review of Leanne Simpson’s (2011) book “Dancing on Our Turtle’s back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence” is a welcome review because the reviewer reminds us that this book is one among many relevant Indigenous texts in other disciplines such as Indigenous studies that can inform social work theory and practice.

The writings contribute to the body of emerging work that reminds us, in the words of Saul Alinsky (1971) that reconciliation is not about accepting that one side gets and keeps all the power and the other side becomes reconciled to it (p.13), rather, reconciliation is about reclaiming voice and asserting indigenous epistemological frameworks (Lawrence 2011) as strategies for reconciling our agency as peoples of integrity with prevailing post-colonial conditions. These writings articulate aspects of our current Indigenous social work realities and contribute important voices to new critiques, paradigms, and practices through Indigenous and allied eyes. These articles provide a welcome contribution “to acts of reclaiming, reformulating, and reconstituting indigenous cultures and language...to the struggle to become self-determining” (Smith 1999, p. 142 cited in Denzin 2003, p.1).

### **All My Relations.**

#### **Raven Sinclair (Otiskewapiwskew)**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work University of Regina  
(Saskatoon)

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<sup>1</sup> *The works here referenced reflect a small fragment of the large body of excellent works available.*

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## **INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**Boozhoo; Aanii; Wachiya; Sago; Tansi;  
Kia Ora; Kwe Kwe; Bonjour; Greetings**

There are an increasing number of articles written by Indigenous and First Nations authors about their worldviews, cultures, research and ways of being and knowing in relation to Indigenous theories and pedagogies. As a result, their experiences, philosophies and approaches emphasize the increasing borders for understanding the importance, value and rightful place of Indigenous theories and pedagogies in research, teaching and practice. Additionally, non-Indigenous authors are also writing messages of encouragement and support for Indigenous theories and pedagogies and highlight ways for non-Indigenous practitioners/teachers to reframe a worldview that incorporates Indigenous worldviews in a “good and respectful way”.

The articles in this Journal reflect reclamation and integration of traditions and culture; relevant Indigenous research methodologies; confronting colonization, racism and oppressive systems; reframing practices for non-Indigenous practitioners/teachers, uplifting individuals and communities; and best practice as it relates to Indigenous communities in their contexts. These articles combine a rich cultural treasure trove of Indigenous specialized knowledge and skills and respectful ways for working in Indigenous communities.

- The first article by Dr. Shelly Johnson describes how the “failure to protect” concept holds assaulted mothers accountable by child protective authorities because their children are unintended victims or witnesses to their mother’s experiences of intimate partner violence. Often these children are removed and placed in foster care where extreme abuses occur. The author highlights that the “failure to protect” concept has become the largest and most often substantiated (78% of cases) child maltreatment category in Canada as it pertains to Aboriginal children. Johnson offers best practice ideas for confronting systems and advocating for better ways in which Aboriginal children and mothers can be protected and supported.

- The second article by Herbert Nabigon and Annie Wenger-Nabigon conveys ideas of utilizing Aboriginal traditions and how they can be integrated alongside mainstream treatment approaches. Their overarching message is to promote “wise practices” that are both effective and culturally safe.
- The third article by Susan Manitowabi and Dr. Denise Gauthier-Frohlick share their research findings on the effectiveness of Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval for healing. Their article describes best practices ideas for effective research partnerships with Aboriginal healers and traditional practitioners. They describe their journey as researchers and share what they learned.
- Dr. Sheila Cote-Meek, Kathy Dokis-Ranney, Lissa Lavallee and Dawn Wemigwans conducted a workshop for young Aboriginal women. They describe the workshop they developed which focused on building leadership capacity and the utilization of culturally-based activities and creative arts. Their article portrays how Aboriginal culture and creativity are strengthening pedagogies for teaching young Anishinaabe-Kwe.
- Joan Sanderson describes the positioning of Elders and traditions as a foundational teaching base for a Master of Aboriginal Social Work Program. Sanderson highlights the traditional pedagogies that Elders bring to an academic context and how their teachings strengthen individuals, families and communities.
- The sixth article by authors Natalie Clark, Michelle Reid, Julie Drolet, Patrick Walton, Joanna Peirce, Grant Charles, Dr. Richard Vedan, Miriam Samuel, Nadine Mathews, Susan Burke and Mike Arnouse describes their action research project experiences that were set across five university/community sites from British Columbia to India. The authors argue for an Indigenous intersectionality framework as an important component of reconciliation within social work field education. They convey that Indigenous knowledge combined with social justice analyses are important features for social work and human services programs.
- The seventh article by Erin Vinkle challenges the social work profession to incorporate culturally competency models to train non-



Indigenous social workers to work more respectfully and competently with Aboriginal peoples. Vinkle explains how the perpetuation of oppressive government policies and legislation act as roadblocks toward Aboriginal peoples' lives. She believes that the responsibility of those who design and implement social work programming within Canadian universities need to be more inclusive to the specific and cultural needs necessary to accurately assess those whose lives they may affect.

- The last article by Tara Williamson is a book review by Leanne Simpson's *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*. Williamson reports on why this book can be an important contribution to the field of community development and organizing as it focusses on Indigenous ways of thinking, knowing and how that relates to mobilizing Indigenous communities.

All these authors assist to enrich the breadth and depth of Indigenous theories and pedagogies as they relate to practice and research. They provide faculty, practitioners and students with more examples of what is happening in the field of social work and Indigenous environments. These authors convey examples of their creativity, responsibility and vision for best practice skills and knowledge when working with or learning about Indigenous peoples.

### ***Acknowledgement:***

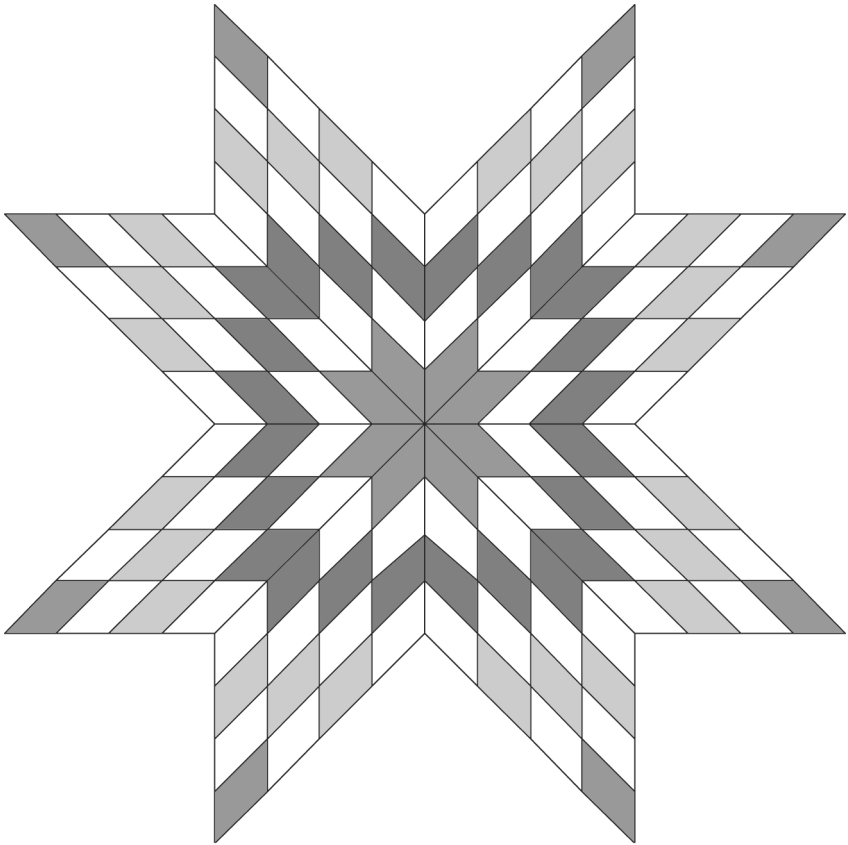
As the Editor, I am grateful for all those who have contributed to the publication of this journal. I would like to thank the authors of each of the articles in this edition who have devoted their time and knowledge in preparing their manuscripts. Your involvement, commitment and work in the area of Indigenous education endorse the rightful place of Indigenous ways of being and knowing. Thank you for your contributions to the field of Indigenous theories and pedagogies.

This Journal is peer-reviewed and therefore requires the support and commitment by internal and external reviewers. Many of the reviewers are trailblazers in the Indigenous field, whether it is research, teaching and/or practice. I acknowledge your leadership and contribution to the field of Indigenous social work education. Thank you for reading and thoughtfully editing the manuscripts for this journal.

Chi Miigwetch to Cheryle Partridge for the opening prayer and to Doris Debassige for allowing us to use your poem for this journal. Thank you to Dr. Raven Sinclair for your messages of insight and wisdom conveyed in the Foreward. Thank you also to Freda Recollet for your administrative and technical support. We are always grateful for the artistic and inspirational work by Dr. Leland Bell and acknowledge you for the cover artwork.

I hope that the ideas and messages conveyed by the authors in this journal inspire you, inform you, confirm your practice and add to research, theory and pedagogies in the area of Indigenous social work education.

**Kia ora Dr. Taima Materangatira Moeke-Pickering, Editor**



# Failing to protect and provide in the “*best place on earth*”: Can Indigenous children in Canada be safe if their mothers aren’t?

---

Dr. Shelly Johnson (Mukwa Musayett)  
University of British Columbia

## **Respectful Indigenous<sup>1</sup> protocol and context**

Adherence to respectful Indigenous protocol guides me to locate myself as a Saulteaux woman and to acknowledge the traditional owners of the unceded Coast Salish and Secwepemc (pronounced SHE-WEP-muh) territories upon which I am a visitor. The Secwepemc Cultural Education Society (2007) states that for over 10,000 years the Secwepemc Nation occupied 145,000 square kilometers in what is now known as the south central interior of British Columbia (B.C). I am descended from the traditionally matrilineal Keeseekoose First Nation on the plains of what is now known as east-central Saskatchewan; an urban-based, heterosexual, able-bodied mother, grandmother, wife, social worker and Indigenous feminist academic. Since time immemorial my ancestors lay buried in our lands now known as Canada; indeed my ancestors are our lands. I do not self-identify as a Canadian, although the Canadian passport bearing my English name tells a different story and provides one example of fundamental and conflicting stories that continue to challenge Indigenous identity, citizenship and knowledge.

## **Indigenous perspective and worldview**

I identify my Indigenous perspectives “biases” and worldview at the outset of this article. Indigenous perspectives bring important interpersonal and human dimensions to this article in ways that positivist perspectives cannot. This commitment to transparency supports

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Indigenous, First Nations, Indian, Metis, Inuit, Aboriginal are used interchangeably as appropriate to identify the original peoples of Canada; regardless of where they live in Canada and regardless of whether they are “registered” under Canada’s *Indian Act*.

Indigenous resistance strategies, and personal struggles for self-determination as a critical step to be free from oppression. Politically, it links research and writing efforts to Indigenous struggles to set Indigenous agendas. Further, it encourages non-Indigenous Canadians to consider their privilege that was acquired at the expense of Indigenous peoples and Canada's occupation of unceded Indigenous lands in what is now known as B.C. Strategically it privileges Indigenous voices which are needed to counter the overwhelming amount of seemingly unjustified non-Indigenous voice in academic research and writing (Rigney, 1997; Wilson, 2008). Finally it rejects Canada's determination to "kill the Indian in the child" (Harper, 2008; John 2010) and supports Indigenous efforts to "put the Indian back in the child".

This article privileges Indigenous voices, experiences and stories as one way to challenge the Canadian child welfare concept and worldview that is imbedded in "failure to protect" policies and practices". The "failure to protect" concept is one in which assaulted mothers are held accountable by child protective authorities because their children are unintended victims or witnesses to their mother's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV). It is a relatively recent issue in the child welfare literature, despite the fact that research concludes that "failure to protect" is the largest and most often substantiated (78% of cases) child maltreatment category in Canada (Trocmé, Knoke, Fallon & MacLaurin: 2009). Typically, child protection responses to IPV concerns, where the child is in the home, are directed at the assaulted women, who are viewed as having failed to protect their children from witnessing IPV, while the typically male perpetrators of violence are essentially ignored (Strega, 2006). This article identifies Indigenous child welfare stories that subject a disproportionate number of Indigenous women to Canada's "failure to protect" policies and practices as a result of their own IPV victimization, and contributes to the over-representation of Indigenous children in Canadian child protection systems.

I recognize that challenges to Canada's official child welfare stories about "inherent Indigenous deficit", and transparency about my Indigenous worldview, may mean that my objectivity may be questioned by some that seemingly have not needed to justify their own non-Indigenous worldview. I argue that Euro-western inherent bias exists and

is unacknowledged in every level of mainstream Canadian child protection services including within the “failure to protect” policies and practices. This lack of acknowledgement is evident to Indigenous children that were forced to enter Canadian child welfare systems as a result of their mother’s IPV experiences, the resultant gendered child protection investigations, mother blaming and lack of child protective worker engagement with violent fathers. I argue that changes are needed to stop gendered child welfare interventions that blame assaulted Indigenous mothers for IPV “failure to protect” investigations, and fail to hold violent partners and Canada accountable for actions that place Indigenous children at risk. As a result, I have come to believe, as do other Saulteaux, Cree, Maori and Koori academics, that subjectivity is a more honest position and leave it to others to consider the validity and legitimacy of my arguments (Kovach 2009; Rigney 1997; Smith 1999; Wilson 2008).

IPV against Indigenous women must be set against the larger social and economic context of historical and contemporary violence, oppression, rape, invasion of lands and cultural genocide enacted by Canada against generations of Indigenous peoples. I argue that the time for transformational child welfare, criminal justice and educational policy and practice change is now. Child welfare efforts and judicial sanctions to separate “at-risk” Indigenous children from Indigenous mothers that are not “safe” due to IPV experiences, while essentially ignoring the perpetrators of violence, mirrors Canada’s actions to ignore its own intersectional violence against Indigenous peoples and withhold that reality from Canadian educational kindergarten to grade 12 populations. None are acceptable actions that will stop violence against Indigenous women and children. Finally, I offer an Indigenous decolonizing, feminist, critical and anti-oppressive, intersectional analysis of the issues to provoke child welfare, criminal justice and educational policy and practice changes.

This article advocates for the development of effective, culturally relevant Indigenous forms of social work practice and restorative justice options. It rejects the notion that Indigenous ways are inferior to “white-know-it-all-ways” (Secwepemc activist Evelyn Camille, personal communication, February 3, 2011) and that solutions to this issue can only come from non-Indigenous worldviews and processes. Instead it draws on Indigenous knowledges, stories and ways of being to point us on our ways forward.

The historical, political, social, cultural and economic context of Indigenous women and children is fundamentally different from that of the descendants of settler societies in that today Indigenous women and children face multiple and intersectional forms of personal, gendered, historical and structural violence in Canada. We are descended from traditional Indigenous communities and a worldview that depended on wisdom of Elders and others to act as lawyer, judge and jury to reconcile matters of harm done to others. Social work policies and practices, practitioners, lawyers and social justice advocates must understand the implications of this fundamental difference. If they cannot, it will render their practice and the social work profession too dishonest to offer theoretical, policy, research or practice help to Indigenous women and children.

***Understanding the “failure to protect” from an Indigenous agency perspective***

Too many times Aboriginal children are not safe because their mothers are not safe. Unlike other international jurisdictions, there is no specific “failure to protect” clause identified in the BC child welfare legislation. Rather, the “failure to protect” non-clause rationale is embedded in the legislation and left open to mainstream professional social work interpretation, management and discretion. This creates tensions for Indigenous social workers who practice from an Indigenous worldview perspective. Sections 13 (1)(c),(h) and (l) of the *BC Child, Family and Community Service Act* (1996) place a disproportionate amount of blame and judgement against assaulted Indigenous women for failing to protect their children (Strega, 2006). These sections identify that a social worker delegated under the legislation and the judiciary has the power to assess whether or not a child needs protection in the following circumstances:

- (c) if the child has been, or is likely to be, physically harmed, sexually abused or sexually exploited by another person and if the child’s parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child;
- (h) if the child’s parent is unable or unwilling to care for the child and has not made adequate provision for the child’s care;
- (l) if the child is in the care of a director or another person by agreement and the child’s parent is unwilling or unable to resume care when the agreement is no longer in force.

The child welfare “failure to protect” rationale has policy and practice implications today in Indigenous BC communities. The case-practice work is problematic for non-Indigenous child protection social workers, many of whom are female, represent mainstream values and beliefs and may feel discomfort and fear engaging with violent Aboriginal men (McGillivray & Comaskey, 2004). It also has practice implications for Indigenous social workers and child welfare organizations in two fundamental ways. First, the legislation belongs to and is developed by representatives of the settler child welfare systems. As strenuously as Indigenous social workers and directors struggle to work within that foreign context, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to “hang culture” on the child welfare legislation and make it “work” for our diverse Indigenous communities. For example, the Gitxsan traditions and customs are different from those of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations as they are from those of the Métis and Inuit Nations. It is impossible to make the argument that a “one size fits all” child welfare legislation, policy and practice will meet the needs of all First Nations, Métis and Inuit families and communities. Secondly, inequitable and inadequate funding formulas are provided to Indigenous child welfare agencies by Canada, particularly to on-reserve communities, and this results in more disruptive measures taken to ensure children’s safety in the absence of available and culturally relevant prevention services (Blackstock, 2007). This issue of Canada’s underfunding First Nations child and family service agencies is the subject of a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal appeal recently won by First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCS) and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) supported by human rights philanthropic organizations such as the Bill Gates Foundation and Canadian Atkinson Foundation.

The differential impact of so much injustice, loss and grief for Indigenous children, families and small communities is complex and overwhelming. To better understand the Indigenous agency perspective and the impact on a BC First Nations community that is currently supporting one of the families of a missing Indigenous mother, I contacted the Executive Director of a First Nations child welfare agency to discuss the issue of IPV “failure to protect” child welfare investigations. Just prior to the Indigenous woman’s disappearance, her children were removed from her care by provincial child welfare authorities for her failure to protect her children from a violent intimate partner. The Executive



Director shared the agency perspective as:

Our women are tired. Too many of them have been murdered and assaulted in too many ways, by too many people and systems for too long. Too many have been forced to carry the burden of caring for our children and healing our Nations for far too long, and they've been doing it alone with virtually no resources. What kind of help and support do they get from us, from the men in our families and communities, from the leadership of our Nations? Not enough...not enough by a long shot. We all know it and we are all guilty of dumping and off-loading our frustration and the responsibility to protect our Indigenous children onto our Indigenous mothers. Then, when they can't do it anymore, what do we do? We all sit back in judgement. We blame them and take away their children. The whole system is sick and oppressive (Director of a First Nations child welfare agency in BC, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

The whole system is sick and oppressive when the societal response is to off-load the responsibility to primarily care for and protect Aboriginal children onto assaulted Indigenous mothers who may not have access to adequate law enforcement protection, timely criminal justice measures that effectively protect women and children, or culturally sensitive resources to keep themselves or their children safe. It is sick and oppressive to hold Indigenous mothers solely accountable to deal with violent partners, or question why she does not "simply leave" violent partners, despite research that demonstrates that separation from violent partners sharply increases the likelihood that men will kill their former partners. Recent research by Bala, Jaffe and Crooks (2007, p. 17) notes that approximately 50% of women killed by intimate partners were murdered in the first two months after separation and 87% were killed within the year. Understanding these risks puts assaulted mothers in the difficult position of being forced to stay with a violent partner and be subjected to additional violence, fleeing a violent partner and fearing for her life, fleeing a violent partner and fearing that he may win unsupervised access to her children and may harm her and her children during the course of that access, or risk having her children become the subject of a "failure to protect" investigation

by child protective authorities. These are isolating and horrific options for any woman to have to contemplate, and are particularly troubling for Indigenous women who experience intersectional oppressions including living in a racist, hostile and gendered society.

***For whom BC is the “best place on earth”***

Since time immemorial Indigenous peoples thrived, lived and continue to live on the lands now known as B.C. Between 2001 and 2011, the governing BC settler provincial neo-Liberal Party branded BC as the “best place on earth”. Since October 2011, the provincial government has quietly changed its international brand to “where Canada starts”. Apparently, unpacking BC as the “best place on earth” meant dismantling for whom this might be true and deciding that it was not the “best place on earth” for all that live on these primarily unceded Indigenous lands. From an Indigenous perspective, given the high levels of Indigenous poverty, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and over-representation of Indigenous children in the B.C. child welfare system, the provincial slogan had to change to one more credible and defensible.

Unpacking the nonsense of the “best place on earth” premise means questioning historical and contemporary provincial B.C. child welfare, criminal justice and educational policies and systems. It means asking if they are meant to stop violence against Indigenous women, address the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems and Indigenous men in justice systems or if they are meant to maintain the status quo, settler surveillance and control over Indigenous peoples and lands. If they were meant to support Indigenous peoples then we would be “fixed”, “healed” and “violence free” by now, wouldn’t we? We would know that because the Indigenous women and children would live in a safe and socially just society, sexualized and racialized violence against Indigenous women would not be tolerated. We would know reconciliation because Indigenous children would not be over-represented in child protection and justice systems, Indigenous nations would not be impoverished in our own lands and the provincial education system would include Indigenous knowledge throughout its curriculum. There is much work yet to be done.

### *Traumatized Indigenous Women and Children*

This article emerged from my 2011 Indigenist doctoral study (Johnson: 2011) that is the first to enter the contested space that is the unique educational site of traumatized Urban Indigenous children in Canadian child protection systems. It identifies the historic, political, socio-legal, legislative, financial and jurisdictional wrangling and impediments to their academic and traditional Indigenous educational success. Specifically, this study explores the intersectionality of educational and child protection issues identified in the literature and personal experiences of 29 urban Indigenous former children in Canada's child protection system and representatives of two Urban Indigenous delegated child protection agencies. The research participants claim Indigenous membership or ancestry in fifty-two First Nations and Métis communities and either grew up on, or are currently living on, traditional Coast Salish territories in the Urban communities of Victoria and Vancouver, BC.

The results of this study link the educational outcomes of traumatized Urban Indigenous children to a strategic intersectional approach that accounts for social determinants such as a violent gendered and racist child protection, educational and colonial history. The enforced relocation of many Urban Indigenous peoples, and enforced constructions of Urban Indigenous children's socio-cultural and political identities into non-Indigenous families and institutions was also considered. Recommendations asserted by the Urban Indigenous participants, gathered through fifteen one-to-one interviews and two talking circles, are synthesized from the data as necessary components of culturally competent social work and educational legislation, policies and services for the burgeoning Urban Indigenous population in Canada.

This article discusses how the collective systemic "failure to protect" Indigenous children from witnessing IPV (either in their own families or in foster families remunerated by the Canadian state) is interconnected to the "failure to provide" Aboriginal child welfare agencies and communities with adequate resources to protect Aboriginal children differentially affect Aboriginal children, youth and families (Blackstock, 2010) and Métis populations. Their experiences must be set within the intersectional systemic context of the larger issues of violence against, and

intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and against Indigenous mother’s and grandmother’s experiences with violence in particular (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2010). It also became increasingly evident that this article must also speak to the topic of abuse and violence on Indigenous men (UBCIC, 2007) and fathers (Ball & George, 2006).

The film, *No Turning Back* (National Film Board of Canada, 1996), makes an important point that Indigenous men that perpetrate violence against Indigenous women and children were victims of abuse and violence in the federal residential schools, provincial foster care systems, and the infamous “sixties scoop”. Addressing the violence arising from Indigenous men’s experiences continues to be compounded by a lack of culturally appropriate programs and difficulty accessing relevant, effective services. State violence against defenseless children is no excuse for Indigenous male violence against Indigenous women and children and is framed by one Mohawk scholar (Alfred 1999, p. 25) as “men bear a special guilt. Many have added to Native women’s oppression by inflicting pain on their wives, daughters, mothers and sisters...rage is externalized, and some cowards take out their frustration on women and children rather than confronting the real (and still dangerous) oppressor”.

Canada has apologized to the survivors of the residential school project (Harper, 2008) for abuses suffered there and is settling the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history with the survivors (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2011), however, it is important to stress that the individual compensation amounts are minuscule compared to the enormity of loss and pain suffered by so many survivors and their families. To date, the government has not acknowledged publicly or apologized for harm and trauma caused to Indigenous children in Canada’s child protection system, however that day is coming. According to Okanagan Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, who was raised in B.C.’s foster care system:

“The difference is when children were taken from a community, they went as a group—brothers and sisters and cousins,” he said. “When children are taken into care, they go alone. It’s a far more traumatic experience in that regard. They were denied complete

exposure to our language and culture. And we don't come home for Christmas and holidays. In many ways, it's the untold story" (Pablo: 2008, p. 1).

On May 30, 2011 Sharon Russell, a Gitksan First Nations woman, filed a class action suit in the Supreme Court of BC against the Government of Canada on behalf of Aboriginal British Columbians who were removed from their families as children by provincial welfare authorities.

The law suit alleges that between 1962 and 1996 the federal government negligently delegated Indian child welfare services to the Province of BC, ignored its obligations to Aboriginal children, took no steps to prevent the children from losing their Aboriginal identity and the opportunity to exercise their Aboriginal and treaty rights when they were placed in foster homes and adopted by non-Aboriginals (CNW Group, 2011).

This BC class action suit is similar to one filed by Marcia Martel in Ontario in 2010 that subsequently received court approval to proceed. In both cases, Indigenous women are taking leadership roles to hold Canada to account for its "failure to protect" Indigenous children and signaling that their patience and wait for justice is over despite the fact that Indigenous children are continuing to enter the child welfare and criminal justice systems at increasing rates. The next section will discuss the impact of the "failure to protect" policy on Indigenous youth once they are forced to enter, and must live inside, the BC child welfare system.

### ***Telling the stories of Indigenous youth harmed by the "failure to protect" policies***

A total of 29 participants (15 Indigenous former youth in care in B.C. and 14 Indigenous agency representatives) contributed to my 2011 doctoral research project. The impact and limitations of the "failure to protect" policies became immediately apparent in their stories, and one interviewee explained how his placement in the child protection system was triggered by violence against his mother and sister.

My Mom got in a relationship with a man when I was about 10 and she became somewhat stable. But he had problems. He was a logger and an alcoholic and really violent. He always told my Mom if she ever left him, he would hurt one of her kids. She did finally leave him. He’d go away to a logging camp & come back with pockets full of money and get drunk. My Mom got tired of that and left him. My sister was home and he got a gun and killed her. My life really plummeted after that. I dropped out of school and ended up on the streets in Vancouver – very, very angry. The guy who shot my sister only got 4 years in jail because he was drunk. He pled guilty to manslaughter. So I just gave up on any government systems because there didn’t seem to be a good outcome (Indigenous research participant, 2009).

Disturbing information provided by Indigenous research participants indicates that at times the BC government failed to protect Indigenous youth in its “care;” sometimes even with full knowledge that harm was likely to occur to children in its approved resources. In fact the following four stories testify that at times government “care” subjected Indigenous children to witness violence against foster mothers by their spouses, experience vicarious abuse, violence by older youth in the child protection system and by fellow students. As a result, these Indigenous youth were further traumatized, not safe, or removed from abusive non-Aboriginal foster placements for months or years, lacked advocacy and oversight bodies, and had limited access to culturally relevant counselling, support or safety to recover from the violence witnessed or experienced.

I saw something and I went into the cabin to say, “Hey, Mom and Dad, did you see . . .” and he just hit her [foster mother] and her glasses were on the floor. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to jump off the boat. I didn’t want to talk to either one of them. There was violence...It would make me go inwards. I became very silent, closed (Indigenous participant, 2009).

We went through some abuse. We sued the first foster home I was in. They called it vicarious abuse, because they had two older kids in the home and they were my abusers. They called it vicarious abuse because the foster father had been abusing the older kids. It

came out in the trial that those foster parents had previously lived in Alberta and the Alberta government was so horrified by the way they had taken care of the kids that they sent a letter to BC saying, “Do not allow these people to be foster parents.” Which they ignored because they needed foster parents. The story was that the Mom stabbed one of the foster kids and I think they were giving them Valium as well. One of your questions was, “Did the social worker ever come and visit you?” It wasn’t even the social worker that dropped us off [at the foster home], it was the receptionist. That came out in court (Indigenous research, 2009).

I didn’t know where to fit in. I was really unhappy because I was being [sexually] abused at home [by the foster father] and was having a hard time sharing that with anybody. It was really hard cause I was really unhappy and keeping the secret dominated everything I did. I couldn’t confide in anyone because I was just really angry and lashed out instead. I wasn’t allowed to tell anybody because it would wreck the family. One day he just put his head on my shoulder and said he wasn’t getting the affection he needed from his wife. I said, “I don’t even know how to cook. I don’t know what you’re talking about” (Indigenous participant, 2009).

I got to find out about prejudice. I met my first bully in kindergarten. I got my first slug in the eye by a bully. I know TV programs like the Simpsons, mock and make fun of the bullies, but it was a pretty significant experience for me. There were two significant incidences that took place off school grounds and they both resulted in concussions for me. One was a pretty significant concussion. I was dazed and confused for the remainder of that day (Indigenous participant, 2009).

These examples offer evidence that the “failure to protect” clause and legislation is differentially applied when government is identified as the “child’s parent that is unwilling or unable to protect the child” versus when Indigenous women are.

In 2002, the late Sherry Charlie, a nineteen month-old Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations toddler was murdered by Ryan George, a First Nations male

caregiver under contract to the BC child protection system to provide “care” to the toddler and her three-year-old brother. George had a violent criminal record, and his rages left the toddler dead of 11 broken ribs, severe bruising that was in various stages of healing and three blows to her head (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, CBC, 2006). Both the paramedic that attended the scene and a paediatric physician at the local hospital suspected that the caregiver’s explanation that Sherry was pushed down the stairs by her three-year-old brother did not “ring true” however, they did not report their suspicions to the BC child protection authorities. Despite the pathologist’s report established that Sherry was a “battered child,” four months from the time of her death passed before police launched an investigation. For a total of five months, the BC child protection system would leave Sherry’s three year old brother in the “care” of the real murderer (CBC, 2006). Anger and outrage at the injustice against Sherry, her brother and paternal family members moved me to suggest that the family retain legal counsel to represent them at the February 2006 inquest into Sherry’s murder. I question if such systemic inaction would be tolerated if Sherry had been a Caucasian child from middle or upper class family rather than a First Nations toddler from a poor family.

These examples provide evidence that safety for Indigenous children within the context of child protection systems will remain elusive. For Indigenous women and grandmothers that feel helpless to stop their children’s entry into the child protection system or guilt for their “failure to protect,” these stories may represent a call to action. With a billion dollar budget and infinitely more resources at their disposal, these stories prove that the BC government does not keep Indigenous children safe, either. Worse than government’s inability to keep Indigenous children safe, at times, is their decision to knowingly put vulnerable Indigenous children at risk of harm, additional trauma or death. The question that must be asked is, “Would this be the case if a fraction of the resources gathered from unceded traditional Indigenous lands were allocated to Indigenous women and grandmothers to keep themselves and their children safe?”

Holding Indigenous women accountable to deal with violent partners and a violent society may be expedient from a colonial perspective, but it does not allow for recognition of the complex historical, political, social



and economic dynamics in domestic violence cases in Aboriginal families or communities and the differential ways in which they impact Aboriginal peoples today (UBCIC, 2007). The shocking lack of knowledge and frustration wrought by these complex issues from the perspective of Director's Counsel (a lawyer under contract to provide legal child welfare representation on behalf of the Director of Child Protection in BC) is evident in this comment when he was asked about the "*failure to protect*" clause.

I think the reason we have so many Aboriginal children in care today is because their parents aren't married to each other, they're just living common-law. If they can't commit to each other, how can you expect them to be committed to parenting and raising a child? (BC MCFD Director's Counsel, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

This comment demonstrates many things; however, I will speak to the continuing lack of knowledge regarding the unprecedented levels of violence against Indigenous women, stereotypes and myths that continue to marginalize Indigenous mothers, unabated by people working within child protection and judiciary bodies. This continues despite numerous voices and experiences contained in Indigenous and advocacy reports, recommendations, research and media coverage directed at the Canadian government (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010; National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, 2005; Ontario Native Women's Association & Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2007; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006) the BC government (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2009(b); First Call, 2009; UBCIC, 2007) and its own publications (MCFD, 2010).

In BC, the office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCYBC) publicly experienced its own high profile struggles with government bureaucracies. In 2010, the RCYBC tried to access BC cabinet documents to which it was legally entitled to complete an audit of vulnerable children living with relatives (Vancouver Sun May 18, 2010). The government's refusal to provide the documents to the children's advocate who happens to be a status Indian woman turned into a public dispute that the media characterized as a "personality clash" between two high powered women.

The Representative is a respected former provincial court judge, Harvard Law School educated law professor and Cree woman, Dr. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, and the other was the former MCFD Deputy Minister (and a white South African), Leslie Dutoit. The Representative's office is staffed by a multidisciplinary team, all of whom are focused on ensuring children and youth who receive government services in BC are protected and safe ([www.rcybc.ca](http://www.rcybc.ca)). The Representative repeatedly asked to gain access to provincial government cabinet documents that her office was legally entitled to under the *Representative for Children and Youth Act* (2006). When government bureaucrats refused and threatened to curtail the power of the office of the RCYBC, Turpel-Lafond took the matter to court and won. BC Supreme Court Justice Susan Griffin ruled that the BC Office of the Premier and the MCFD broke the law by refusing to provide Turpel-Lafond with cabinet documents (Vancouver Sun, May 18, 2010). The fact that the Representative is an Indigenous woman at battle with government was not lost on Indigenous peoples in BC. Her court challenge, win, and determination to hold the provincial government to account for their care of vulnerable children were hailed as a victory for Indigenous women and children everywhere, and her leadership is what offers hope and proof that other Indigenous women can do the same on behalf of vulnerable children.

### ***Our way forward***

When I consider how we can move forward with all the complex issues of child welfare, IPV and a seemingly unresponsive criminal justice system, the words of a respected Saulteaux Elder, “Bones”, or John Shingoose, come to me. He cautioned me by saying “MukwaMayett the Creator made you this way and put you in that place for a purpose. When you do those things always ask yourself if they are good for your children and grandchildren. Always remember who you are in your heart. Never pick up something new and leave behind who you are, who we are and what we believe (Saulteaux Elder Bones, personal communication, November, 2006). Another Secwepemc Elder, Mike Arnouse similarly cautioned me to be careful and considerate of what the settlers, or newcomers to our lands know, and what they don't. He always tells me to remember that “We have lived together in this land called Canada for over 500 years as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and yet we still

do not know one another (Elder Mike Arnouse, personal communication, September 1, 2011). Breaking the silence around colonial violence, Indigenous peoples' history and lack of successes to hold Canadian child welfare and criminal justice systems to account for gendered, racist and unfair practices are other matters that we need to pursue together. It is to that end that I offer some strategies for moving forward in the best interests of our Indigenous children.

***Learn the history of Indigenous peoples from the perspective of Indigenous women and children***

Métis scholar Emma LaRocque (1996, p. 14) argues that:

“We cannot assume that all Aboriginal traditions universally respected and honoured women...It should not be assumed, even in those original societies that were constructed along matriarchal lines, that matriarchies necessarily prevented men from oppressing women. There are indications of male violence and sexism in some Aboriginal societies prior to European contact and certainly after contact”.

LaRoque's (1996) Métis perspective on the oppression of women living in original matriarchal Indigenous societies differs from that of some First Nations women leaders in B.C. One contributory factor may be because European influences on traditionally matriarchal Indigenous societies in B.C. is a much more recent phenomenon than for traditionally matriarchal Indigenous nations in the rest of Canada. Significant numbers of non-Indigenous peoples only began to arrive in B.C. in the 1850s, a very short 160 years ago and it is in B.C. that Indigenous life prior to contact is most recent. Some Indigenous women from traditionally matriarchal societies within B.C. contend that until contact with European societies, Indigenous women were not treated as second-class citizens in their own territories (Johnson, 2001). Rather they believe, as some Mohawk women do, that Indigenous women from their original matriarchal nations were integral rights-holders with respect for their balanced and interdependent roles to bring forth life, care for and educate children and contribute to the leadership of social, spiritual, cultural and governance issues in their communities (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011; Johnson 2001). Additionally,

Indigenous women from matriarchal B.C. First Nations were economically entitled to land, to hunt and fish, to trap-line holdings, and responsible for food gathering, processing and distribution and the collection and making of medicines (Johnson: 2001). These Indigenous women believe that European influences disrupted Indigenous women roles as guardians and caretakers of the land, water, resources and traditional societies. These ideological impositions by primarily male European missionaries and foreign government representatives saw the unparalleled power, honor and equality that Indigenous women held in their traditional societies, relative to European women at the same time in history, and sought to destroy it. The newcomers recognized that they had to break the power of Indigenous women, create a “divide and conquer” mentality and disrupt Indigenous social organizations in order to gain control of rich Indigenous lands and resources (Johnson, 2001; Lawrence, 2004).

To achieve this goal, the newcomers deliberately enacted successive waves of violence sustained through legal, political, social, economic and germ warfare against Indigenous peoples, primarily through the influence of non-Indigenous explorers, fur traders, gold seekers, missionaries and settlers which resulted in widespread death in Indigenous communities (Muckle, 1999).

Violence against Indigenous women continues today through the imposition of foreign government systems and successive pieces of draconian colonial legislation such as the *Indian Act* (1985) that continues to discriminate against Indigenous women and our descendants. For example, in 1985, Bill C-31 amended the *Indian Act* to attempt to remove discrimination against women in the Indian Act registration provisions. Since then, all “registered” Indians have been subject to the “second generation cut-off rule” which occurs as a result of two successive generations of parenting with non-Indians of either sex. However, the Indian Act’s gender discrimination was not fully remedied by Bill C-31.

Implementation of the new Bill C-3, the *Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act* still will not confer registration status on some Aboriginal women and their descendants. For example, grandchildren who trace their Aboriginal descent through the maternal line will continue to be denied status if they were born prior to September 4, 1951, although

grandchildren who trace their Aboriginal descent through the male line will not (Day & Greene, 2010).

This race-based act still has the power to define who was, and was not, is, and is not, an Indigenous person and displaces the:

community based and self-identification approach to determining membership, which included descent, marriage, residency, adoption and simple voluntary association with a particular group...and implemented patrilineal descent that was the least common principle of descent in Aboriginal societies, but through these laws, became predominant (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] 1996:26).

Today violence and colonizing efforts against Indigenous women continue to be enacted and enforced in full view of the Canadian public through myriad Canadian colonial pieces of legislation, bureaucracies, policies and practices. Examples of such colonial policies include Canada's *Indian Act* (1985), seven billion dollar budget to support the Canadian federal department of 'Indian and Northern Affairs'(INAC, 2011), one billion dollar budget to support the BC provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development [MCFD] where more than fifty-four percent of all children in foster care are Indigenous children (MCFD, 2010a), and approximately eighty-one million dollar budget for the BC provincial Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation [MARR] (MARR, 2011). These are just a few examples of the level of funding Canada controls in its racist and oppressive attempts to silence Indigenous women and direct Indigenous life from cradle to grave for status or registered Indians, politically separate and exert control over non-status, First nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. There will never be a Canadian federal Department of Japanese or Iranian Affairs or provincial Ministry of Irish or Italian Relations and Reconciliation because the rich lands and resources Canada seeks to own, manage and benefit from are (or were) Indigenous lands and resources. With few exceptions such as Treaty 8 in the north-eastern part of BC, the 14 Peace and Friendship Treaties on Vancouver Island and the lower mainland, and the Nisga'a Treaty, BC's vast provincial territory remains largely unsettled by treaties. Canada does not seek treaties with immigrant populations to Canada such as Pakistani,

Ukrainian or Chinese-Canadians (as examples of settler communities) rather Canada seeks treaties with the original owners of the land. It is important for social work students, practitioners and social justice advocates to understand this history from Indigenous perspectives and how these fundamental influences impact Indigenous peoples and women in particular. It will also guide helpers to understand the magnitude of the theft of Indigenous resources by Canada's governments and bureaucracies to manage the affairs of the country, fund these bureaucracies and develop complex relationships with multi-national corporations to extract additional resources from unceded lands (Neu&Therrien: 2003).

Given these larger colonial societal self-interests, it is sobering to consider what it will take to ensure that BC is safe for Indigenous women and children. Indigenous women and children are not from somewhere else or another country. Sovereign and diverse cultural and linguistic Indigenous nations called these lands “home” centuries before the 1867 establishment of Canada (Dickason & Newbigging, 2010). Today it is our home despite the fact that Canada has the power to organize the land into ten provinces and three territories governed by a parliamentary democracy with a British sovereign as its constitutional monarch and where French and English are the “official” languages.

***Connect the failure to protect to what makes Indigenous women and children vulnerable in BC...and to what might make a difference***

Growing up within a hunting community means that I am familiar with a hunting term used to describe the time of year when a particular species is allowed to be hunted according to colonial law. It's called “open season”. It is the term that immediately springs to mind when the media reports horrific acts perpetuated against Indigenous women in BC and Canada, both inside and outside child welfare, criminal justice and educational colonial institutions. It is also the term that springs to mind when I consider the stories and experiences of Indigenous women and children involved in IPV and child welfare “failure to protect” investigations. Given the current lack of options and choices available to them, there is no safe place to which they can run, hide or use to protect themselves. Examples of these atrocities include over 580 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, of which over twenty-eight

percent disappeared from BC alone and over eighty-eight percent are mothers and grandmothers (NWAC, 2010). The term stays in my mind when the media reports another missing Aboriginal woman connected to the BC Highway of Tears along route 16 west of Prince George to Prince Rupert (Vancouver Sun May 6, 2011). It resurfaced when Sto:lo First Nations Lieutenant Governor Stephen Point issued an Order in Council establishing the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry in BC on September 27, 2010 to probe why it took police investigators so long to arrest Robert Pickton, the most notorious serial killer in Canadian history. Police suspect Pickton preyed on over four dozen vulnerable Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and lured them from Vancouver's downtown eastside and killed them at his Port Coquitlam, BC pig farm. The inquiry will also review the 2008 decision by the BC Criminal Justice Branch to stop legal proceedings against Pickton because police thought one of his victims was not credible (Vancouver Sun May 5, 2011).

Tragically, too many of their stories illustrate the social and economic inequalities experienced by Aboriginal women and girls, which are directly linked to the impact of colonial policies that dislocated Aboriginal women, families and communities, and result in trauma, violence, as well as circumstances of vulnerability. However, the stories shared by families, communities, and friends also tell us that many missing and murdered women and girls were vulnerable only insofar as they were Aboriginal and they were women (Native Women's Association of Canada 2010: 38).

There is no "magic key" to ensure the safety of Indigenous women in BC and Canada and to ensure they have the resources and support to protect themselves and their children from IPV, structural, gendered, racist violence; it must happen in many sites and many ways. The transformation of social work, criminal justice, and educational policy, practice and research must be guided by diverse Indigenous peoples, communities and nations and based in specific Indigenous cultural knowledges, values, beliefs, ways of knowing and being. Indigenous peoples must lead the transformation process and contribute what we know works in our respective nations while non-Indigenous peoples act as allies and advocates to support that leadership (Archibald, 2008;

Bishop, 2002; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

The removal of at-risk Indigenous children from Indigenous women experiencing IPV and other forms of structural violence is reflective of Canada's denial of Indigenous rights and title, self-government (John, 2010; Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008), intergenerational and intersectional impacts of colonization, racism, murder, rape, assimilation and genocidal attempts by churches and state through the residential school project (Annett, 2010; Grant, 2004; Jacobs & Williams, 2008), child welfare and adoption (Blackstock, 2010; Carriere, 2007; Johnson, 2011; Sinclair, 2009) and criminal justice systems (McGillivray & Comaskey, 2004).

There are ways forward, however. It will begin once Canada and the profession of social work, criminal justice and education have honest discourse with Indigenous peoples and leadership about the harm, blame and violence inflicted on Indigenous women in Canada and the myriad ways that prevents, fails to support and disables Indigenous women from protecting themselves and their children from personal, partner, structural or governmental violence. It depends on the amount of public, international political pressure and reconciliation efforts that can be applied on Canada. Reconciliation can never be achieved by only party to the violence.

There is a role for social workers, educators, political leadership and social justice advocates to garner support in the “court of public opinion” and elsewhere. Change is coming and it is being led through developments such as the restorative justice-focused First Nations Court led by Administrative Cree Judge Marion Buller-Bennett in New Westminster, BC. Indigenous peoples still have not yet reassumed control of the resources needed to fund change and it is true that non-Indigenous peoples dominate and control colonial institutions and systems and have vested interests in maintaining that control. Yet there is hope for the safety of Indigenous women and children, collective learning, healing, reconciliation and ally development possibilities for us all. It is a very big “if” and is dependent on both the willingness of allies to be guided by Indigenous peoples and their leadership and the success of our collaborative actions. Another place to start is by asking Indigenous



peoples, “What can I do to help?,” and then really listening to the answer before beginning to act.

***Work with the political nature of Indigenous decolonizing social work practice***

According to Yellow Bird (2004), the seven goals of decolonizing social work practice are better health, protected spiritual practices, a greater awareness of Indigenous history, language preservation, traditional education techniques, community building and economic development that is respectful of the environment and traditional values. Two of these goals, a greater awareness of Indigenous history and respect for traditional values, must be addressed through a process of truth-telling from Indigenous perspectives. A critical place to begin is by infusing truth-telling in the Canadian child welfare, criminal justice and educational systems. Non Indigenous Canadians must be helped to understand and take action to reconcile what was done to Indigenous communities between a historical time and today. We all must come to terms with what happened between a time when Indigenous women offered leadership, and Indigenous children were holistic and key members in self-sustaining, self-governing, rich and vibrant societies and today where Indigenous women and Indigenous children in child protection systems represent the bottom of a fragmented and marginalized population in every key income, educational, health, safe-housing, labour-force activity and socio-economic indicator that measures child well-being (RCAP, 1996). Influential Indigenous academics (Blackstock, 2010; Lawrence, 2004; Yellow Bird, 2004) argue that it is unrealistic and unwise to expect that the settler systems that have created so much trauma, pain and suffering for Indigenous peoples can now be expected to offer a way forward out of Indigenous intergenerational trauma and violence. Indigenous peoples have come to understand that Canadian systems are developed to maintain and reinforce the status quo and that social work is Eurocentric in its development and, as of today, its goal is not to transform Indigenous realities (Yellow Bird & Gray, 2008, p. 26). While that may be true today, it is difficult to know what tomorrow may bring, and as an Indigenous woman, I believe that the actions that each of us takes today will have implications for our seventh-generation descendants. Seven generations ago some believed that Indigenous peoples were a vanishing race; yet we

are still here, bloodied and bruised by the colonial war that continues to be fought, but we are here.

According to the Seven Fires Ojibway prophecy (Gaikesheyongai, 1994; Simpson, 2008), we are currently living in the Seventh Fire, a time when a new people, the Oshkimaadiziig of the Eighth Fire emerges. It is their responsibility to revive Indigenous languages, philosophies, culture, and ways of knowing and being. Their work is to develop new relationships with other nations by returning to our original instructions. Their work determines the outcome of the Eighth Fire yet it is dependent on other nations to join with us to build a sustainable future based on justice and respect. The Oshkimaadiziig certainly have their work cut out for them because statistics and examples from the research, policy and practice literature demonstrate that safety from intimate partner violence for Indigenous women in Canada is yet to be achieved (Anderson, 2006; Derosier & Neckoway, 2005; Lawrence, 2004; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010; Sinclair, Hart & Bruyere, 2009; Strega, 2006; Wadden, 2008; White, Beavon & Spence, 2007). As an Indigenous person, the Saulteaux Elders' words continue to ring in my ears and hopefully they will resonate with the settler descendants on our lands. As we move forward to search for answers out of these complex and violent times towards reconciliation and peace, each one of us must always ask ourselves if what we are doing is good for our children and grandchildren.

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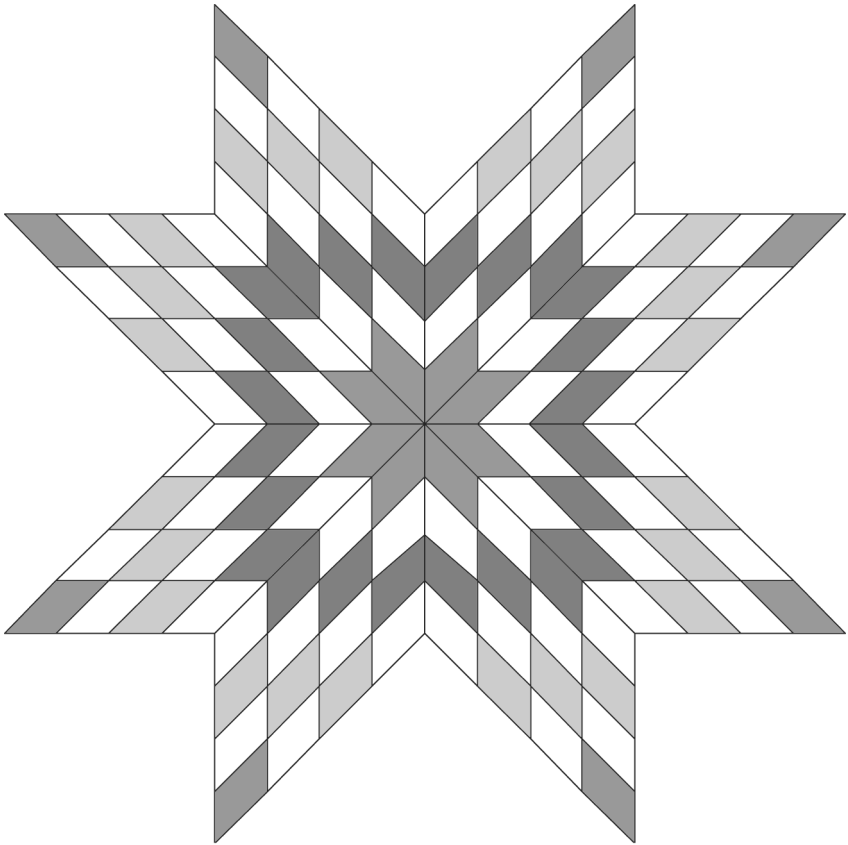
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# “*Wise Practices*”: Integrating Traditional Teachings With Mainstream Treatment Approaches

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## **Abstract**

*This article addresses the integration of traditional wisdom with “mainstream” (medical model) approaches to healing in First Nations communities, and with Aboriginal peoples in off-reserve settings. The “wise practices” concept that emerged from the Canadian Aboriginal Aids Network (Thomas, 2007 as cited in Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010, pp. 390-391) is a “best practices” model for integration of approaches. A wise practices approach facilitates good clinical judgement in complex cases (O’Sullivan, 2005). The Seven Grandfather Teachings and the Cree Medicine Wheel are presented in brief, not as the main focus, but as examples of traditional teachings which can be integrated into some contemporary mainstream theoretical approaches. Cognitive Behaviour Theory and General Systems Theory are used as examples.*

## Introduction

In the current climate of mental health and addictions treatment there is disagreement on the best practices concept. Practitioners using differing theoretical perspectives have conflicting opinions about what constitutes best practice. In working with Aboriginal treatment populations the goal is to create wise practices that are both effective and culturally safe (Smye & Browne, 2002; Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010). Incorporation of traditional healing and other theoretical approaches can potentiate good outcomes (Duran & Duran, 1995; Duran, 2006; Hill & Coady, 2003; McCormick, 2000; McCormick, 2005; Menzies, Bodnar & Harper, 2010; Moodley & West, 2005; Rice, 2005). Contemporary best practices show increasing recognition of the concurrent role of cognition, emotion, relationships, and spirit in healing (Mehl-Madrona, 2007; West, 2005). Integrative approaches are also effective for physical illnesses not remitted by solely using a medical model (Koerner, 2003).

Exploring the concept of “promising practices” is useful for guidance where few standard integrative approaches exist (Dell, Lyons & Cayer, 2010). A more thorough unpacking and envisioning of details on how this can be done is beyond the current scope of this paper. The authors take the stance that exploring the concept of integration of core traditional spiritual strategies and mainstream approaches can stimulate thinking among practitioners regarding their own unique situations. No one format or particular approach can be prescribed or will fit all circumstances. Careful thought must be given to the requirements of each setting, with practitioners taking responsibility for appropriate formulation of applicable integrative strategies.

Traditional healing approaches represented in Medicine Wheel Teachings and Seven Grandfather Teachings (or Seven Sacred Values) (Benton-Banai, 1988; Mawhiney & Nabigon, 2011; Morrisseau, 1998; Nabigon, 2006; Wenger-Nabigon, 2010; Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010) can be used as a framework for applications of the two mainstream approaches the authors have chosen for brief review – Cognitive Behavior Theory (Thomlison & Thomlison, 2011), and General Systems Theory (Andrae, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Practitioners are encouraged to consider choices carefully when integrating approaches. The Elders counsel that reflection

and prayer must go into personal change, and the implications of change must be considered prior to action. It is Spirit who effects change, and the helper’s job is to know and understand practices that can be used within relationships, where healing occurs. When additional training is required, either in traditional practices or mainstream practices, communities should support their workers in gaining the necessary on-going professional upgrades. Sustaining practices of accountability through appropriate supervision should be implemented. No one works well in a vacuum.

### **Critical Analysis –Looking at the Bigger Picture**

The dominant empiricist tradition of science provides the background for much of what happens in contemporary treatment settings, contributing capacity for helping but leaving contemporary Aboriginal life invisible (Menzies, Bodnar & Harper, 2010; Smye & Browne, 2002; Waldram, 2004; Waldram, Herring & Young, 2007; Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010). Critical analysis provides a tool for contextualizing historical and contemporary Aboriginal realities (Pollock, Weaver & Levandosky, 2004). Critical analysis provides a reasoned contextual critique of structural inequities that must be taken into account for wise practices to emerge, and widens the field of responsibility beyond the individualistic structures of the “silos” in many contemporary treatment settings. The constraint of authoritarian hierarchical structural organization does not blend with traditional values, and is a reflection of the dominant society.

The contemporary reality of structural factors perpetuating systemic over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in poverty, ill health, incarceration, in the child welfare systems, etc., is now generally known by any Canadian resident paying attention to the daily news, and reflects the context of many Aboriginal communities across Canada. In Ontario there are 133 First Nations, with approximately 158,395 First Nations people residing in Ontario. This represents about 65 per cent of the total Aboriginal population in Ontario, according to the 2006 Census. About 30 per cent of this population lives on reserves. Approximately 29 per

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Theory’ is not a statement of ‘truth’, and should be understood to mean ‘a statement with some predictive qualities’.

cent of the First Nations people in Ontario are under the age of 15, with only about 58 per cent of youth completing high school. The First Nations unemployment rate in Ontario is about 14 percent, with a labour force participation rate of about 63 per cent. The average personal income is estimated to be \$24,000 per year, with on-reserve First Nations people averaging \$17,000.<sup>2</sup>

This reality exists in the context of a resource rich province where extraction of wealth from traditional territories has long been the norm. Inadequate education and job training opportunities, and communities underserved by health care, housing, and other social services, are not what mainstream Ontario communities would find acceptable. Small, medium and large cities in Ontario could not survive such a disastrous structural situation. What would be considered intolerable by political leaders and the general population is tolerated for First Nations. This reality is an aspect of the context within which lateral violence is generated.

The issue of lateral violence in all First Nations is extreme to a point where it disables healthy families, and too often isolates those who desire to help in a variety of ways. Lateral violence is the manifestation of hierarchical violence distributed horizontally among members of a community which suffers historical and on-going oppression from external dominant state/economic systems (Smye & Browne, 2002). Power imbalances trickle down, and are systemically disproportional. Lateral violence is visible across communities at all levels, disallowing leadership to deal with conflict constructively, fairly, and respectfully. The conclusion of the legacy of physical, social, and spiritual impoverishment can be seen in the depression and despair that so often manifests in communities in various ways. This is a sad state of affairs, and it will take a long time to turn around, but it is only the communities and people themselves who can take on the task of changing this reality. Appropriate relationships with allies from various directions can assist the change process, but no “quick fix” exists via any treatment format.

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<sup>2</sup>Source: Data from Statistics Canada, 2006 Census and INAC Ontario Region. Seven First Nations chose not to participate in the 2006 Census, and three First Nations were incompletely enumerated. [http://www.aboriginalaffairs.gov.on.ca/english/services/datasheets/first\\_nations.asp](http://www.aboriginalaffairs.gov.on.ca/english/services/datasheets/first_nations.asp)

A view of the well-spring of strength in the communities must lead any analysis of the current picture. The generalizations of unemployment and lack of education has exceptions. As an example, the Chippewa's of Rama, and other communities, have a majority of employment, and many communities evidence entrepreneurship contributing significantly to the capacity of that community. Also, many communities support advanced education for their members and on-going training for their workers and community members. Many communities have Elders with strong practices and interventions around all forms of imbalance and harm to self and others. They utilize the Seven Grandfather Teachings, sweat lodges, talking circles, and many different traditional ceremonies, medicines, and good food in their approach to treating disturbances in relationships (Koerner, 2003; Menzies, Bodnar & Harper, 2010; Moodley & West, 2005; Morrisseau, 1998; Nabigon, 2006; Rice, 2005; Smith, 2005; West, 2005). They know that relationship is the key to successful interventions in areas of trouble. Some Elders have treatments for physical disorders such as cancer, diabetes, thyroid problems, hepatitis, and others. All treatments are premised on natural herbs (medicines) and ceremony, and are powerful for many people using these approaches. Natural helpers and community leaders who collaborate with Elders can achieve healing and positive structural solutions.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the Elders, many people who have worked hard to obtain higher education and employment have returned to serve their communities. Youth are encouraged to get education and avoid a lifestyle of addictions. Youth and adults have greater interest in their traditional spiritual ways, and strengthen their identities through learning and practicing their cultures and languages, some even when not identifying with traditional spiritual ways. There is growing understanding of historical trauma, the impact of Residential Schools, and opportunities to participate in healing programs. Mainstream allies contribute to supporting the goals of Aboriginal peoples, and communities are working toward and gaining increased self-governance. A good critical analysis

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<sup>3</sup>An “Elder” is not necessarily a “healer” and vice versa. Each community has its’ own way of designating “Elders”, and natural helpers. Some communities will prefer to rely on other more mainstream approaches.

shows that “the dominant mental health problems for aboriginal people are social in nature, rooted in a long history of oppression and current social conditions” (Smye & Browne, 2002, p. 43). A good critical analysis shows that the picture is bright with hope for change and desire for better futures for Aboriginal peoples.

### **Foundational Structure of Traditional Knowledge**

Traditional knowledge regarding wisdom teachings, sweat lodges, the medicine wheel and pipe, etc., was transmitted and preserved by oral methods, and is referenced in the following quote from *The hollow tree: Fighting addiction with traditional native healing*:

The Grandfathers can be understood in terms of spirit guides who possess all the knowledge of the universe. They are available to everyone. Sometimes they may plant thoughts in our minds to give us direction and guidance. These thoughts always make the utmost sense. Their purpose is to help us in our spiritual evolution. I believe the terms Grandfather and Grandmother were coined eons ago when the traditions were being laid down because they were words that people connected with the wisdom of ages. (Nabigon, 2006, p.89)

The Cree Medicine Wheel has been recognized in the academy as useful in healing work (Mawhiney & Nabigon, 2011). It conveys the principle therapeutic goal of “... [promoting] balance and harmony within individuals and groups of people, including communities, and to assist in taking action to relieve pain in the communities and nations of the world” (p. 22). The Cree understanding of the medicine wheel is similar to other understandings (Benton-Banai, 1988; Morrissette, 1998; Rice, 2005), and provides a circular template with which to understand the problems being faced and the directions for finding solutions. The four quadrants of the medicine wheel cover four aspects of human life – feelings (vision), relationships (time), respect (cognition), and caring (action; physical; spiritual) (p.23), around the core “fire” of the person, or what is considered the central location of healing in the heart. Treatment processes need to consider emotional, cognitive, social, and physical functioning in a spiritual context.

Nabigon (2006) writes:

To take care of the Earth and the community of life we need to remember the teachings of the little boy. He handed all the gifts of knowledge that he received from the Seven Grandfathers to us so that we would know where we stood in the scope of the universe. These Grandfathers implicitly give us direction to resolve the conflicts of our inner demons ...The sacred fire represents the Creator who is inside every human being. Our responsibility is to keep that fire alive (pp.86-87).

For helpers/healers who are grounded in these teachings, it is a natural process to discover what is needed for people to find their identity, balance, and solutions for their problems. With this grounding, any method or technique can be applied if it is in the context of the traditions. With a solid grounding in a spiritual life guided by these teachings, a helper will be able to create appropriate working partnerships. The most complex situations can be addressed comprehensively if the necessary framework is in place. This understanding cannot be handed to someone – it comes through committed personal work on oneself.

### **Brief Review of Cognitive Behavioral and General Systems Theories**

Advances in research in psychology, neuroscience, and social work practice have shown improved understanding of cognitive functioning in human life. Cognitive Behavior Theory (CBT) focuses on the “inclusion of thoughts and beliefs in the determination of clients’ problems and their alleviation” (Thomlison & Thomlison, 2011, p. 77). CBT based therapy techniques are taught and used widely in both mental health and addictions treatment, based on the premise that changing one’s thoughts can lead to emotional and behavioural changes.

General Systems Theory (GST) is a holistic “methodological approach to understanding the world” (Andreae, 2011, p. 243). Over the past 200 years the scientific community has grown in the understanding of systems and how the theory explains environmental and human phenomena in a non-reductionist manner. GST has provided a framework for the mainstream scientific community to understand connectedness, complexity, and



relationship. GST is widely applied in many fields, and is compatible with a holistic understanding of human functioning and healing, particularly in Family Therapy contexts.

The traditional Aboriginal worldview is vastly different from the scientific, capitalistic, modern worldview dominating today's societies. Through the traditional teachings people are guided to understand "the natural laws of balance" (Mawhiney & Nabigon, 2011, p. 27). The Seven Grandfather Teachings of Love, Bravery, Honesty, Wisdom, Respect, Humility and Truth, and the template of the Medicine Wheel Teachings, provide guidance for creating balanced relationships (with people and the natural world). These teachings encompass strategies that address the emotional, cognitive, social and behavioural aspects of life in a systemic fashion. With thought and focus, any helper trained in CBT, or knowledgeable about GST, or Family Systems Therapy, can see how all of this knowledge is already carried by the traditions.

The traditional approach can assist a helper in knowing how to best organize their work. Assessment, treatment planning, therapy strategies, and follow-up care can all be built around the structure of the teachings, and incorporate knowledge, strategies, and techniques from other theoretical positions. GST and CBT approaches are particularly beneficial in providing specific tools to change thought, heal negative emotions, understand things from different viewpoints, and try new behaviors. The traditions give the guidance and support that is necessary for on-going healing and change. They convey a core understanding of a spiritual life. Without Spirit, and personal commitment, it is unlikely that any teaching or any strategy, from whichever direction, will help people attain and maintain balance. The Sacred Circle of the Medicine Wheel, and the Sacred Teachings, encapsulate all the spiritual wisdom required to guide the healing journey, sustain healing relationships, and promote positive change.

### **Wise Practices in Integrating Different Approaches**

Integrating different helping approaches calls for a broad range of knowledge. The terms "eclectic", "braided", or "blended" can describe the practice of drawing on different theoretical approaches. The authors

have used the term wise practices to describe the integration of knowledge in order to provide the best help possible in a given situation. People are encouraged to learn and use terms and practices that fit their own working environment (Nabigon, Hagey, Webster & MacKay, 1999). The goal is to help people help themselves, and to mostly stay out of the way, yet be “on their side” by offering strategies that fit their unique needs.

A traditional understanding of healing implies more than an understanding of holistic health. It flows from knowledge of the inter-relatedness of everything. Health arises from all aspects of life being in right relationship. Sickness arises from disruption, or imbalance. Any method or technique that ignores the foundation of respectful, balance with all aspects of life will have limited benefit. In the long run, what we eat, drink, do, feel, think, believe and intend is part of the wholeness that is the essence of healthy living and right relationships. As long as humans live in disruption of relationships and environments there will be difficulties. People, including helpers, need assistance to turn things in better directions. It is incumbent upon helpers to take responsibility and learn as much as possible from all directions, yet always hold this knowledge in the light of traditional guidance.

When it comes to a consideration of a critical examination of the nature of integration when designing best practices in Aboriginal contexts, it is important to remember that traditional Elders almost never engage in argument over issues of privilege and disadvantage. Stating the obvious is not a customary traditional form of teaching. Leading through example, through sharing wisdom, and through acknowledgment that the winds of change are always moving people along the path of life is the traditional way of promoting healing and change. It is obvious that there are tensions in integration, but it is important to not kill the Spirit of knowledge and growth. Nothing can stop pain except change. Healing is a process, a change process, and pain is inevitable along that path. The practitioners who do the necessary work of helping people and communities to heal must expect to encounter difficulties, and must prepare themselves spiritually to manage their own necessary growth and change. Sometimes integration of two ways can be helpful, but not always. No Elder, or mainstream practitioner, can take away the strength of the process which is not often an easy one, nor should it be expected to be thus. Balance, like

mental health, can be understood to be the ability to hold opposites within the same field at the same time. The greatest wisdom often comes from integrating paradoxical truths. This is a wisdom that must be infused into the hearts of willing helpers if the journey to health is to be realized. There are no simple prescriptions except doing the work that is required by the process.

## Conclusion

Real tradition has substance, and comes from the heart. It is not simply another technique or form to be assumed by someone who wants to be a healer/helper. Integrating traditional and medical model /mainstream healing approaches requires strength and vision. Traditional teachings cannot be used as if they were a medical prescription, or an empty container to be manipulated for gain or appearance. Neither traditions nor other strategies can be imposed from the outside in, but must come from the inside out – from the heart.

Helpers who seek wise practices must seek their own healing. They need to be able to truly listen to their own heart before they can hear the heart of another. Training can be gained, but learning and healing is an on-going growth process. Helpers who are able to apply the lessons of the Medicine Wheel and the Seven Grandfather Teachings in their life will be able to develop wise practices in their work and learn the art of working from the heart.

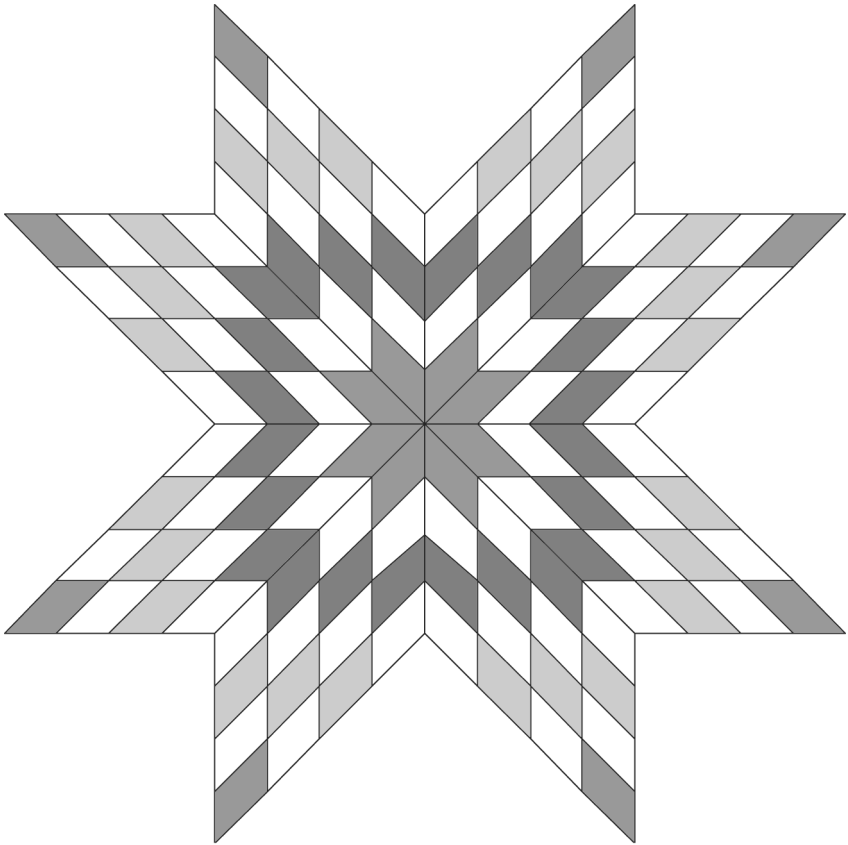
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# Relationship Building: A Best Practice Model for Aboriginal Women's Health Research

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## Background

*In the fall of 2006, Aboriginal women healers from the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge approached the Anishinabe Kweok Research Network (AKRN) to conduct a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cedar Bath and its teachings. Subsequently, in 2008 we were invited by this same group to conduct another study on the effectiveness of Soul Retrieval as a way of healing from the impacts of family violence and trauma. These two research projects were undertaken to determine the effectiveness of traditional healing modalities and their usefulness for healing those with family violence issues.*

*This article explores the partnership between Aboriginal women researchers (associated with the AKRN) and Aboriginal women healers versed in holistic and culturally appropriate healing techniques. The development of this partnership will be highlighted to demonstrate a respectful research process that utilizes best practice such as identified within the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) – Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal Peoples. The primary goal of the AKRN is to provide up to date and relevant research that focuses on Aboriginal women's health as well as to build research capacity and knowledge transfer.*



## Introduction

For generations, Aboriginal peoples have used their ceremonies, their cultural teachings and traditional teachings to improve their health and well-being (Cole, 2006; Clark, 2006; Hart, 1999; LaFromboise, 1994). As these ceremonies and teachings are passed along from generation to generation by oral means, little written documentation exists on these healing methods. While few research studies do explore the need for traditional approaches to facilitate the promotion of health and wellness, there is a dearth of evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional treatment approaches with family violence, mental health, corrections, substance abuse, grief and loss, and other health issues (Beltran 2010; Graham, 2002; Hodge, Limb & Cross 2009, Limb & Hodge, 2008, Weaver, 2002). The need for further study on traditional treatment approaches is supported through documents such as the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey 2002-2003 (2005) which recommends that “only an increase in traditional medicine practices and culturally sensitive healing and knowledge paradigms will improve community wellness, including culture and self esteem among Indigenous peoples and their communities” (p.150). The Regional Health Survey (RHS) is a “First Nations initiative led and coordinated by First Nations through the First Nations Centre (FNC) at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)” (pg. vi) and provides a First Nations perspective on health and wellness.

Struthers and Eschiti (2005) found that one’s culture determines how one views health and illness, that the choice of healing should be theirs and that traditional knowledge is still paramount in a contemporary society. Therefore, it is necessary for Aboriginal people to incorporate indigenous healing practices in order to attain the highest level of well-being potentially leading to a decrease in health disparities. For Aboriginal people, the need for healing is necessary when the client/community has lost the ability to be in harmony with the life process that they are a part of (Duran, Duran, Brave Heart & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998).

Authors such as Duran and Duran (2000) and Burstow (2003) argue that healing from trauma should take place outside of psychiatric institutions. Further they support that the focus of healing should be on strengths and

capacities rather than illness. Mitchell and Maracle (2005) proposed using a Post Traumatic Stress Response model that promotes a holistic perspective on health consistent with the cultural concepts of the medicine wheel. This wholistic model stresses the importance of culture, elders, community process and traditional healing further, that therapeutic and psycho-educational approaches have proven effective for addressing historical trauma among the Lakota including attending to:

- the mind, by remembering, speaking and coming to terms with the horrifying, overwhelming experiences that lead to the trauma response
- the body by learning to acknowledge and master the physical stress responses like anxiety and sleeplessness
- the emotions by re-establishing relationships and secure social connects, and
- the spirit by recognizing the spiritual and the cultural that have often been critical aspects of the original wound or trauma for Aboriginal people (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005, p. 19).

Traditional healing and purification practices can be used to help people grieve, to share common trauma experiences thereby reducing trauma through increased understanding and cultural renewal. Cultural ceremonies provide structures for individuals, families and communities to acknowledge and mourn common wounds. Group healing within ceremonies reduces feelings of isolation, guilt, shame and anger and enhances feelings of self worth (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005).

The legitimatizing of Aboriginal thought in the Western world remains a challenge. Aboriginal communities can help the process by legitimizing its own knowledge and allowing the healing to emerge from the community. Research that demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional treatment approaches to deal with family violence, mental health, corrections, substance abuse, grief and loss, and other health issues can help endorse Aboriginal healing methods.

### **Anishinabe-Kweok Research Network (AKRN)**

In June of 2006, an Aboriginal Women's Health and Social Research Network (AKRN) was formed with funds received from the Department of Canada Heritage. The AKRN is made up of Aboriginal women who share a common concern about the paucity of research documenting the unique challenges facing Aboriginal women in Northeastern Ontario; the high level of violence that Aboriginal women are subjected to; and, the impact that this has on their overall health and well-being. The primary focus of the AKRN is to provide up to date and relevant research that focuses on urban Aboriginal women in this geographical area; a secondary focus for this group is to build research capacity for Aboriginal women researchers in this area.

### **Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win (Ability to see into the Future) Teaching Lodge**

One of the first projects undertaken by the AKRN was to evaluate a Cedar Bath ceremony and its teachings with respect to assisting Aboriginal women to heal from abuse and violence. In the fall of 2006, the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge proposed a partnership in which they would host a Cedar Bath Wellness Retreat which provided an opportunity for the AKRN to conduct its evaluation of the Cedar Bath ceremony and its impact on the participants. Then in 2007, the healers invited the research team to conduct another study on Soul Retrieval as a means of healing from impacts of family violence. Subsequently, a five day weekend retreat was planned which provided an opportunity for participants to experience Soul Retrieval. These research projects assisted the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge to realize one of its goals which was to demonstrate the effectiveness of traditional healing techniques to address issues of abuse and violence.

### **Cedar Bath Project**

In the fall of 2006, the Aboriginal women healers approached the AKRN to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cedar Bath and its teachings. The Aboriginal women healers had been working with Cedar Bath and other

traditional healing methods to assist Aboriginal peoples to deal with family violence issues. The Cedar Bath project served two overarching goals: 1) to demonstrate the effectiveness of Cedar Bath in assisting Aboriginal women to heal from abuse and violence; 2) to assist in the capacity building of Aboriginal women researchers.

Through their previous practice, the healers witnessed first-hand the improvement in the well-being of the people they worked with but they did not have the proper evidence needed to demonstrate to their funders their success in addressing family violence and other health and social issues. Consequently, they approached the AKRN about engaging in a research project that would explore the effectiveness of Cedar Baths as a means of healing the pain associated with family violence issues. More importantly, they were interested in demonstrating the healing impacts of the Cedar Bath on their participants. Subsequently, the research question became "Does participation in traditional healing approaches (such as Cedar Baths) contribute to health and wellness?"

The Cedar Bath is a symbolic washing for those areas that have been abused. Washing away of all the hurts and pains that are carried is part of the ceremony. In the Cedar Bath ceremony, participants were encouraged to let go of their trauma and replace the traumatic experiences with forgiveness and self-affirming behaviours. Cedar Bath requires that one learns how to let go and to forgive. Forgiveness is a gift from the creator that allows people to let go of their baggage and to begin the process of change enabling one to move forward, creating a sense of empowerment and to take charge of their own recovery and growth. Because participants re-live trauma head-on during these processes, establishing a safe, nurturing environment and creating a sense of safety is essential.

### **Soul Retrieval Project**

As a follow-up to the Cedar Bath study, the Soul Retrieval project aimed to explore the effectiveness of Soul Retrieval in helping to heal from the pain associated with trauma, abuse and family violence. This project explored the experiences of participants in the Soul Retrieval ceremony. Several other goals were associated with this project: to validate the use

of Soul Retrieval to deal with issues of abuse and violence; to show that Soul Retrieval is a culturally-appropriate and valid healing method; and, to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal women to gain research experience.

According to Clements (1932), there are two popular beliefs about illness; illness is caused by a diseased object that has invaded the body for which the cure is surgical removal, and the second belief of illness involves loss of the soul. Soul loss may derive from two means: the departure of the soul from the body or the theft or abduction of the soul. Spirit intrusion or possession can also occur when a person is made ill by an evil spirit invading the body and causing the illness (Duran & Duran (2000).

To understand the concept of ‘soul retrieval’ it is necessary to define what is meant by ‘soul’ and ‘soul loss’. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the soul as ‘the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being, or animal, often regarded as immortal’ (Thompson, 1995). According to Ingerman (1991), soul loss is a result of such traumas as incest, abuse, loss of loved ones, surgery, accident, illness, miscarriage, abortion, the stress of combat or addiction. Soul loss can be described in the following way: every time we experience a trauma, a piece of our soul is lost to the universe. Therefore, to become whole again, we need to recover those lost soul pieces. The treatment for soul loss is restoration of the soul by a healer (Battiste, 2000, Clements, 1932; Duran & Duran, 2000; Duran et al, 1998). Soul retrieval is a ceremony in which the participant journeys back to recover soul pieces that have been lost as a result of trauma or of someone having stolen a piece of one’s soul (Duran & Duran, 2000).

The Soul Retrieval weekend retreat involved utilizing traditional healing methods such as teaching, visioning, smudging (sage), hand drumming, and meditation (journeying) to come to an understanding of how the ritual of retrieving lost parts of one’s soul becomes part of the healing. The Soul Retrieval ceremony exposed Aboriginal women to the teachings and provided the participants with the opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal traditional teachings and culture allowing them to become aware of their cultural distinctiveness and contribute to the maintenance of their cultural identity.

Foundational teachings must be carried out prior to attempting the Soul Retrieval journey. Experiencing Soul Retrieval does not happen unless one is fully ready, “the spirits are the ones who allow you to go to those places”. Other teachings were also provided about finding one’s colours, animal helpers, clan, and visioning. Participants were provided teachings on “attachments” and how these attachments can be removed by journeying to regain lost pieces of soul.

## **A Qualitative Framework Design**

These projects offer a context for locating Indigenous methodologies within research practice. While Indigenous research methodologies are distinct from other forms of qualitative inquiry they can be situated within the qualitative landscape because they encompass characteristics congruent with other relational qualitative approaches that value both process and content in the research design such as feminist methodology or participatory action research (Kovack, 2009). This is important because it creates a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to understand each other.

## **Methods**

According to Kovack (2009), qualitative inquiries are allies for Indigenous researchers. She further states that phenomenology and narrative inquiry are useful methods for making meaning of the story (p. 27); therefore, a phenomenological approach was used with these two qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers use stories in methodologies that value contextualized knowledge such as phenomenology, narrative inquiry, feminism and autoethnography (Kovack, 2009, p. 96). In Indigenous societies, stories: remind us of who we are and where we belong (Kovack, 2009); teach values, beliefs, morals, history and life skills (Brown & Strega, 2005); and, provides an important process for visioning, imagining, and critiquing the social space around us, and ultimately challenging the colonial norms fraught in our daily lives` (Simpson, 2011).

Phenomenology was used to elicit the healing stories of the women. According to Creswell (2007), “...a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a phenomenon”

(p. 58). The rationale in choosing to use a phenomenological approach is to grasp the human experience of the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval and describe the essence of the experience of the participants. According to Struthers and Peeden-McAlpine (2005), phenomenology is well suited with Indigenous people because it values the essence of their shared and lived experiences. Through the telling of their stories, participants have the possibility to reflect on changes that may improve their health in a holistic and cultural way. Because qualitative research is interpretive, the stories of both the researcher and research participants are reflected in the meanings being made (Kovack, 2009). Culture is important in a phenomenological study because humans create meaning from their experience within their shared environment (Struthers & Peeden-McAlpine 2005). Caelli (2000) states that phenomenological meaning is culturally constructed and is found in the description of the experience.

A qualitative research approach often uses participatory knowledge claims, narrative design and open ended interviewing to collect data (Creswell, 2007). However in this phenomenological research project, researchers used the discussions held in the circles, the focus group transcripts and observation notes to elicit the experiential meaning, to increase the practical insights (van Manen, 1990), and to explain the phenomenon of traditional healing modalities such as the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval experienced by the participants. Sharing Circles is an open ended method that invites story; using open-ended conversational methods demonstrates respect for the participants story and allows the participant greater control over what they wish to share (Kovack, 2009, p.124).

## **Foundational Teachings**

The foundational teachings for this research project came from the Seven Grandfather Teachings (respect, love, bravery, truth, honesty, humility and wisdom) and the Medicine Wheel Teachings. Throughout the weekend retreat, the circle was used to facilitate the sharing of information and to gain feedback from the participants. For Aboriginal peoples, the circle is an important concept that contains many teachings about how one should relate to another. Inherent in the concept of the circle is the notion of respect (Hart, 1999). When Aboriginal people sit in the circle, the circle

defines the respectful way each human being in the circle should conduct themselves. This respect includes the respect for confidentiality of what is being said within the circle.

Aboriginal protocol involving the use of tobacco and the Eagle feather was utilized to signify the sacred trust among some Aboriginal people. Traditionally, tobacco is presented when asking for something and the acceptance of the tobacco signifies their consent to participate. In this instance, the acceptance of the tobacco signified their willingness to participate in this research project and their willingness to share their experiences. The Eagle is a highly revered animal in Aboriginal culture, recognized for its ability to soar above the world and its ability to see far and to envision. The Eagle feather was used to signify confidentiality and respect. The use of the Eagle feather and the tobacco constitutes what is considered equal to an insurance policy in mainstream society.

Both the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremonies are very powerful healing methods but it is also acknowledged that the teachings are equally important. It is important to combine the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremony with the teachings. For both weekend retreats similar methods were used to gather information. The research team was introduced to the participants at the start of the weekend during the introductory circle, where their role as observers and documenters of the process was explained. The circle was used to gain feedback from the participants over the course of the weekend. The participants were informed that a focus group discussion would be held at the end of the weekend retreat.

Traditional teachings, including circle teachings were an integral part of both the Cedar Bath ceremony and Soul Retrieval ceremony. These teachings helped to prepare the women for what to expect, set the environment for the ceremony and explain the protocols around the ceremony. This reinforced expected behaviour and addressed issues around confidentiality and trust. Circle teachings were used to set the environment and prepare participants for both weekend retreats, as well as a method for debriefing with the participants. The healers talked about the circle teachings, where everything is done in a cycle: "the seasons are in a circle; when we work in the circle, we each bring energy to the circle; and there is power in the



circle”. The healers acknowledged the power of prayers, which provide us with power when we do healing work. Establishing a sense of safety was crucial to building a trusting relationship between healers (grandmothers), participants and the researchers. Additionally, the use of circles allowed the participants, healers, and researchers the opportunities to share their feelings and expectations.

The Eagle feather and teachings about the feather were introduced to remind participants of the protocols that are to be respected when in a circle. In the opening circle, the healers talked about the importance of learning how to live and let go of past hurts and pain in order to change and grow; “to let go of feeling ashamed of our past and instead to carry our past experiences with pride and dignity”; and “how these experiences provide an armor that helps to protect ourselves and develop coping strategies”. This circle introduction worked at a cognitive level to help the participants increase their awareness that past experiences can be used to change and grow.

Smudging is a form of purification to help people clear thoughts of any negative energy and replace it with positive thoughts and prayers for what a person is about to do. Smudging is a way of connecting to the spirit world. The participants were given tobacco and invited to relax and focus on their reason for being there. Through this process the participants were able to let go of their trauma and were encouraged by the healers to replace the traumatic experiences with forgiveness and self-affirming behaviours allowing the participants to move forward and take charge of their own recovery and growth.

### **Significance of Partnerships**

Community based research begins at the ground level and is rooted in community knowledge (Smith, 1999). According to Fletcher (2003), Community based participatory (CBPR) research recognizes the value of local knowledge systems and their ability to contribute to a larger understanding of the world and the place of humans in it. CBPR seeks to engage people and communities in all phases of research from the conceptualization of the research problem to the dissemination of the results. This community based research project used a “participatory”

approach. The Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge was consulted on all aspects of this project from the initial discussions to the formulation of the research project, through to the development of the assessment tools and feedback on the draft documents.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (p.13). An important aspect in the unfolding of this partnership was the relationship building process that needed to occur before any work on the project could proceed. It took many months to build the relationship between the research team and the healers. This step was a necessary part of the process because of the history of research in Aboriginal communities. Research has gained an unfavourable reputation in many Aboriginal communities due to the way in which research has been conducted (CIHR 2007; NAHO, 2007; Smith, 1999). Typically, past research was conducted by mainly non-Aboriginal researchers who 'parachuted' into the community, conducted their research and then left with the research data, a concept referred to as 'smash and grab' in ethnographic research (Kovack, 2009; Martin & Frost, 1996). Reports, articles and presentations about the research became the property of the researchers and leaving the researched with very little or no say in the findings of the research or the decision about what would be done with the research (CIHR 2007, NAHO, 2007). Because of this history, it was necessary for the healers to get to know the research team on a more personal level. The healers needed to know the values from which the research team operated, to understand if they could be trusted with very sacred traditional knowledge, how the research team would represent that knowledge, as well as the capacity of the research team to conduct this research. The researchers also needed to know what Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval entailed so that they could accurately represent the findings of the research. In order to do this, the researchers needed to experience these ceremonies and the teachings associated with the ceremonies. This provided great insight into what the experience would be like for the participants and added to the understanding needed to effectively document the findings of the research.

In the past, individuals interested in training as traditional healers required a commitment to working as an apprentice for many years alongside

traditional healers for little or no pay. The “real” traditional healers have become scarce and the knowledge that they possess is at risk of being lost. Documenting the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremonies is viewed as one way to preserve this knowledge. It is the mandate of the Teaching Lodge to work at establishing a training program for potential healers, aiming to become recognized as health professionals thus validating the services they perform. While these projects did not lead directly to the establishment of a training program, one member of the original research team was recruited by the healers to work as an apprentice.

Finally, the Teaching Lodge directly benefited from the research by being able to use the final reports from these projects to advocate for funding to reach its vision of being able to offer meaningful programming to train Aboriginal healers and to facilitate and enhance program development. Some women involved in these projects gained confidence to learn more about the ceremonies and take on active roles in facilitating the healing of other Aboriginal women.

The Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching lodge was able to use results from these two projects to generate other funding proposals that resulted in several successful grants. The Teaching Lodge received funding from Ontario Women’s Directorate to host grandmother gatherings. The purpose of these gatherings was to provide grandmother teachings to Aboriginal women and to solicit feedback on what the role of grandmothers should be. Funding received from the Status of Women Canada allowed the healers to conduct their ceremonies and bring their healing into other communities. The healers made a commitment to conduct two ceremonies per month in the Northeast Region of Ontario. The Teaching Lodge was able to secure funding from the Trillium Foundation to hire a manager to oversee the administrative functions of the organization thus allowing the healers to focus on their work. The role of the manager was to seek additional funding opportunities, to coordinate activities and complete reporting requirements.

The Teaching Lodge was able to gain Non-Charitable status and become incorporated which allowed them to seek out funding from other charities. To date, much of the funding received came from the churches. The purpose of the funding is geared towards programs that address healing

from sexual abuse and abuse in general. This limited funding allows the healers to provide their services in other communities.

### **Building Research Capacity**

The research team worked well together. The research team members were guided by the Seven Grandfather Teachings (respect, love, humility, bravery, truth, honest and wisdom) and operated from a strengths based approach, identifying the strengths of each team member and using those “gifts” that each team member has to support the work that is required (Hart, 2002). For example, one member of the research team was quite skilled in the development of budgets and reporting on operating expenses, while another member was skilled in focus groups and another was skilled at report writing. Over the course of the weekend, the team was able to share roles and responsibilities and take turns in leading the research process. This could not have been done without knowing and understanding the capacities and skills that each member possesses and respecting one another.

With regards to the partnership with the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge, the research team operated from a strengths perspective and worked in a respectful manner with this partner organization. The ethics of the Tri-Council Policy Statement and guidelines for research involving Aboriginal peoples were followed (TCPS, 1998). The research team worked closely with the Teaching Lodge every step of the research project, including the dissemination of the project findings.

In keeping with a fundamental research principle with regard to capacity building, the research team was able to secure a research assistant through the School of Native Human Services (social work) program. This student expanded the literature review, attended various traditional ceremonies within the community and participated in the Soul Retrieval weekend. She also took some participatory observation notes and transcribed the data collected while expanding her research experience. During the course of the weekend retreat, the research team met with the research assistant to discuss how the research was proceeding thus providing mentoring for the student.

## Conclusions

According to the Guidelines for Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples, the research should be of benefit to the community as well as to the researcher. While this project has contributed to the research capacity building of urban Aboriginal women researchers, it has also contributed to furthering the knowledge about traditional treatment methods specifically around dealing with family violence issues. By documenting the effects of the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval on participants, we were able to add research credibility to holistic and culturally-appropriate healing techniques.

The information gained from this research has been valuable to the Neegoni Wabun Gi Gay Win Teaching Lodge as the findings supported program development, enhancement of existing programs and re-affirmed traditional treatment strategies that the healers used to address family violence and other health and social issues.

Findings from the Cedar Bath study were presented at two community forums that targeted health and social service providers including, police officers, sexual assault counsellors, family violence counsellors, child and family service providers, mental health and addiction counsellors and local Aboriginal leadership as well as the local Minister of Provincial Parliament. While the findings do not directly influence public policy and decision-making around treatment of health and social issues regarding Aboriginal women, the dissemination of the findings create awareness of the potential of traditional healing practices to health and social issues. Making this known to service providers creates another avenue for these providers to seek help for their clients.

Documenting the Cedar Bath and Soul Retrieval ceremony is one way in which traditional knowledge can be preserved and made available to other potential Aboriginal traditional healers. It is the hope of the Teaching Lodge that they will be able to establish a training program for potential healers and that they might become recognized by Western Society as traditional health professionals thus validating the services they perform.

Without adequate reliable and relevant research it is difficult to address policy and programming issues that relate specifically to Aboriginal women's health and wellness. Through these two projects we were able to contribute to the capacity and knowledge transfer of Aboriginal women researchers to conduct research based on sound ethical principles.

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# Building Leadership Capacity Amongst Young Anishinaabe-Kwe Through Culturally-based activities and Creative Arts

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## Introduction

There is no doubt that ongoing colonization has and continues to affect the overall health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples and women in particular. The colonial and imperial imposition of European values and ways have contributed to the decline in Aboriginal languages, culture and traditions as well as Aboriginal women's economic status, community rights, and roles in the community. The high incidence of violence against Aboriginal women is one of the most profound and tragic results of ongoing colonization. In Canada, Aboriginal women are almost three times more likely to be subjected to violent victimization than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Brennan, 2011). As well, the Report on Stolen Sisters documents that as of July 2009 520 Aboriginal women have gone missing or have been murdered in Canada in the last three decades (Amnesty International, 2009). While Amnesty International has raised awareness of the violence perpetuated against Aboriginal women in Canada relatively little has been done to address the issue. These statistics affirm that many Aboriginal women find themselves subjected to high levels of violence at the individual and societal levels.

Voyageur (2008) in a landmark study on First Nations women chiefs notes that First Nations women "have always played a role in politics in the Aboriginal community. Sometimes their involvement has been overt and sometimes covert" (p. 10). However, it is clear that colonial imposition through the Indian Act continues to direct how community leadership is determined in First Nations communities. The Indian Act, implemented in 1876, is viewed as a forced system of leadership and governance which has resulted in a political governance system that has undermined Aboriginal women's formal leadership role in the community (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Voyageur 2008). In fact, as Voyageur (2008) notes, changes to the Indian Act that saw the inclusion of Aboriginal women as potential chiefs in their communities did not come about until 1951. As a result of being marginalized from key leadership positions in the community it can be said that Aboriginal women have also been excluded from major decisions that affect them, their families, and communities. Lawrence and Anderson (2005) assert that "the legacy of the Indian Act, in the form of all-male representation, has shaped the nation to nation discourse. This has set the stage for a political representation that is not shaped by women's ways of

knowing the world” (p.2). While there have been some changes and we see a number of Aboriginal women taking up key leadership positions they still remain under-represented in this realm (Lawrence & Anderson, 2005; Voyageur, 2008).

While it can be argued that Aboriginal women do take up leadership roles in a variety of other venues, there is no question that they do not have access to major decision making avenues. For example, Aboriginal women, in their daily lives, are still often found in roles as community leaders, heads of household, transmitters of traditional knowledge and entrepreneurs. However, in these roles their voice and ability to affect significant change in their lives and community is often limited by overarching systems of oppression. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) concurs that Aboriginal women are “excluded – from their home communities, from decision-making, and from having a say in their future and their children’s future” (p. 95).

While the roots of these inequities can be traced to the structural determinants of colonialism and patriarchy, the legacy of this marginalization continues to thrive to this day, in many forms including but not limited to poverty, ill-health, sexual, physical and mental abuse, and the silencing of Aboriginal women’s voices in debates over self-government, land claims, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (RCAP, 1996). RCAP (1996) stressed the need to address the imbalance of relations between men and women in Aboriginal communities (p.77). Certainly these inequities can be addressed in a number of ways. However, as a result of their research, RCAP (1996v3) made several recommendations to increase Aboriginal women’s participation in decision-making bodies noting that one of the primary ways to address the discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal women is develop strategies to ensure that they are fully and fairly represented in all institutions of self-government and in community decision-making (p. 77). This includes the need to continue to develop the leadership capacity of Aboriginal peoples to ensure meaningful and full participation in their respective communities as well as in broader society.

In order to assist with this process the development of leadership capacity at a younger age is critical. A pilot program was designed to begin to fill this gap by contributing to building leadership capacity of young

Aboriginal women. While this was a small pilot program, the results show promise in building the capacity of young Aboriginal women by engaging them in a culturally based program aimed at building self-esteem as well as knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal identity, culture, and tradition. The literature also supports that many Canadian girls which included Aboriginal girls face gender-specific challenges that may include poor body image, low self-esteem, eating disorders, violence in their lives, poverty, sexism, racism and homophobia (Hein & Holland, 2005).

There is limited research in efficacy of utilizing creative arts in the Aboriginal population. An earlier article by Dufrene (1990) notes that Aboriginal peoples “regard art as an element of life, not as a separate aesthetic ideal” (p.122). This suggests that art is naturally viewed as part of life and an expression of life. Dufrene (1990) further points out that healing and art are not separated. More recently, Archibald & Dewar (2010) reported on the links between creative arts, culture, and healing. These researchers found that creative activities have healing benefits whether they were based in traditional or western forms. These activities ranged from “drawing and painting, music, dance, writing, and storytelling” (p.6). While the research did not make links to leadership capacity the researchers do discuss how creative arts combined with cultural activities can assist with the process of building confidence and self-esteem as part of a healing process (Archibald & Dewar). The use of creative arts has become increasingly utilized in a variety of settings including but not limited to children living in foster care (Coholic, Loughheed & LeBreton, 2009), health promotion for Aboriginal women in Australia (Davis, Knight, White, Bell, Claridge, & Davis, 2001) and as a decolonizing tool to assist Aboriginal women with healing from the effects of colonization (Lu & Yeun, 2012). Stuckey & Nobel (2010) completed a review of the literature on the connections between art, healing, and public health and in their discussion conclude that there are clear indications that engaging with various forms of creative arts including music, visual arts, and expressive writing can indeed positively affect overall health and wellbeing.

## **Culturally-based Leadership Program**

### **Partnership Development**

This section provides a context for understanding the importance of working with the community in the development of this pilot program initiative. It also provides a brief overview of the partners that were involved very early on in the initiative.

This program was conceived and developed in partnership with the Indigenous program lead at Laurentian University and the Aboriginal leads at the two local English speaking school boards. This partnership was imperative in ensuring that the program was developed with a good understanding of young Aboriginal women's needs. The lead at the Rainbow District School Board is the Principal of First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education. She holds responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework in the Rainbow District School Board.

The lead at the Sudbury Catholic District School Board was the Aboriginal Lead responsible for working with a local Aboriginal Advisory Committee to increase Aboriginal cultural awareness to all staff, students and families of the Sudbury District Catholic Schools. She was also responsible for advocating for effective programming to support Aboriginal students including the development of partnerships.

The lead at Laurentian University was the then Director of Academic Native Affairs who was responsible for Indigenous initiatives at the university. The Director of Academic Native Affairs worked to ensure that Native Student Affairs also participated in the program design and implementation so that participants had access to support services should they be needed. For example supportive counselling was available through Native Student Affairs. The lead at the university was also the primary lead for the program and was therefore responsible for ensuring overall program management and oversight of the delivery of the program.

The development of the partnership was critical in terms of ensuring the leadership program was both appropriate and culturally relevant. This team conceptualized the program which included setting a series of goals and

objectives, planned program activities to meet those goals and objectives, assisting with recruiting of participants and ensuring that logistical aspects were taken care of. In addition this program was designed within a research framework and therefore was subjected to the usual ethical review process at the university.

## **Participants**

In the Rainbow District School Board, the Principal of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education met with the Aboriginal support workers from each of the secondary schools in the area. The leadership program was explained to them including the goals and objectives of the program. These Aboriginal support workers then engaged First Nation, Métis and Inuit students at their respective schools to inform them of the opportunity and provided information on how they could become involved. Interested students passed their names along to the Aboriginal support workers and they were then forwarded to the Project Coordinator who was responsible for ensuring registration. A similar process for recruitment took place at the Sudbury Catholic District School Board.

Once the potential names of participants were received, the Project Coordinator ensured all the logistics details were completed. For example, appropriate consent and health forms.

The Leadership Training was delivered to 19 young Aboriginal women between the ages 15-24 years. Due to budgetary constraints participants were limited to those from the Greater City of Sudbury. Eighteen (18) of the nineteen (19) participants were enrolled in local high schools and one (1) participant was enrolled at the local community college. The 5 day training was held during the month of August in 2009 and each day ran from 9am to 4pm. The training was facilitated by a Project Coordinator who was hired to organize the logistics of the training as well as provide facilitation of the training. The Project Coordinator engaged the services of a number of guest speakers and worked closely with one Elder who attended the full 5 day block. During the training this Elder provided ongoing support and encouragement to the young women, led opening and closing prayers for each day, and offered words of wisdom relevant to the training content. A

second Elder was also engaged with the training and provided support for specific activities by providing assistance with the activities as well as talks and traditional teachings.

### **Leadership Program Description**

In this program we developed a five day Leadership Training using a combination of culturally-based and creative arts methods to strengthen knowledge of Aboriginal culture and to build the self-esteem of young Aboriginal women. Through increasing knowledge about Aboriginal culture and building self-esteem we surmised that leadership skills could be enhanced and hopefully assist young Aboriginal women to consider taking on leadership roles in their communities.

The curricula and supporting materials for the 5 day Community Leadership training were researched and developed in detail by an Instructional Designer and the Project Coordinator, both of whom have some skill in developing culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum. The Instructional Designer and the Project Coordinator worked under the supervision of the program lead and the program partners who provided feedback and direction. A complete resource packaged in the form of a booklet was provided to each of the participants during the training. This resource package included the week long agenda, detailed objectives and activity plans as well as briefings on the traditional teachings to be covered during the training. The booklet was designed with appropriate cultural symbols and pictures and was completed professionally by a graphic designer. The training focussed on the following five thematic topic areas:

- Traditional Anishinaabe-Kwe Roles and Responsibilities;
- Traditional knowledges and Community Wellness;
- Role of Anishinaabe-Kwe in Contemporary Times;
- Addressing Racial and Gender discrimination; and
- Urban Aboriginal women's identity.



### **Delivery Process and Pedagogy**

The training was delivered in the ‘Round Room’ in the School of Education at Laurentian University. It is important to note that the ‘Round Room’ was chosen as the delivery site because this room is circular and can be utilized for smudging ceremonies. The room itself was designed as a space that would be consistent with Aboriginal worldviews and supportive of Aboriginal pedagogies. In the Anishinaabe tradition the circle represents many things: it is the place that joins the four directions (Nabigon, 2006) and “is considered the very heart and soul of who we are as Anishinaabe people” (Cote-Meek, 2010). The Round Room “is a designated and dedicated room to honour Aboriginal peoples, traditions and worldview” (Round room bookings & protocol agreement, May 19, 2010). Given how the room was designed and its purpose we all agreed that it would be an excellent site to host the one week training program. Pedagogically the room reinforced the symbol of the sacred circle which is important to the teachings of the Anishinaabe peoples (Nabigon, 2006). This is also reinforced by Fitznor (1998) who relates how the sharing circle and traditional medicines are utilized to reinforce Aboriginal beliefs, values, and ways of knowing and understanding.

Each of these thematic topic areas included sessions that were designed to build capacity of young Aboriginal women that supported strengthening culture and self-esteem, building awareness of Aboriginal women’s issues including youth concerns, and assisting with organizational and leadership skill development. The following were the primary goals of the 5 day leadership program. To provide young Aboriginal women between the ages 15-24 years with:

1. An understanding of the traditional roles and responsibilities of Anishinaabe-kwe (women) and how these can be translated into a contemporary context;
2. Beginning skills to address racial and gender discrimination; and
3. The opportunity to engage in activities which build self-esteem and strengthen one’s identity.

Each of these objectives was met through the implementation of a variety of culturally-based and creative arts methods. The design method paid attention to pedagogy, supportive facilitation, and debriefing opportunities after each activity. Methods were specifically designed to assist with reclamation and preservation of cultural identity and distinctiveness of Aboriginal women. For example, the young women had opportunities to hear and engage in ceremonies such as the traditional welcoming circle, hear and ask questions about the traditional teachings on the roles of Anishinaabe women including the responsibility for caring for water, the importance of skirts, and drum teachings to name a few. These culturally-based activities and ceremonies were carried out by the Elders using the circle format. The evaluation at the end of the training confirmed that the participants enjoyed the traditional teachings, skirt making, mask making, drumming and singing since many had not experienced any of these activities in the past.

Other activities included discussions and information on issues that related to racism and sexism in society. This objective was included because it has been identified in the literature that various forms of oppression remain a significant barrier that many Aboriginal women face on a day to day basis (Amnesty International, 2009; King, 2008; Lawrence & Anderson, 2005). In order to build leadership capacity and skill to be able to maneuver in general society we felt it was important to understand inequities and to identify strategies to promote equity.

Another important extension was racism to ongoing colonization. This was done through the inclusion of a film on the impact of the Residential Schools. This film provided an entry point for discussion on issues that relate to racism. Pedagogically the program leads and the Elders worked together to facilitate the delivery of this content. This was done with much care, respect, understanding, and support. The discussion and debriefing of this content was concluded through the use of a circle where the Elder and facilitator encouraged participants to talk about their reactions and understanding of the film.

In addition, a series of creative arts-based activities were included to supplement the cultural teachings. These activities included the actual making of a traditional skirt, mask making and painting which were

designed to assist with discussions on cultural identity, and singing hand drum songs. These experiential and creative arts-based activities were well received by the young Anishinaabe-kwe. They all participated and often there was much laughter and spontaneity in the room.

All guest speakers were Aboriginal women which also provided exposure to a range of role models. For example, one Aboriginal woman came in and spoke about her work in the film making industry. With this guest speaker participants had an opportunity to carryout some spontaneous ‘acting’ activities. Although many were quite shy to engage at first it wasn’t long before many participated.

### **Feedback from Participants**

In order to evaluate and close the training participants completed a short questionnaire. In addition a closing circle was led by the Elder. This provided an opportunity for participants to give final comments on the week. At the closing circle all participants were presented with a Certificate of Achievement during the closing circle. This was a pleasant surprise to the participants. It should be noted that attendance was extremely high throughout the training. There were only three exceptions when a participant had to be away for a short period of time for personal or medical reasons.

#### *Not enough time*

Consistent with the written feedback the main narratives of the closing circle were that participants enjoyed the training, meeting everyone, and thought it should be offered on a yearly basis. In terms of improvements to the training many commented that they would have liked more time to complete the sewing activity. In retrospect, this activity took longer than anticipated as many of the young women had little or no experience with sewing. In order to ensure that the participants completed the skirt making activity supplemental assistance was provided by the facilitator and Elders. In a couple of instances the finishing touches of the skirt had to be completed by an Elder so that the participant could wear it during the hand drumming activity that followed a day later. Despite the lack of time for the activity 66% (10/15) of the participants who completed the evaluation

noted that this was one of the activities they enjoyed the most. The skirt making activity included learning how to prepare material for cutting, cutting the material using a pattern, learning to use a sewing machine to put the skirt together as well as learning about the cultural teachings of wearing the skirt in ceremony. Many of the participants also wore their skirts, with pride, on the last day of training.

#### *Connections to identity*

Just over a third (4/15) of the participants who completed the evaluation indicated that prior to participating in the leadership program they didn't know much about their Aboriginal identity. This one week program provided an opportunity for them to connect with this aspect of their identity. One participant noted that it "got me in touch with my Native side." Another stated that it was "awesome, meeting new people and learning about my culture, I liked it". In addition 14/15 thought the training provided them with some knowledge about their culture and traditions which they could share with their family and community. One participant noted: "I've gained new traditional ways and understanding of my cultural background and have made me feel comfortable to be a proud aboriginal woman."

#### *Building self-confidence and self-esteem*

In terms of how the leadership program might assist them in the future, most of the participants stated that this program had assisted them with building their self-confidence. For example, one participant noted, "This training would help me more to speak louder and be more confident in front of new people." Another participant commented that "now I feel more comfortable talking in front of people."

#### *Learning about culture and roles of Anishinaabe-kwe*

The majority of participants indicated that they really enjoyed the Elder's teachings and getting to learn and know more about their own culture and roles as Anishinaabe-Kweok. It is significant that many also thought this type of leadership program should run on a yearly basis so that others could benefit.

Participants commented that it was important to them that the program was specifically designed for Anishinaabe-kwe and that they could be with other Anishinaabe people including facilitators. Some noted that this experience would assist them with their own personal journey, learning about the residential school, and generally the support of each other as young Anishinaabe-kwe.

Some of the participants also relayed that because this Leadership program was held at the university they felt much less intimidated by the university and that they were happy to know that there were a number of people here that could support them should they plan to attend. While this wasn't a goal of the program, this does indicate that the program itself opened another door for the participants that may not have been there prior to the training.

### **Final Reflections**

This section presents final reflections on the program and lessons learned. Lessons learned in any project are usually the outcome of overcoming challenges and/or constraints. One early constraint in getting the project started was the delay in finding out about the funding. This caused some difficulties with organizing dates for the program as ethical approval at Laurentian University was needed before proceeding. As a result the training which was originally scheduled for the month of July did not take place until the month of August. This also presented some challenges with recruitment of participants since many of the highschool students would have been finished classes for the year in early June.

Another unexpected challenge was when one presenter did not show up. In this instance one of the key organizers was able to deliver a presentation. It is important to point out that a contingency plan should always be in place when planning events such as this otherwise a ½ day could have been lost in the training. Fortunately, the primary lead has had over 20 years of experience facilitating, teaching, and developing programs. She was also involved in the conceptualization of the program and oversaw the implementation of the training and therefore had a good sense of what needed to be accomplished.

Another challenge was the unexpected time that the skirt making activity took. While this activity was planned with a seamstress who had years of experience teaching sewing we did not predict that many of these young women would have very little to no experience with sewing. As a result this activity took longer than anticipated to complete causing many participants to express disappointment with not being able to complete it. In retrospect it would have been important to ask potential participants ahead of time their knowledge level and/or ensure that this type of activity is given sufficient time. As well, additional personnel are required to assist those with no sewing experience. Interestingly, that even though this was a challenge the sewing activity was rated as one of the most enjoyable by most of the participants.

Overall the feedback on the project supported our notion that increasing leadership through culturally-based activities and creative arts was a way to engage young Anishinaabe-kwe. Despite the challenges the project lead, coordinator and partners were able to successfully address them and all agreed that this was an exciting program. The lead from the Rainbow District School Board commented that providing First Nation, Métis and Inuit youth with leadership development and cultural learning opportunities is a priority for their board. In fact, it is the youth themselves that are asking for more opportunities to learn about their culture and identity. “This program provided them with that opportunity. Building their confidence through leadership training and development will also help them to take on more active leadership roles within their schools and communities” (Dokis-Ranney, 2012).

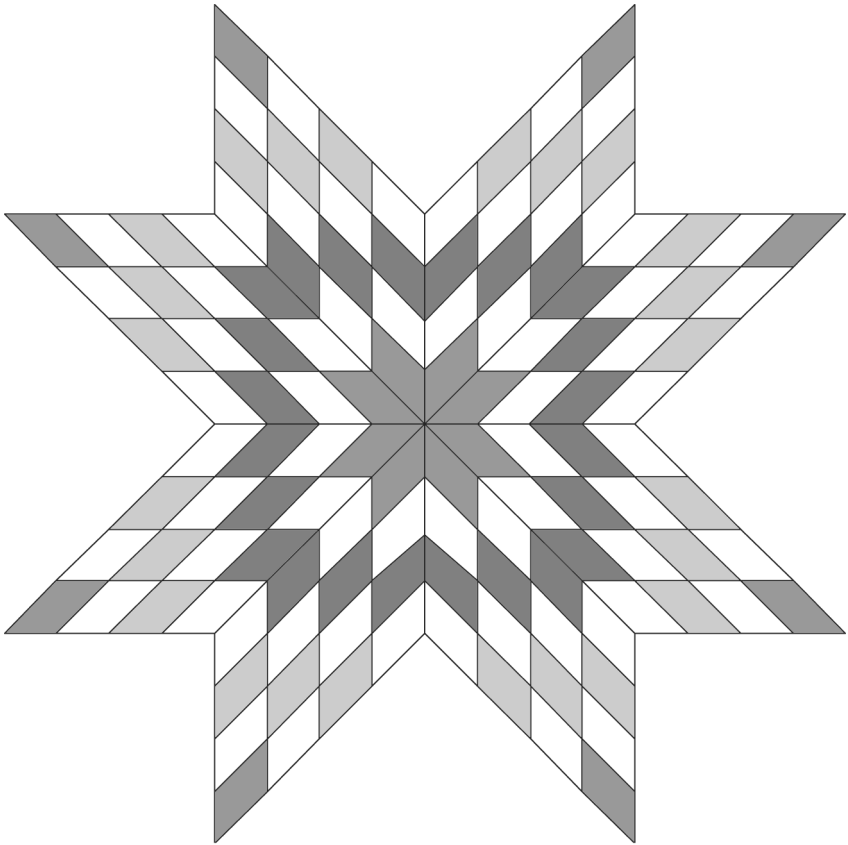
While there is no way to measure whether these young Anishinaabe-kwe take on leadership roles in the future as that would require a longitudinal study this small pilot program does show promise that engaging with youth culturally-based and creative arts programs does have some positive impact.

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# The Master of Aboriginal Social Work Program: Elders and Culture Camp as the Foundation

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## Abstract

*This reflection paper, written by a faculty member who is also an alumni, recognizes the School of Indian Social Work (SISW) as one of the early programs of Indigenous social work in Canada (1974). In 2001 the SISW had its first intake into the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) and this paper primarily focuses on important Indigenous practices within this post graduate program. The MASW begins its program in August with Culture Camp, ASW 800, which is held on a Saskatchewan First Nation community. The teachers for this experiential course are two traditional First Nations Elders, a female and a male. In the fall semester the Elders continue to teach Traditional Counselling, ASW 822, so their essential role is maintained. These Elders are available outside of class time to support the students in their growth and healing. The Elders and Culture Camp provide the foundation for the MASW.*

### **Author in Context**

As I reflect on the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) program for this article, and particularly on the Elders and the Culture Camp course, personal memories surface regarding my own experiences in the School of Indian Social Work (SISW). In the present moment I am a faculty member and coordinate the MASW, however, I earned my Bachelor degree from the Indian Social Work Program several decades ago, and I know first-hand the life changing knowledge and experiences that traditional Elders can provide. The importance of their role cannot be understated, particularly in these times when so many First Nations people are surfacing their residential school wounds and making efforts to free themselves from old trauma.

My own story reflects the influence Elders can have. As a student the old ones had given me the salve necessary to begin a spiritual journey, and I know those years were a major turning point; however, I did not remain as focussed on my healing as I should have. Years passed; marriage, children, other degrees and career moves filled the space of my life, and yet those early years in this program remain clear – as if they were a moment ago. Years after graduation, I was resisting my mid-life crisis. I floundered; I flailed; I froze. I craved the safety that the Elders emitted. Then I saw an advertisement for a faculty position at my alma mater, and every cell vibrated with possibility. This was a place that would support my healing and foster my capacity to truly learn the internal lessons that were eluding me. The Elders were there; the ceremonies and teachings were there; the love was there. The first four years as a faculty member are the most sacred of my life. With the help of several Elders I learned to stop running, to turn around and face myself and the agony that was within. Ceremonies, prayer, teachings and laughter were provided generously, and the old ones became the ground that held me up as I grew into my spirit. In turn I do all I can to give students the bravery to live in their truth allowing it become their teacher rather than their prison.

The SISW, along with other Indigenous social work programs, has challenged and changed social work education, the profession and social services in Canada. We know of the colonial induced trauma that most

of our students carry. We talk ‘it’; we feel ‘it’; we release ‘it’. SISW has been part of a social justice movement to address the discriminatory way that First Nations people have been treated. The elements that make this program unique and life-changing are many; some highlights, in particular the Elders roles, are shared in this paper.

### **Vision Unfolding**

The Indian Social Work Education Program opened its doors in 1974 as a part of the University of Regina’s (U of R) Faculty of Social Work. First this was dreamed by the grassroots first people who knew that education would provide a better life. Elders and leaders arose who knew these things, too. Their children and grandchildren had to have the same opportunities as other Canadians, but they knew that ‘same’ should not be the same. The higher education institution that their children needed would emulate the old wisdom of their ancestors; it would embrace like a circle; it would smell like sage; it would beat like the drum. Ethical allies joined the cause, but First Nations people led the charge.

The creation of the Indian Social Work Program also opened the doors of Indigenous Social Work to Canada as the first program of its kind. The Certificate (CISW) and Bachelor of Indian Social Work (BISW), unique credentials indeed, came later in 1976 when the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College was created through a partnership with U of R. The Indian Social Work Program was independently accredited in 1992, and the program is now called the School of Indian Social Work (SISW). The School of Indian Social Work offers an educational experience that is grounded in First Nations knowledge and expects and supports personal growth and healing.

Twenty-five years after its beginnings the SISW began the development phase of a post- graduate program. Funding was obtained through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, and in 2001 the first cohort of students entered the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) – the post graduate Indigenous social work in Canada was underway.

## Vision Expanding

The undergraduate programs had a curriculum based on First Nations philosophies, worldviews, theories, practices and included congruent western knowledge. Our visionary Elders had told us to “take the best of both worlds” (SIFC, 1976). The MASW would follow suit, as expressed in the mission of the MASW.

“The mission of the MASW program is to prepare social work students at the graduate level to become clinical practitioners who are especially skilled in First Nations approaches to therapy and the use of congruent Western Theories and approaches, and who are especially sensitive to issues facing First Nations communities. Fundamental to the MASW program is an understanding of traditional First Nations spirituality, culture and healing, and especially how these traditions can function effectively in contemporary settings. Our mission is also to encourage the development of a critical analytical framework with which to understand the effects of residential schools and colonial impacts on First Nations people and the opportunities for self-determination”. (SISW, 2002).

A brief overview of the MASW program’s defining characteristics (SISW, 2002), outlines our philosophical and pragmatic approach to graduate education for Indigenous social workers.

*First*, the MASW program is one culmination of the vision and determination of First Nations people to develop educational opportunities for First Nations people to better serve First Nations communities. Our strength and inspiration is derived from a steadfast commitment to the vision that the First Nations Elders, chiefs, political leaders, educators and grass roots people put forth many years ago, a vision that placed the spirituality, philosophies, knowledge and skills of First Nations people as the foundation for learning.

*Second*, the MASW program is guided by the wisdom of the Elders who stress that First Nations people should “take the best from both worlds” to ensure a positive and meaningful future, though the primacy of First

Nations ways of being must be maintained. As a result, the MASW program offers what is unique at the graduate level of Social Work education, and unique at the graduate level of education in North America: a high quality academic program guided by teachings of the Elders.

**Third**, as another key to articulating that founding vision, the MASW program has a strong and enduring commitment to serve and give back to the First Nations community.

**Fourth**, as yet another key to articulating the founding vision of First Nations Elders, leaders and communities, the MASW program stresses the importance of students engaging in the work of self-healing and participating in their own healing journeys. The Elders teach that one cannot be of help to others unless one is actively working on oneself.

**Fifth**, the MASW program at present has a clinical orientation. The program trains social workers to perform as therapists and/or senior management in agencies that focus on healing from a First Nations perspective, rather than for example social policy analysts.

**Sixth**, the MASW program responds to a critical need in graduate education and graduate social work education in particular, namely the graduate education of Indigenous social workers in order to provide culturally relevant services to the First Nations community.

This is a cohort program and courses run from August to the following April. After April, students enrol in the internship, project or thesis. The bonds that students forge during this intensely challenging time are deep and authentic. Unlike mainstream academia, a competitive atmosphere is not evident; instead, attitudes of support and love are the norm, and it truly is an 'all for one, one for all' experience.

The SISW is proud of the MASW and its primary focus on traditional First Nations knowledge and practices and their importance in contemporary Indigenous social work. The way to ensure that the MASW mission is achieved is through the involvement of traditional First Nations Elders.

### **Elders are the First Teachers: Vision in Action**

Our program knows the importance of the Elders and their contributions to individual, family and community development, and the literature supports our perspective. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) states that:

“Elders...are those recognized and respected for knowing, living and teaching the traditional knowledge. They see the world through the eyes of the ancestors and interpret the contemporary world through lessons passed down through generations. Their wisdom is transferred to young people who seek their teachings. The elders are a living bridge between the past and the present. They also provide a vision for the future, a vision grounded in tradition and informed by the experience of living on the land, safeguarding and disseminating knowledge gained over centuries (p. 7).

So many of the people feel disconnected from themselves and the world around them. Elders help those around them to connect with their spirit and to learn to trust that part of themselves. Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) states, “A spiritual connection helps not only to integrate our self as a unified entity, but also to integrate the individual into the world as a whole... allowing the individual to move toward experiencing connection to family, community, society and Mother Earth.” (p. 54). We often need guidance to find our true selves, and “Elders have traditionally provided this support and have been identified as a critical component of the healing process for Aboriginal people (Menziez & Bodnar, 2009, p. 97). Sanderson (2010) writes that Elders want the best for the people and they teach that “[t]o develop as the Creator intends we must all be around the same campfire” (p. 50).

Goulet and McLeod (2002), who work with Elders within Indigenous Education at First Nations University of Canada, acknowledge the SISW’s premise when they share, “We found that the ones most able to lead students to connect and reconnect with themselves, their past, and the world around them were the Elders” (p. 357), and again in the statement, “The Elders assisted in promoting change by expanding our capabilities as faculty and

students to understand our world and ourselves in a holistic manner..." (p. 358). Stiegelbauer (1996) learned from Elders about how they approach their role in these contemporary times, as follows: "The strategies that these traditional teachers employ, both individually and organizationally, offer suggestions to all teachers: they emphasize the importance of being a role model, of tailoring your teaching to the readiness and needs of the individual, and of continuing to learn as a teacher" (p. 39).

### **Culture camp (ASW 800).**

The first course that the MASW students take is Culture Camp, ASW 800. It is coordinated by a faculty member and led by a female and a male Elder. Other Elders are invited to lecture at the camp. "Under the guidance of these traditional Elders, this experiential course offers students opportunities to learn about traditional culture, emphasizing spirituality, values, philosophy and ceremonies" (ASW 800 Course Outline).

ASW 800 differs from the Cultural Camp for the BISW program in both intention and intensity. Students entering ASW 800 generally are expected to be at a more advanced level of understanding about Aboriginal cultural traditions and more experienced in their journey of self-discovery than students generally are when they attend the undergraduate camp. For example, students in the ASW 800 will deal extensively with issues of cultural identity, and at Cultural Camp they will build on that, moving toward the next level of learning. In the undergraduate Cultural Camp, many students are just beginning their examination of issues of cultural identity.

The Cultural Camp ASW 800 will also be a more intensive experience than the undergraduate Cultural Camp. There will be far fewer students; typically, 8-12 rather than the usual 40 in the undergraduate course. Therefore students in ASW 800 will have the opportunity for a closer, more intensive and extensive contact with Elders, emphasizing one-on-one counseling and teaching, and more opportunities for intensive participation in ceremonies. Finally, students in ASW 800 will be expected to take a more active role in their learning from Elders, by reflecting on the Elders'



teachings and subsequently engaging Elders to seek further understanding and insight.

The course outline description provides an overview, as follows:

This course provides an opportunity to learn about traditional Aboriginal spirituality, values, philosophy, life-style and ceremonies in relation to self-knowledge and knowing of others. At its core is a weeklong experiential cultural immersion program guided by Elders, taking place in a local Aboriginal community, coupled with seminars to prepare for and debrief the experience.

Students will deepen their commitment to learning about Aboriginal culture, and through ceremonies and exchanges with Elders, their own understanding and growth will deepen. As students grow in their own commitment and understanding, they can further their own journeys towards health and healing, enhancing their abilities to be of help to others.

The camp is held in the summer, usually in early August, and it is the beginning of the MASW experience. Its positioning in the program as the first course is purposeful. This required course is viewed as one of the most essential components of the MASW program, and it is intended to start each student on a positive learning journey during their masters program. Each graduate course will maintain the focus on the importance of First Nations knowledge, worldviews, culture and methods to the advancement of healing for First Nations individuals, families and communities. It is therefore, imperative that this foundational culture camp experience be at the forefront of the program.

The culture camp is by its very nature, wholistic. All four aspects of our humanness are alert, engaged and connected to the lived experience of this course. Life at culture camp ensures emotional, physical, mental and spiritual learning in an interconnected and natural way. Camp reflects the classroom of authentic living, and removes the participants from the classroom – an environment that can easily entice us to lose touch with our wholeness and focus too strongly on the mental aspect of our being. Another important issue is addressed at camp. The Elders and coordinator introduce the idea that graduate studies are rigorous and demanding, and

the culture camp provides an opportunity to envision this exciting venture and to commit to the balance that will be necessary if students are to gain the most from the experience. The necessary bonding that brings the students together in a way that will benefit everyone throughout the coming semesters is cemented at camp. Many graduate programs are competitive; the MASW approach is to come together as relatives – as extended family – to help one another through the challenges, set-backs and frustrations and to celebrate one another in times of success, transcendence and completion.

The relationship with the Elders and the importance of cultural knowing will continue throughout the program. The learning objectives of the culture camp (SISW, 2010) can also be seen as learning objectives of the program, as follows:

- To engage in a learning/teaching dialogical relationship with Elders, ceremonies and traditions of First Nations people.
- To engage in prayer, reflexive thought, and meditation upon questions such as “Who am I?”, “Where have I come from?”, and “Why am I here preparing to enter into and complete the MASW program?”
- To learn actively about traditional First Nations culture, values, philosophy, counselling and spirituality by participating in ceremonies, including daily Pipe Ceremonies and Sweat lodges, and by listening and engaging in learning during the oral teaching of the Elders.
- To learn about Aboriginal culture and community through the experience of practical participation in the Cultural Camp, including the planning, organizing and implementation of the camp, and the development of a strong and healthy sense of community.
- To learn beginning levels of practice, insights and skills in ceremonies used in traditional counseling.
- To learn Aboriginal approaches to counseling.

- To examine personally and analytically questions about being in residential schools.
- In summary, the primary objective of ASW 800 is self-knowledge; the primary method is to contemplate in the presence of the Elders and in the experience of the ceremonies.

An overview of the camp activities may be helpful in imagining the process (SISW, 2010).

**Day One & Two:** Elders, students and the faculty coordinator meet in the MASW classroom to prepare physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually for camp. Protocols and preparatory teachings are shared by the Elders. Organizing and helping with tasks to set up the camp are undertaken, i.e. Grocery shopping, rock and wood gathering, packing the trailers with tarps, teepee poles, cooking utensils, etc.

**Day Three:** Setting up the camp. Arrive at campsite by noon.  
4:00 pm - opening with Sweatlodge.

**Days Four – Seven: Regular Camp Schedule**

7:00 Pipe Ceremony

8-9:00 Breakfast

9-Noon Teaching of the Elders

Noon-1:00 Lunch

1-2:30 Students gather in small groups to reflect on Elders teachings, and where appropriate engage Elders in conversation in order to develop further understanding

3:00 Sweatlodge

6-7:00 Dinner

7-9:00 Sharing Circles and Dialogue with Elders

**Day Eight: Family Day**

7:00 Pipe Ceremony  
8-9:00 Breakfast  
9-Noon Prepare for Feast  
Noon Feast  
3:00 Sweat lodge  
6-7:00 Supper

**Day Nine: Break Camp**

7:00 Pipe Ceremony  
8-9:00 Breakfast  
9-Noon Break camp; leave by Noon

Two major assignments are part of the culture camp expectations. The first is a written journal demonstrating and expressing the student's learning during culture camp. It would include teachings from the Elders, reflections on a student's experiences at camp, and an integration of these learning's into a student's understanding of their own learning and healing work. Students usually find it helpful to keep a daily diary of learning's during camp, the sum of which can constitute inserts into this learning journal. It is due one week after the camp is completed.

The second assignment is a written document demonstrating the effects of the Culture Camp experience in helping the student prepare for the coming year. This Personal and Professional Journey Document is a vision and plan for the Masters of Aboriginal Social Work program that lies ahead. The document, due about three weeks after camp, will deal with personal and professional aspects of a student's life, including their perceived needs, the resources they can draw upon, and their visions for the kind of person and social worker they wish to be.

**Traditional counselling (ASW 822).**

When courses begin in the fall following the culture camp course students maintain their connection to the Elders and the strong focus on traditional approaches to healing through ASW 822, Traditional Counselling. Like the culture camp, this course is organized and coordinated by a faculty member, and the primary teachers are the female and male Elder who

led the culture camp learning. This course is three hours once a week for thirteen weeks (fall semester).

The MASW educates and trains students to work in the field of balance and emotional well-being. In the western paradigm this role could be termed a counsellor, therapist or mental health worker; the MASW focuses on First Nations approaches to healing with congruent western models as supports. Western approaches that focus on talk therapy have not had a high success rate with First Nations people seeking counselling. We have moved away from that model to the traditional wisdom of the past. The traditional counselling course emphasises the importance of ceremonies, spiritual support and Elders teachings. Each class begins with a smudge ceremony and then teachings are shared on various personal issues. Grief, abuse, residential school trauma, addictions, adoption and foster care are some of the issues that the Elders address and provide direction on healing approaches. There are two sweatlodge ceremonies during the term; a pipe ceremony and a feast are also held during the semester. Students who want to fast or participate in a Sundance are provided with the support they need to ready themselves for those (and other) ceremonies. The Elders are available for personal support outside of class time. There are tears and laughter throughout this class; there are disclosures and confessions; there are breakdowns and breakthroughs.

### **Maintaining the Vision**

A dear friend and colleague, Richard Katz (2002) made a point at one of our faculty meetings that continues to resonate within me. His message was that western mainstream culture is so pervasive, so all-encompassing, so omni-present that we must never waver in our efforts to bring Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, approaches back home to the people. We must first live from this way of life ourselves and then we can give it away (Richard Katz personal communication). Colonization and neo-colonization have taken too great a toll (Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996; Neu & Therrian, 2003). First Nations peoples have had a minimal role in determining their education agenda. Assimilation is the underlying agenda, and, from the earliest years of contact, government policies out powered the needs of First Nations people.

In conclusion, the MASW provides First Nations students with a relevant and viable alternative to mainstream post graduate training in social work. It is acknowledged by our First Nations Elders and communities as an essential program that supports affective healing and self-determination. The input from Elders, community representatives, graduates, current students and future students is essential to maintaining a fresh and contemporary program that remains grounded in the wisdom and depth of an Indigenous worldview. Kim Tootoosis (2010), a graduate of the MASW, expressed in her Masters project how life was lived before contact, and gives us a challenge to ensure Indigenous knowledge is retained and incorporated into our contemporary lives:

“Prior to European contact, Indigenous societies in the Americas had strong, viable, and complex societies that ensured healthy family systems and healthy support systems in the wellness, vitality and prosperity of the communities. The life cycle of the individuals, families and communities was based on the foundation of Indigenous Spiritual Law. Individuals were born into a deep understanding of life, were raised and nurtured in accordance with Life laws and contributed to a community as a healthy individual and member. All elements of life and life values were in balance with Spirit (life force) and Creation. All living entities were interrelated. This included the community, the land and all that lived and walked upon the land. A vibrant, nurturing and yet elaborate and distinct society enriched with spiritual laws, family and community values were thriving (p. 8).

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# Indigenous Social Work Field Education: “Melq’ilwiye” Coming Together towards Reconciliation

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## **Abstract**

*This article describes a participatory action research project currently unfolding across five university/community sites from British Columbia to South India that is working to reveal, review and reconcile Indigenous social work and human service field education. Subsequent to a research development project identifying culturally safe practices in Aboriginal social work field education (Clark, Drolet, Arnouse, Mathew, Michaud, Walton, Tamburro, Derrick, & Armstrong, 2009) our intersectional research team set out to expand and center this Indigenous knowledge in five diverse university/community sites and begin a reconciliation process between mainstream dominant social work and human service theories, policies or practices that may be harmful for Indigenous students who are doing their field placements. The article considers how field education, and working by example, the researchers and the research project, can create fissures in the dominant normativity of this social work domain. The authors argue for an Indigenous intersectionality framework as an important component of reconciliation within social work field education. One of the goals of this research project is to center indigenous and local knowledges and to begin a reconciliation process within the social work and human service field education programs while maintaining strong commitments to social justice and activism.*

## **Looking in One Direction**

Our initial work began with a story offered by a Secwepemc Elder who assisted and guided our participatory action research project as a co-researcher and ethical guide. This story invited us to look back to where we came from, in order to move forward all looking in one direction. In addition, he offered the Secwepemc word “Melq’ilwiye” which means coming together, and has guided our process. This story continues to guide our research as we look back from where we came, reflect on where we are, and now with this new study look forward. Our initial research occurred in the Interior of British Columbia with a community – university partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies from the Interior Indian Friendship Society in Kamloops, Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology in Merritt, all of which are located on the traditional territories of the Secwepemc and Nlaka’pamux peoples. Elders, students and field education faculty and community all offered actions and resistances for the creation of Indigenous social work and human service field education<sup>1</sup>.

Themes suggested field education programs be responsive to Indigenous students including spirituality and ceremony as central integration, grief and loss honouring practices, a focus on relational practices, Elder involvement, and adoption of wellness plans for students (Clark et al., 2009, Clark, Drolet, Arnouse, Mathew, Michaud, Walton, Tamburro, Derrick, & Armstrong, 2010). We have taken this exploratory study a step further through a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Aboriginal research grant to collaborate with five diverse university - community sites, on five different Indigenous territories, across one Province, and two countries. This partnership includes Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in Kamloops, BC, the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in Merritt, BC, the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, BC, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in Prince George, BC and Madras Christian College (MCC) in Chennai, South India. Implementations of the recommendations of the original project have begun at TRU and the team is prepared to enrich the learning through

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article we will use social work but is inclusive of other social work programs including human service programs which prepare students for social work education.

collaborative partnerships. TRU, NVIT, UNBC, UBC, and MCC are further developing the mixed methods to collect the voices specific to their Territory and school. Themes will be compared and shared across Territories. This will serve as opportunity for richer development of reconciliation practices in social work field education, and to begin to identify Indigenous field education practices and processes, locally and internationally.

### **An Indigenous Intersectional Framework**

Being Indigenous, the Indigena are not metaphors. Those of us who are indigenous have experienced the everyday realities of continued colonization, which has shaped the ways in which we think of ourselves, one another and the ‘whitestream’ and the ways in which we write, speak, and come to research. Those of us who are not Indigenous have been profoundly shaped by our witnessing of colonization, by our roles as accomplices, abettors, exploiters, romanticizers, pacifiers, assimilators, includes, forgetters, and democratizers (Fine, Tuck & Zeller-Berkman, 2008, pp. 159-160).

Intersectionality is not new to Indigenous peoples’ it’s the way we have always lived (Yee, J. 2012). Intersectionality has been central for thousands of years in Indigenous and tribal communities. Intersectionality as a theoretical construct was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and was developed out of the lives of African-American activists to describe the oppression produced structurally and, experienced and resisted individually and collectively through and across diverse social categories of identity simultaneously. There is growing recognition that the concept of intersectionality “complements growing discussions about the complexity and multiplicities involved in being indigenous, in the category of indigeneity, and in indigenous people’s health and well-being” (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2011, p. 54). This paper argues for an Indigenous intersectionality framework as an important component of reconciliation within social work field education, as it is rooted in a deep awareness of the intersecting structural forces of gendered, raced, classed, ablest, heteronormative colonial oppression, past and present, and situated and developed in the local indigenous community and knowledge. There is a pressing need for research that illuminates the complex structural factors that contribute to experiences for Indigenous students in social

work field education programs including the ongoing effects of the Indian Act, reserve system, residential school system, and child welfare system, while identifying such students' historic and ongoing resistance and activism with respect to healing from this legacy. One of the goals of this research project is to center indigenous and local knowledges to engage in a reconciliation process in social work field education and strengthen social justice and activism. Consistent with Indigenous and intersectional commitments to reflexivity, we have also applied the concept of intersectionality to our research team itself. As developed by Clark and Hunt (2007, 2008) and others an intersectional research team is committed to applying the concept of intersectionality within the team and recognizes that the contextual nature of identity across geography, social and cultural contexts, and time is understood and is integral in the development of a team that is intersectional. Furthermore, as an intersectional research team we are choosing to create a research space that uses all of this knowledge, and purposefully asks what everyone's agenda in doing this work?

In the fall of 2010, the newly expanded research team gathered together for the first time at the Quaaout Lodge, on the Little Shuswap Indian Band in order to build relationships and to strengthen the partnership for the research project. The agenda, while busy with learning, sharing and research development, involved the land and spirit through trips to the salmon run, and a story-telling and sharing session in the Kekuli winter home. Like the Salmon and their journey, we are guided by memories of where we have come from, and a vision of where we need to go. Towards this goal, each member of the team articulated their intentions and aspirations for this project, as Indigenous, Métis, and allied educators, and our respective location and partnerships within the Indigenous territories we reside on. We recognize that our universities, and social work programs, as well as us as research team members have been shaped by complex and diverse historic and contemporary relationships to colonization and to local Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, in considering the goal of centering Indigenous practices in social work, the team recognizes the diversity of Indigenous identity, as many of the team who are Indigenous are living and working as visitors in other territories, while often our Indigenous students are from the territory where the university is situated and have strong cultural practices, and others are visitors in the territory and are learning about their Indigenous territory while attending university. This has underscored

the importance of appreciating the diversity of knowledge from different locations, while centering the learning in the Indigenous territory where the university is situated as highlighted below.

The members of the research team are located on the unceded territory of the Secwepemc people in the Interior of British Columbia through Thompson Rivers University. These include, Mike Arouse, Elder Secwepemc; Natalie Clark, Field Education Coordinator HUMS programs, Aboriginal ancestry; Jann Derrick Therapist Mohawk, Julie Drolet Field Education Coordinator, BSW programs, French-Canadian, Nadine Mathews, Community-Based Researcher, Vicki Michaud, Community Partner Secwepemc, Paul Tamburro previous TRU faculty, community-based researcher, Abenaki and Shawnee, Patrick Walton, Education faculty, Métis.

Our intentions in doing this research are to continue the journey we began in our initial research project and share and learn from other sites. We envision local action with global commitments to centering Indigenous approaches in field education both within human service programs and social work programs. Some of the action research practices we have implemented at TRU includes Elders in classrooms and field education preparation seminars, cultural safety teachings through a Mohawk elder and community therapist, providing Indigenous faculty field liaisons, developing an Aboriginal and faculty advisory to the school, and providing wellness gatherings for the Indigenous students and their families. One learning is the connection between our work and decolonizing the university space, as many of our students are active on campus, thus we recognize that change in social work and human service field education requires advocating for and being a part of structural changes throughout the University. Examples of actions here include organizing a meeting with the new president of TRU and Aboriginal students.

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) is located on Lheidli T'enneh Territory, north of Secwepemc Territory and has regional campuses on the territory of many tribal councils, bands and First Nations. The research team members include Joanna Pierce, Assistant Professor and Field Director, and Susan Burke, Métis, Sessional Instructor and community-based researcher from the School of Social Work.

Located in British Columbia's north, UNBC is situated on the top of Cranbrook Hill. The university opened in 1994, and the campus overlooks the northern community of Prince George. In recognition of the vast northern geographical area, UNBC has Regional Campuses located in South-Central (Quesnel), the Northwest (Terrace), and Peace River-Liard (Fort St. John). The School of Social Work continues to expand across the regions creating demands on rural and remote field placements. This challenge is discussed in the literature by Zapf (2001) who suggests that to deny the existence of the geographic reality of countries with challenging terrain and immense distances between populated areas would ignore the clear emerging distinction between rural and remote areas or regions. Our focus is to examine ways in which we can strengthen current relationships with Indigenous rural and remote communities across the regions to enhance field placement opportunities for students who request practicum opportunities in these challenging geographic areas.

The University of British Columbia's main Vancouver campus is located on the traditional territory of the Musqueam people. The research team members are Grant Charles, Associate Professor, and Richard Vedan, Associate Professor and member of the Neskonlith Band of the Secwepemc First Nations.

The School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia (UBC) is one of the oldest social work programs in Canada having been established in the 1930's. Despite the longevity of the program the School has a mixed history when interacting with Aboriginal communities and students. That is despite the fact that the university is located on unceded territory and borders on the Musqueam First Nations. With a few notable exceptions such as the BSW program we have run in conjunction with Squamish First Nations, we have struggled to serve the Aboriginal community to the extent that we should. This is, in part, a reflection of the larger struggle the university as a whole has had building relationships with Aboriginal communities. Some of this is because of the size of the university but also because of historical attitudes towards reaching out to communities in general and Aboriginal communities in particular. As Richard has said it wasn't that long ago that UBC had more poles on our grounds than we had Aboriginal students in our programs. This is changing but there is still a great deal of work to do before the School and the University can say that

we have developed a culturally safe space for Aboriginal students and the broader Aboriginal community.

We have got involved in this project out of desire to better understand and meet the needs of Aboriginal students in our program as well as to attempt to make the School more attractive in terms of recruitment. Since field education is such a significant part of professional training it seemed a logical place to start. We recognized that in order to make the learning environment safer and more meaningful for Aboriginal students we needed to better understand the dynamics of the process for them as well as the people supervising them and the agencies where they are placed.

Michelle Reid, Field Education Coordinator and faculty member, is a member of the research team from NVIT. My Heiltsuk name is Juba. I am a member of the Heiltsuk Nation and I have bi-cultural heritage. NVIT has two campuses, in Merritt BC on the Nlaka'pamux people's territory and in Burnaby on Coast Salish Territories. I am interested in this research project because I believe that we have to continue to address the strengths and challenges within schools of social work and field education curriculum and programming to ensure that they are inclusive, respectful and validating to Indigenous theories and practices and peoples. This is the beginning of an ongoing conversation in this area of field to assist in changing our programs in meaningful ways. I am a proud auntie of many nieces and nephews who remind me of why I went into social work education and the importance of this work. I am committed to addressing the ongoing colonial impacts to ensure a better present day and future for them and other Aboriginal peoples that is built on equality, respect and social justice.

Miriam Samuel is head of the department of social work at Madras Christian College (MCC) in Tambaram-Chennai in South India. Jean Boddhu is a graduate social work student at MCC. At MCC in India, the mission statement has a strong focus on a rights perspective: Hence the curriculum and training focuses on integrating communities that have been marginalised over the centuries; tribal communities (Adivasis) being one of them. This is also reflected in admissions of students from tribal communities to the course. The department has a strong focus on community development processes that are participatory and rely heavily on the involvement of people in communities. The curriculum has a course

on 'Tribal & Indigenous Social Work Practice', and is an effort to facilitate understanding of tribal communities; students are taken on a Tribal Camp, which is part of the course requirement. This develops in them a deep sensitivity to understanding the diversity in culture and needs of the communities. The weeklong camp in a remote tribal village challenges students to consider the ways in which social work can be practiced in these communities. Questions such as who is developed? Who is cultured? What is social work practice among tribals? The camp has questioned the whole gamut of 'mainstreaming' and the relevance of indigenous knowledge and health practices and the wealth of traditional ecological knowledge. Who has knowledge? Is knowledge colonized? Do we respect indigenous knowledge in social work practice?

The project considers the diversity of learning from local Indigenous sites, in numerous diverse locations with different colonial histories past and present, in British Columbia and South India, as well as the vast geographic differences, in rural and urban landscapes. A comparative study is possible across these diverse sites, as we value the local context that grounds the research in focusing on "wise practices" (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010) rather than the westernized concept of "best practices." We will not assume our study can be fully transferred to the multitude of diverse Indigenous contexts (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010) yet share an ongoing concern given the history of social work education at the national and international level.

Reflexivity within research and practice requires us to not only consider our actions; and ourselves but also to challenge the very profession that we have invested time in (Clark, 2012). The history of social work within Canada is rooted in construction of innocence, assuming that the profession is inherently good because of the good intentions of the people working within it and not recognizing the connection to the colonizing traditions of "goodness" and "helpfulness" (Rossiter, 2001). Cindy Blackstock's (2005) article "The Occasional Evil of Angels" draws attention to the fact that social work as a profession believes so strongly in its ability to do good in society that it does not examine, or reflect, on the "potential to do harm" (p. 1). In spite of a mandate rooted in social justice and advocacy, social workers through history have been directly and indirectly implicated in the multiple harms done to Indigenous children and families. From the



residential school system through to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their homes during the “sixties scoop” to the current overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within child welfare in BC and Canada. In fact, as Raven Sinclair (2004) notes “social work has negative connotations to many Aboriginal people and is often synonymous with the theft of children, the destruction of families, and the deliberate oppression of Aboriginal communities” (pp. 51-52).

Despite this history, many new social work and human service students identify their reason for entering the profession as “I just want to help people” with little or no awareness of the colonial history of the profession and its link to the oppression of Indigenous people. Furthermore, in spite of the trend towards culturally safe and competent education for Indigenous students and people receiving services, there has been little examination of this within social work education. In the words of BSW graduate, E. Alston-O-Connor (2010), “as agents of child apprehension, social workers must examine their role in this tragedy and in the colonization of Aboriginal peoples. A commitment to implementing culturally relevant social work practice with First Nations clients is essential for the profession” (8).

Within India there is a long tradition of social service, and professional schools of social work date back to 1936. These schools however were chartered by Americans, and reflecting U.S. curriculum (Nimmagadda & Martell, 2008). During the colonial period, the British classified India’s population into categories, one of which was adivasi (indigenous people). Today the tribal peoples of India make up 10-15% of India’s population and have a strong history and tradition including self-regulating economic and political systems and reliance on the forest for daily needs including food, shelter and medicine. However, within social work education the use of local or Indigenous knowledge is often not included, and there is a growing recognition that within countries like India, they have largely not taken advantage of their extraordinarily rich indigenous intellectual and academic tradition (Nimmagadda & Martell, 2008).

In considering the history of colonization and the key role of education in colonization Sandy Grande (2008) challenges, “unless educational reform also happens concurrently with an analysis of colonialism, it is bound to suffocate from the tentacles of imperialism” (p.236). As such we must

consider the university itself as a site of colonial struggle, a microcosm where power relations are enacted, performed and refined. A key step in this process is recognizing and naming the colonialism as it currently exists within education and the discipline of social work. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes "some of these disciplines, however, are more directly implicated in colonialism in that either they have derived their methods and understandings from the colonized world or they have tested their ideas in the colonies"(p. 65). Recognizing and naming the current impacts of colonialism in our programs, and field education specifically, is an important goal for us in this project as we move forward.

Examining the ethical framework of our research as it unfolds also requires we ground ourselves in the sociopolitical context of social work in both Canada and India. The reconciliation of social work theory and practices with Indigenous peoples of Canada is currently in critical dialogue due to the social work profession's historic and ongoing contribution to colonization (Blackstock, 2005; Blackstock, 2006; Fournier & Crey, 1997; MacDonald & MacDonald, 2007; Sinclair, 2004). As Richard Vedan (2009) notes in the foreword to *Wicahitowin: Aboriginal Social Work in Canada*, "... nationwide, there is not a single First Nations family or community that has not been affected by the child welfare practices that resulted in what became known as the "Sixties Scoop", with an exponential increase in the number of children brought into the care of the state" (p. 13). These numbers have not decreased since the 1960's, but in fact in many provinces have continued to increase (Blackstock, 2005). Similarly, within India and more generally throughout the world "the human services have contributed to the practices of colonization and dispossession" (Healy, 2000, p. 61 as cited in Gray, Coates & Yellowbird, 2008, p. 2).

Although some footing has been made through innovative, Indigenous centred curriculum and university safe spaces where social work is transmitted to the next generation of students, contributions in field education remain scarce. As highlighted in stories from our original research development grant (Clark et al., 2009, 2010) the need for field education to be a strong site of Indigenous centered social work theories and practices is necessary. It is the space where curriculum instruction or theory comes together with experiential learning and the identity of a social worker (Westerfelt & Dietz, 2001; Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2007). It

can also be the location of ongoing racism and the breakdown of change for Indigenous centred practices (Clark et al., 2009, 2010; Razack, 2001; Razack, 2002). In fact, one could argue that field education is the site where colonization continues within social work education in policies, and practices. Michael Hart (2009) in calling for the need for anti-colonialism within social work education cites Graham Smith (2000),

I do not believe for an instant that we are in a postcolonial period. I do not think we have seen the last of colonization; on the contrary, it is very much alive and well. What has happened in recent years is the creation of an illusion that colonization is no longer practiced – that somehow the ‘white’ world now understands this phenomenon and is able to desist from it. This, of course, is a myth. What has happened is that the processes of colonization have been reformed in different and more subtle ways. Many of these new formations are insidious, and many of them have yet to be fully exposed. (p. 29).

Within a global context, concerns over ‘professional imperialism’ continue, as social work has become part of the ongoing colonial project (Midgley, 2008, p. 32). Many scholars have noted that social work has to be concerned with this ongoing colonization through the globalization of social work education, practices and policies and specifically the potential devaluing of localized and indigenous knowledges and systems of helping and healing (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008; Hart 2008).

From this intersectional research team, grounded in these Indigenous, multilocated contexts we have been examining Indigenous social work field education using Indigenous research methods. Students and practitioners should not misconstrue the presence of Indigenous perspectives within social work as an indication of either the profession’s commitment to respect the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to be self-determining within the realm of professional social helping or recognition that Indigenous knowledges and practices have equitable status with Euro-western social work theories and methods (Baikie, 2009, p. 45).

An Indigenous intersectional framework together with participatory action research methodology recognizes that research must create “the conditions that are respectful of the multiple readings of the world

hinges on recognizing the limitations of an old order and going beyond the mechanisms that maintain that order" (Ermine et al. 2004:24). The stories from our original research development grant on cultural safety and intersectionality were the beginning steps in exposing the colonial forces at work in field education. As we move forward towards processes of reconciliation within social work and field education specifically, our research aims to do so within an Indigenous intersectional framework.

## **The Research**

Using tools developed in the earlier project, the objectives of this project include: Advancing traditional knowledge of Indigenous field education; honouring the experiences of Indigenous students within field education; critically examining the field education practice and policies within Canada and internationally as the basis for recommendations; implementing indigenous knowledge and perspectives in social work and human service field education; and enhancing and extending relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, researchers, students and allies as a basis for ongoing research and practice in Indigenous field education.

Some of the important components we are exploring in the project are through an Indigenous intersectional framework, building a reflexive and culturally safe space both within the research team, as highlighted, but most importantly within field education to allow us to move forward with reconciliation and implementation of rights frameworks. Specifically through interviews, talking circles and questionnaires we are beginning to listen to the stories of our students, educators, community partners, and Elders about their experiences in social work field education programs.

Reconciliation is defined as a way to "restore to friendship or harmony" and to "settle and resolve differences" (Retrieved from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconciling>). Within Canada the recent Truth and Reconciliation commission has resulted in increased debate and dialogue about the meaning of truth and reconciliation within Canada and between settler and Indigenous peoples. There is recognition that if reconciliation is going to work then a process of promoting self-determination and restoration of languages, cultural and social structures are required. Development of strategies is required across a wide range

of structures including within post-secondary education (Mussell, 2008). Partnerships between First Nations and others are required to make this successful. Cindy Blackstock and her colleagues have applied the phases of reconciliation to child welfare, within their Touchstones of Hope (2006) project. The phases as proposed in the Touchstones of Hope include truth-telling or naming; acknowledging, restoring and relating (Blackstock et al. 2006). This reconciliation model recognizes the impacts of colonization and the ongoing processes that Indigenous are engaged in “to build and develop culturally based services and policies” (Blackstock, et al (2006, p. 2). In this research process we will be considering models towards reconciliation within social work field education within an Indigenous intersectional framework that recognizes the diversity of who is Indigenous, and the structural forces that impact their experiences. Gendered violence was and continues to be part of the ongoing colonial project, and reconciliation is not possible if it remains at the individual level and does not acknowledge and challenge structural inequalities. As noted by Karina Czyzewski (2011) “reconciliation will only be possible, then, if racism is recognized as structural, pervasive and on-going; but is also addressed as impactful, and inherently linked to other forms of discrimination, like sexism”(7).

As this applies to our research, an Indigenous intersectional framework and the interviews will provide an opportunity for an open exchange, listening and sharing, regarding social work and the field education program past and present, and within the diversity of experiences. As described by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2003) “we have to understand people within the multiplicity of frames that shape their lives - everyday frames of experience that they choose, that they inherit, that are imposed on them and that may be transformed, disintegrated, forgotten or ritualized” (p. 41). However, as critics of reconciliation processes have pointed out, storytelling in of itself will not lead to transformation, and instead “will demand an ethical listening and reading, and will necessitate follow-up discourses and activities in order to produce social change” (Czyzewski, K. 2011:6). Acknowledging requires us to affirm and learn from the past, hear from students and others what needs to be changed within the field education programming, and embrace new possibilities as offered by the research. This research is an active process of relating to hearing the information that is shared from the students and research participants and finding out what is working and what is not working for them within

their field education programming and placements. The experiences and information from participants will assist us in a process finding out what we can do to address the issues that Indigenous students have identified as not meeting their needs within their field education programming. Restoring is fundamental in not only addressing the problems of the past, but also creating a better path for the future of field education. It is through relating with the Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, field education coordinators, faculty, and agency field instructors that we can begin an ongoing process of relating with one another to collaboratively work together to build on the current strengths of practicum programming, implement the recommendations, and monitor changes that are needed within field education programming within their respected settings.

This could mean that there is an ongoing field education evaluation process and dialogue put in place, as it pertains to Indigenous students, ensuring that the field education policies, practicum courses, and field placements are fulfilling the guiding values of the project which will better ensure a respectful and meaningful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working in the various levels of the field education programming. This process brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in the field education programming to create a structure based on respect, understanding, guiding values, vision. This process would recognize and honour Indigenous cultural knowledge, experiences and practices as being integral, critical and the most respectful for field education policies and practices. The final step of relating will emerge when social work recognizes that Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions about Indigenous peoples and define their cultural identities. Reconciliation processes can assist social work education programming to move forward in a more respectful way to achieve better experiences, and outcomes for Indigenous students within field education programs, in Canada and in India. While this seems like a grand last step to be taken by the profession as a whole, we regard this research as a ripple on this wave of change. Recognition of Indigenous rights and a commitment to sovereignty is essential in any truth and reconciliation process. Too often, research and policy changes with respect to Aboriginal students are framed within a language of needs, not rights. The UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during its 62nd session at UN Headquarters

in New York City on 13 September 2007. The Declaration sets out the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, as well as their rights to culture, identity, language, employment, health, education and other issues. It also “emphasizes the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations.” It “prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples”, and it “promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them and their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development.” Speaking on behalf of India who supported the declaration, Ajai Malhotra said “his country had consistently favoured the promotion and protection of indigenous peoples’ rights. While the Declaration did not define what constituted indigenous peoples, the issue of indigenous rights pertained to peoples in independent countries who were regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region which the country belonged, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present State boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retained some or all of their socio-economic, cultural and political institutions.” (<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10612.doc.htm>). In contrast, Canada did not officially endorse the declaration until November 12th, 2010 (Green, 2011).

Recognizing the principles of the U.N. Declaration in our field education programs would mean beginning to see the centering of Indigenous knowledges within social work and human service field education as a right, not a need. Needs are individual, whereas the process of reconciliation and recognition of rights is a collective response that recognizes nation-to-nation status. The implications of the Declaration, and the policy statements and accreditation standards within social work education, require our research project to consider the rights of Aboriginal students with respect to field education and providing the opportunity for Aboriginal communities to participate in their evaluation and contribute to recommendations and changes required.

The final and important step is action and activism related to the findings from the project. Critics of reconciliation have pointed out that without change at the structural level, that the process of reconciliation

can serve to further re-inscribe power relationships (Angel, 2009). As Taiaike Alfred (2009) reminds us "Indigenous-settler relations cannot be obviously reconciled without deconstructing the institutions that were built on racism and colonial exploitation" (p. 168). In our project, we wish to attend to the process of truth and reconciliation, but within a framework of intersectionality that attends to power as it operates at the structural level, and that attends to our commitment to social justice, action and activism.

This research may reveal that further research and evaluation need to be done within our social work programs more broadly to meet the needs of Indigenous students and ensure accountability back to Indigenous communities. Sites of activism include structural factors such as policies, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the national accreditation standards of that relate to Aboriginal students and communities that are affiliated with the respective social work or human service programs. Participation in areas regarding program design and implementation is only a temporary gain. Aboriginal peoples must also be allowed to participate in the accreditation process in social work education (Moore, 2009, p. 67).

The social work profession has continued to embody predominantly culturally dominant Eurocentric mainstream systems, policies and practices, and yet social work has often deemed itself culturally neutral within its laws and practices (Baikie, 2009; Blackstock, 2005). Regardless of the claims of social work educators and programs, we need to take a closer examination of what guidelines, policy and practice standards are being used, and how they are being monitored to ensure that our social work and field education programs are not only culturally appropriate but also safe for students. Although we have an accreditation body that oversees schools of social work in Canada, it is important to explore the experiences of students and analyze our respective program policies and practices generally and in relation to field education placements. This project will examine the policies within field education accreditation. Some examples of the relevant standards that apply to Indigenous field education and this research include the CASWE Educational Policy standards (8.1 & 8.2), which state that where appropriate, schools' education programmes, including admissions, shall respond to the needs of aboriginal students and their communities; and Aboriginal communities affected by the



programme shall have an opportunity to participate in the planning and ongoing evaluation of the programme.

(Retrieved from: <http://www.casweacfts.ca/vm/newvisual/attachments/866/Media/StandardsofAccreditationMay200825012010sl.pdf>)

This research and reconciliation process can better ensure that schools are being accountable to Indigenous students and communities within the field education programming by finding out what the needs are, implementing them and monitoring them.

## **Conclusion**

If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (Wilson, 2008, p. 135).

Coming back to our journey together, through the story from our Elder, we consider how this research might change social work and human service education – and ultimately us. Taking time to reflect on our history, and where we are now, will guide us in our journey forward, looking in one direction. Further, the challenge and the opportunity put forward by the Truth and Reconciliation process requires small discussions to begin and for structures and programs across Canada to take responsibility to initiate discussions and dialogue. An Indigenous intersectional framework for truth and reconciliation allows us to not only remain strongly committed to social justice and activism, but also to recognize that we have to work on this issue differently, recognizing that we cannot separate out colonization from gender and other factors (Smith, 2006). We are committed to the process of respectful and inclusive relationships within the research, but also within our classrooms, our field education programs and within ourselves ultimately. As we move forward into year two of this project and begin listening to the stories of our students, educators, community partners, and Elders about their experiences, it will be up to us all to make change. Blackstock (2009) states:

It is not enough to issue a statement on Aboriginal peoples from time to time or tinker with services if what social workers really want are justice, respect and equality for Aboriginal people. We must courageously

redefine the profession [of social work] using reconciliation processes and then move outwards to expand the movement into society (p. 35).

Through this research project, and an Indigenous intersectional framework we are going to start this process and dialogue within specific social work and human service sites within the field education programs.

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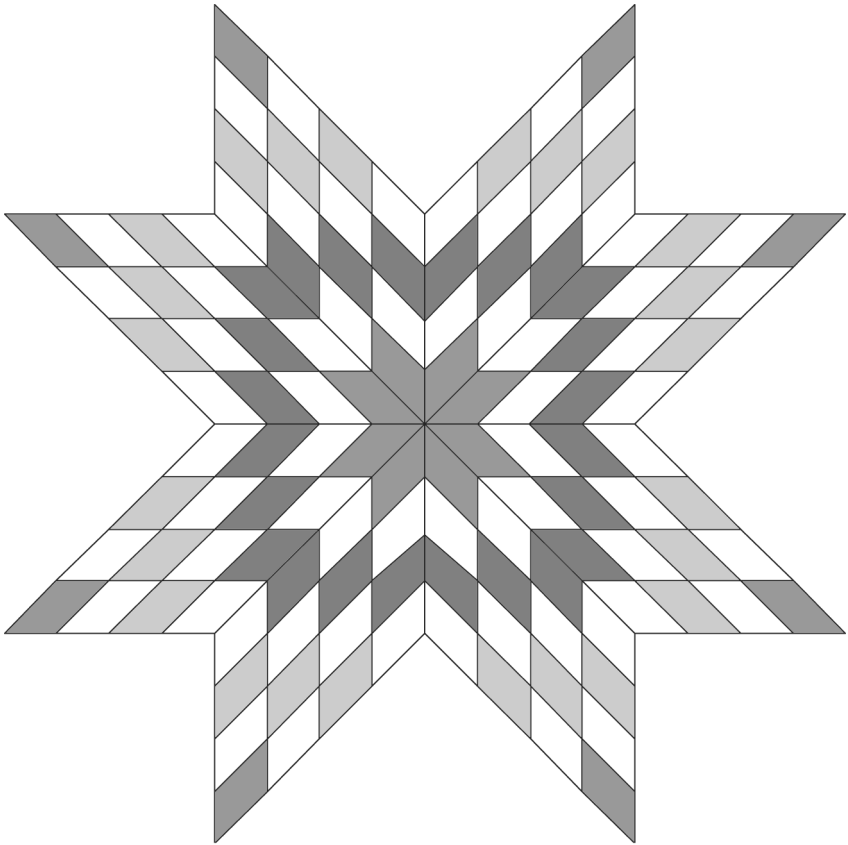
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# Cultural Competency - Working With Aboriginal Peoples: A non-Native Perspective

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the course of my education in the Social Work field, I have come to learn about the importance of cultural competency as it pertains to the helping profession and working with Aboriginal peoples. There are many disheartening issues that First Nations communities face in our country today. I have gained some insight of the rules and regulations that the Federal government has placed upon Aboriginal people. Government legislation has created impossible boundaries that prevent Aboriginal populations the right to exercise equality in Canada. Unfortunately those most affected are the lives of many innocent Native women, children and families who struggle with poverty, violence and racism on a daily basis. Racism towards Aboriginal peoples continues to happen generation after generation. It is necessary within the social work profession to raise awareness about how our society lacks the knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture. If social work practice recognizes the need to be culturally competent when working with Aboriginal peoples then we should examine how our actions will lead us to that goal. The lack of historical knowledge plays a key role in how we systemically continue to oppress the lives of First Nations people. Social workers in Canada should be aware of the challenges Aboriginal people face with regards to government policies and legislation that act as roadblocks preventing First Nations people from improving their quality of life and overall well-being. It should be the responsibility of those who design and implement social work programming within Canadian universities; to see that the quality and delivery of education is inclusive to the specific and cultural needs necessary to accurately assess those whose lives they may affect. Regardless of race or ethnic background, social workers need to understand the socio-economic and cultural complexities of Aboriginal lives. It should be mandatory that social workers obtain a cultural, social and



economic understanding of Cultural Competency and Aboriginal peoples in order to work competently with the issues they face. Throughout this paper I will describe my experience as a non-Native student who enrolled in a Native social work program and how this experience has enhanced my understanding of cultural competency and working with Aboriginal peoples.

### **Cultural Competency and Aboriginal Peoples**

As I entered into the Native Human Services program as a non-Native student I felt a strong need to understand the divide between Aboriginal peoples and Mainstream society. I grew up in northern Manitoba where there are large Aboriginal populations. Racism and discrimination towards Aboriginal people in the Prairie Provinces of Canada are alarmingly high. I was personally motivated to understand why this was happening. I also felt that if I wanted to become a social worker I should be aware of what causes such oppression in our Country. I spent the first two years of my university education within the mainstream, Anglophone social work program. I had initially wanted to enter the Native Human Services social work program but when I called to inquire about it, one of the first questions I was asked (by the voice on the other end of the telephone) was: “are you Native?” I replied: “no” and the voice on the other end of the telephone strongly suggested I enter the mainstream program, and with that I complied. Because I had grown up in northern Manitoba and observed the high rates of racism throughout my life, I can honestly say I was not surprised at what I had been told. I remembered feeling somewhat confused and thought to myself that I would eventually find a way to enrol in the Native Human Services program. I decided fill my electives with as many Native courses as I could. The first Native course I enrolled in was; “The Original People of North America” which discussed issues of oppression that Aboriginal people face in our country. In my second year of university I continued to enrol in other Native classes. I came to realize throughout the course of my education that Aboriginal people were one of the most oppressed groups in Canada and have been for centuries. I began to think that if Aboriginal people have been oppressed for centuries and have survived, then Aboriginal people would have a lot to teach us about oppression and resilience. I learned that a Western perspective was only *one* way to perceive the world and the helping profession. By the

end of my second year in the Mainstream social work program I decided to try and switch programs again.

This time I spoke to the Native Human Services program co-ordinator who told me I could enrol in their program and it was at that time that I successfully changed programs. When I had made an appointment to speak with the Native Human Services coordinator I was somewhat apprehensive about how they would react towards me. I was afraid I might be rejected or not taken seriously because I was non-Native. I was afraid of what they would think of me. I was accepted into the program immediately and was treated with kindness and respect. At this time I did not experience any resistance entering into a Native program as a non-Native student. It was not an issue for the Native Human Services Department. Why had I been told earlier that I had to be a Native person in order to enrol in the Native Human Services program? Why did I experience resistance when I wanted to practice diversity, and why do boundaries within our society always seem to be placed around race and culture? This confused me especially when Canada perceives itself to be a culturally diverse country. What I did not realize at the time is that I had experienced a restrictive act of institutional racism; which is also known as Western control over Aboriginal people, colonization, segregation and marginalization. I was a non-Native person being told not to enrol in the Aboriginal program.....why?

Any health care professional who works with First Nations people should understand why it is important to become educated and informed about the political and economic predicament Aboriginal people find themselves in. It is equally important to understand, throughout history, how Aboriginal people have been affected by social policy due to the oppressive laws that have been imposed upon them. It is necessary to understand Indigenous people from a historical context in order to understand why so much systemic violence and racism exists towards Aboriginal people in Canada. We also need to be aware of the vulnerable position Aboriginal women are in today and where these acts of racism and violence come from. What many social workers do not know is that historically, before colonial contact, Aboriginal women held a lot of political power and prestige among First Nations societies. During the colonial period Western society viewed Aboriginal women as a threat to

colonial economic growth due to the political power First Nations women held among their people. As the fur trade diminished so did the power of First Nations women and the Canadian government gained control over economic growth at the expense of Aboriginal peoples and their pride. This knowledge is significant when discussing cultural competency and social work today because it helps us understand how the impacts of the past have and still affect Aboriginal people in the present. Native women were viewed as such a threat; that it was to the Canadian government's advantage to disgrace Aboriginal women in order to gain hierarchal prestige and power. Sarah Carter (2007) states:

The documentary evidence on women was overwhelmingly produced by European males, who had little appreciation of their roles and ranges of activities. They tended to be surprised at the amount of physical labour that Aboriginal women performed, and often concluded that they were little better than slaves or beasts of burden. At times, however, European observers commented on the amount of power and influence women appeared to exercise-over their husbands, for example. Yet we have to ask: did these observers fail to understand the lives and roles of women, were their views biased by the ideological boundaries of their own concept of proper roles for women (and men), or did their observations to some extent actually reflect the work and status of Aboriginal women? (p.28)

What Carter tells us is that European settlers were much different than Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples of Canada had their own unique governing systems that were much different to that of the European Settler. Indigenous peoples are those who are original Natives to the land. This means they have been on the land since the beginning much before Europeans settlers arrived. European settlers are not Indigenous peoples of North America. Indigenous peoples are also those whose ways of living and seeing the world reflect their Aboriginal culture as well as the land in which they come from. The author suggests that perhaps it was a lack of understanding (on the part of the new colonial settler) that caused the distortion and misconception of Aboriginal societies. Indigenous societies were eventually made to look as though they were incompetent in comparison to the "sophisticated" European ways of living. According

to Barbara Perry, author of “Silent Victims” (2008): “In short, colonial practice and discourse were intended to deprive Native Americans of their status as an independent people and reduce them to just another racialized group” (24). If we, as social workers chose to practice ethical correctness when working with Aboriginal populations, then we must understand the value of becoming educated about history and the oppressive effects it has had on Indigenous people.

Social workers who work with Aboriginal peoples at anytime will find it difficult to practice cultural competency if they do not understand Aboriginal issues from their historical context. Other considerations that indicate the need for historical insight is that Aboriginal people are still suffering today from systemic discrimination that has been imposed upon them from centuries ago. At the basis of these discriminatory views lies the ongoing battle for money and power. Unfortunately it is Aboriginal children, families and communities who suffer tremendously at the brunt of the political tension that continues between First Nations leaders and the Canadian government. If social workers had the opportunity to become educated about the political and socio-economic realities that continue to oppress and marginalize Aboriginal people, they would be better equipped to practice cultural competency when working with Aboriginal children, families and communities. Gray, Coates and Yellowbird (2010) point out:

Not only have the efforts of social workers, and others, been proven to be largely ineffective, the profession has not stood out as being at the forefront of advocacy efforts to expose or combat the rampant poverty, the ‘third world conditions’ and the human rights abuses, nor has it been a major supporter of efforts to uphold land claims and treaty rights. The profession has been largely absent from these political realities and this absence is a direct result of the dominant modern paradigm under which social work has developed, which has more often than not, been ineffective in dealing with the needs of Indigenous Peoples (p.49).

The social work profession should be willing to accept the realities Aboriginal people are faced with everyday. Our education system should be meeting the needs of Aboriginal peoples. Social Work Programming

within Canadian universities should encourage non-Native social workers to practice diversity especially those who will work with Aboriginal peoples. We must also act responsibly and make an effort to educate ourselves in regards to comprehending the complex socio-political and economic relationship that has come to affect so many First Nations people. By understanding history from an Indigenous perspective helps social workers understand Aboriginal people, their culture and how they live today. Cultural competency also means working together to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Working together within the education system would help non-Native social workers gain insight to the needs of Aboriginal peoples.

When examining issues of violence and racism that exists towards Aboriginal peoples, history once again becomes a very important topic because it helps non-Native social workers understand what First Nations people have been through and at the same time helps them to recognize the many faces of violence. Analyzing historical patterns will help social workers recognize that violence portrays itself in many forms. Violence is found in political, social, historical, economic, emotional, physical, mental and spiritual realms. Violence can also be observed from micro, mezzo and macro perspectives of social work practice which help to connect the effects violence has had on Aboriginal peoples throughout the North America Continent. It is necessary for social workers who choose to work with Aboriginal peoples to have some comprehension of the Indian Act, what it is, and how it was used to oppress Aboriginal people. The government uses the Indian Act to control Aboriginal peoples. Moreover the Indian Act is used to measure the “status” of every Aboriginal person and their rights were determined by this. Long and Dickason (1998) describe the Indian Act as:

The British North American Act of 1867 gave the power of legislation control over Indians and their lands to the federal government. Thus empowered, the Canadian Parliament began drafting provisions for what was to become the Indian Act. The Indian Act was, and perhaps still is, the most oppressive legislation in Canadian history (p.88).

Non-Native social workers who have an understanding about how the Indian Act has affected Aboriginal people are far more culturally competent than those who do not. Building allies and working together to understand the issues Aboriginal people face will help to create positive relationships thus creating cultural competency when working with Indigenous peoples.

The relationship between the federal government and First Nations people is one of the most extraordinary and complex areas of Canadian politics. It is literally impossible to go into depth on any one issue dealing with Aboriginal people because every issue that relates to First Nations people is attached to the historical and complex political discourse that relates back for hundreds of years. This complex relationship between the federal government and Aboriginal people is one of violence and oppression filled with years of forced assimilation. These violent acts of oppression are referred to as “cultural genocide”. Social workers in Canada should be aware of these facts. Being Native or non-Native is irrelevant. Social workers should be educated about the issues that exist between the federal government and First Nations people. The education system would benefit all social workers by recognizing the importance of teaching in-depth theory and history as it relates to First Nations people and the political, socio-economic struggles they face. By doing so, social workers would then have a greater understanding of what it means to be culturally competent. Becoming educated about the negative effects of government legislation and policies has had on Aboriginal peoples can help social workers further identify systemic and institutional oppression. As a non-Native social worker I have learned to be much more aware and sensitive to the issues that Aboriginal peoples face. It is not ethical for social workers to make life changing decisions about the personal lives of Aboriginal people if they are ignorant to the challenges Aboriginal people face. Nash, Munford and O’Donoghue (2005) confirm: ‘To be able to assess you need to know the client’s politics, ethnicity, social status’ (p.148). Discrimination and racism is a form of violence which has become a destructive reality for Aboriginal populations. First Nations people face systemic racism and discrimination which goes unnoticed throughout society. Professionally we should raise our awareness in order to competently assess Aboriginal clients or we risk making ethical

errors due to our lack of knowledge; unknowingly contributing to the subtle but dangerous acts of systemic violence.

Aboriginal women are also at risk for experiencing violence and racism more than non-Native women. This is due to government policies such as the Indian Act that has put Aboriginal women in very vulnerable and frightening circumstances in our country. Any social worker working with Aboriginal women should understand how they are affected socially, economically, politically, emotionally and spiritually (Bopp, Bopp, & Lane, 2006). An Aboriginal woman's political position within society is substantially different from non-Native women. Some of the most oppressive legal policies are directed towards Aboriginal women. Long and Dickason the authors of "Vision of the Heart" (1998) state:

For example, the treaty process required that "official" representatives be elected. This practice eliminated women from local and national politics, while men were legally given more political power than they possessed under traditional politics. Until 1951, the Indian Act denied women the right to vote in band elections, to hold elected office and to participate in public meetings that decided band business (p.89).

It is acts such as these that clearly identify systemic discrimination that exists towards Aboriginal women. Social workers should be made aware of the dangerous position the Canadian government has placed Aboriginal women in. Aboriginal women are also more vulnerable to domestic violence as Long and Dickason (1998) state:

The Indian world is a political world; there is no getting around it. As Karen Ilnik states, "If you don't want to get involved, you really have to work at it". Women of the New Brunswick Tobique Reserve took some radical steps to improve their economic and political situation. They were desperate for housing, many of them finding themselves and their children out on the street with no place to go. Some women had been kicked out of their houses by their husbands. Since the Indian Act have men sole ownership of the family house through a certificate of possession, their wives had no housing rights and not legal recourse (p.95).

It is important that non-Native social workers understand that legal policies have made Aboriginal women very vulnerable giving them less rights than non-Aboriginal women due to the implementation of the Indian Act. This puts Aboriginal women at greater risk for racist and violent acts that are imposed upon them within society. First Nations women continue to be put in many vulnerable and demoralizing circumstances. For example, the Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada Report (2006) states that:

The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women (1993) maintains that Aboriginal women are particularly excluded. This is so, they argue, because one of the legacies of colonization has been a diminution of status of Aboriginal women, both within their own communities and within society at large (p.62).

These injustices also put Aboriginal woman at great risk for their safety in our country. Aboriginal women are vulnerable targets to violent crimes resulting in death. There are approximately five hundred missing Aboriginal women in Canada. These are very disgraceful facts and it sends a dehumanizing message to First Nations populations. According to the Report on “Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence against Aboriginal Women in Canada” (2011), it confirms that:

According to Canadian government statistics, young Indigenous women are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence. The pattern looks like this: Racist and sexist stereotypes deny the dignity and worth of Indigenous women, encouraging some men to feel they can get away with acts of hatred against them. Decades of government legislation have impoverished and broken apart Indigenous families and communities, leaving many Indigenous women and girls extremely vulnerable to exploitation and attack. Many police forces have failed to institute necessary measures – such as training, protocols and accountability mechanisms – to ensure that officers understand and respect the Indigenous communities they serve. Without such measures, police too often fail to do all they can to ensure the safety of Indigenous women and girls whose lives are in danger.



These alarming facts are only some of the many violent acts of discrimination, racism and oppression that Aboriginal women face. This only confirms the need for social workers to become knowledgeable about legislation such as the Indian Act so that they may understand the position Aboriginal people are in, systemically, politically, economically and socially. Social workers should be provided with the training that promotes cultural competency so that they may acquire the skills necessary to work with Aboriginal women on issues of violence and racism. If mainstream social workers are not aware of the legislation and policies that affect the lives of First Nations people; the profession will not be given the opportunity to become culturally competent when dealing with Aboriginal women, families, and communities in Canada. It is unethical to remain unaware of the possibility that we may be making wrong decisions due to a lack of knowledge which could potentially disrupt the lives of many First Nations people. If we are not aware of the political complexities that Aboriginal people are subjected to within our society, then we cannot possibly understand how to improve their quality of life and well-being.

Another important area to consider when discussing cultural competency and working with Aboriginal populations, is to be aware of their unique and spiritually rich culture. Cultural competency can help teach social workers how to see the world from other worldviews which allows more opportunity for the average social worker to “think outside of the box”. Aboriginal peoples provide unique methodologies that can be used to lend social workers the insight into Indigenous spiritual knowledge. Indigenous knowledge consists of removing ones thinking from a linear way of thinking to that of a more holistic approach. For example, the ancient Medicine Wheel has been used by Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years throughout North America. To be more specific Cree Medicine Wheel teachings have been around for centuries and are used to help restore balance in one’s life (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 2000). Moreover, the Cree Medicine Wheel helps to provide guidance within peoples’ lives spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Indigenous knowledge does not separate any area of a person’s life into categories. The Medicine Wheel teaches us that all things are connected and should be viewed holistically as such (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 2000). It would be necessary for non-Native social workers to understand the

spiritually holistic worldview of Aboriginal peoples if they want to work effectively with First Nations peoples and communities. As a non-Native social worker I have found Indigenous methodologies to be very helpful for myself both personally and professionally. It is important for mainstream social workers who work with First Nations peoples to be made of *how* Aboriginal people view the world around them. Aboriginal culture interprets the world from a distinct ideology which can be much different to that of mainstream culture. In order to work towards bridging the gap between Aboriginal worldviews of helping and direct social work practice, mainstream education should be providing social workers with this education. Social workers who have an opportunity to learn about Indigenous healing methodologies would have a better understanding of Aboriginal culture. The mainstream healthcare profession recognizes the need to be culturally competent. By providing the appropriate education for non-Native social workers would help mainstream health care providers gain some insight into Indigenous philosophies. This would allow for Aboriginal populations to identify within mainstream urban health centres.

Indigenous knowledge is very complex. It is profound in that one cannot understand the depth of this knowledge unless they are capable of allowing themselves to encompass *all* of creation and apply it to Indigenous theoretical practice. Aboriginal culture is rich in theory because it originates back thousands of years. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through traditional ceremonies and oral teachings. Aboriginal peoples have been using a holistic approach to healing for centuries because it works. Aboriginal healing uses a philosophy that believes that *all* of nature encompasses a living and breathing spirit and that the human spirit is very much a part of nature. They believe that in order for the spirit to heal, people need to understand how they are connected to nature. Throughout my education within the Native Human Services program I have learned the importance of these principles which has enhanced my skills as a social worker.

As a Non-Native social worker I have also come to understand that Aboriginal culture encompasses a holistic approach that acknowledges the many realities that exist universally. For example, Indigenous thought acknowledges the importance of their ancestors that have passed over

to the spirit world. When working with Aboriginal populations it should be noted that Indigenous knowledge does not separate the physical, spiritual, emotional and mental aspects of life. Spirituality is included in daily life, giving thanks to the creator at all times. The concept of spirituality is extremely important in regards to healing and working with Aboriginal peoples. When non-Native social workers become conscious of this fact they can begin to understand the differences between Western and Indigenous social work methodological practices, thus gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be culturally competent. This is why therapy is many times non-effective for many First Nations people and misdiagnosis tends to be common. The Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project Report on “A Gathering of Wisdoms” (2002) informs us that: “Most Indian people resist being absorbed into the mainstream American culture. Mainstream mental health services, which are predicated on dominant cultural assumptions, are unacceptable to and ineffective with many Indian people” (p.116). This is an error that mainstream social workers may make when working with Aboriginal people. Indigenous knowledge teaches the non-Native social worker that Aboriginal culture is holistic and spiritual in content and may need to be applied when working with Aboriginal people. If non-Native social workers are not aware of the importance of traditional healing and do not have an understanding of Indigenous practice they will continue to be ineffective when working among many Aboriginal people, families and communities. Cultural competency is a very important component to the success of the therapeutic relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers and clients. Cultural competency not only includes the need to become knowledgeable about the political and socio-economical factors that affect Aboriginal people, but it also requires the need to understand a culture’s spiritual and traditional beliefs. These are only a few of the many issues that need to be recognized when working with Aboriginal populations. It is necessary to understand that cultural competency and working with First Nations people includes educating non-Native social workers about the in depth historical discourse that exists between Aboriginal people and the Canadian government. This insight will hopefully allow social workers to appreciate diversity and understand social work from other cultural perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Social workers should be given the opportunity to be educated about the oppressive issues Aboriginal peoples face in Canada so that they may be prepared to work competently with First Nations populations. Aboriginal people have been exposed to some of the most oppressive acts of systemic violence and racism yet our government continues to ignore and oversee the issues that relate to marginalization and discrimination towards Aboriginal people in Canada and worldwide. As social workers, Native or non-Native, it is important to understand cultural differences between Western and Indigenous societies as well as the historical context in which they are viewed. In order to “bridge the gap” between the systemic divide that exists within our institutions we need to be sensitive to the needs of those who we as a society continue to fail. We must acknowledge that it is the responsibility of all social workers to be diversely educated within the helping profession so that they may confidently practice cultural competency when working with Aboriginal populations.

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# AambeMaajaadaa!

## Community Organizing in Indigenous Communities and Leanne Simpson's *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*

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### A Book Review

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Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring. 165 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1894037-50-1

When I was asked to develop a community organizing course for the Aboriginal Emphasis Initiative in the social service worker program at Fleming College, I began running through the list of great books, articles, and other resources I've used or seen in the last few years on this topic. Although I do have a background in social work, I have also had the opportunity to study and work in the fields of law and Indigenous governance; and so, I look to all of these areas when considering the most current and relevant information on any topic. In the process, I quickly realized the kinds of divisions that still happen between disciplines that tend to limit the dialogue in any field before the conversation has even started. In response, I'd like to open the horizon a little and offer a book review of a new work that would normally be classified as "Native Studies" but which I have found to be an incredible contribution to the field of community development and organizing in its focus on Indigenous ways

of thinking, knowing and how that relates to organizing and mobilizing in Indigenous communities.

Leanne Simpson's newest book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* is a tremendous effort of Indigenous philosophy and intellectualism. But, don't let the Westernized meanings of "philosophy" and "intellectualism" fool you. While it is absolutely rigorous in its research and argumentation, it's written in extremely accessible language with numerous uses of narrative/storytelling approaches that make it a pleasure to read. Simpson sets out very broadly to explore how community regeneration is connected to Nishinaabeg political and intellectual thought. Her guided exploration proves to be engaging and thoughtful. However, her real success lies in her capacity to show (instead of just tell) - through her use of traditional stories, personalized accounts, and localized examples of community organizing - that indeed "Resurgence is our original instruction" (p. 66).

As part of her thesis, Simpson acknowledges the important role of some Western based theories (social movement, critical, post-colonial) in "diagnosing, revealing, and even interrogating colonialism"(p. 31). Her critique of these theories is that they do not provide guidance when it comes to Indigenous people organizing a community that contests and is without colonialism. For similar reasons, she is suspect of the reconciliation agenda pushed by Canadian and Indigenous governments and people alike. Although her critique is sharp, it is also concise and it quickly becomes clear that Simpson's real focus is not to dissect Western theory but to hold up Indigenous theory (which is consistent with the principle of *aanjigone* (p. 54) that she maintains in analysis and practice throughout the work). The subsequent chapters flow nicely into each other as Simpson explores how Indigenous philosophy is expressed and acted out through visioning, storytelling, gathering, language speaking, and parenting.

What is particularly moving about this book is that although Simpson is not necessarily going out on a limb when she communicates some values of Indigenous theory/thought - i.e. she considers *bimaadziwin* (the art of living in a good way), the 7 sacred Anishinaabe teachings, and interconnectedness in her epistemology - she is able to relate these

concepts with depth, meaning, and context. For example, the notion of “interconnectedness” that permeates Aboriginal perspectives/issues/thought classes and texts has arrived at the point where its meaning has become largely symbolic and romantic. Simpson weaves together our relations to eels and salmon with an analysis of transformation and flux that left me seriously considering the differences and boundaries between humans and swimmers. It was a refreshing path for my mind to explore. Simpson also engages with the newest literature and information in the field and her commitment to the use of Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwe language) is commendable. Finally, Simpson uses footnotes in a repetitive way that makes it easy to use only one section or chapter of the book without losing out on informative or referential sources.

Admittedly, the things that make this book empowering for an Indigenous professor might be the same things that make it frustrating for some students. The infusion of Anishinaabemowin into the text may be challenging for non-speakers. Also, the very nature of this Indigenous philosophy – one that is fluid, interactive, and personal – really reaches outside of traditional post-secondary models of education and it may be difficult to ask students to approach this book/text in such a different way than their other classes. Finally, the book is not intended to be a community organizing text because it lacks the skills-based knowledge that would be necessary in a social work/social service work academic text .

However, I cannot help but think of these challenges as just that – challenges. I don’t think it is unreasonable to ask students to work through language barriers and I believe it is our duty as teachers to help students think outside the proverbial box. If you have the luxury of being able to teach a course that is dedicated to community organizing in Aboriginal communities, this is a gem of a resource. If you are looking to supplement a more mainstream community organizing course with Aboriginal knowledge/theory, then you will undoubtedly find contemporary and informative excerpts and chapters that can be used in a variety of teaching situations. Either way, Simpson’s focus on re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence has the power to rekindle a passion for community organizing and mobilization. In the spirit of our original instructions - “Aambemaajaadaa! Come on! Let’s get going!” (p. 25; p. 29).



