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**‘The power of our culture and teachings’:  
Healing Stories from a family’s experience of the Missing and  
Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls tragedy**

For Canada, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is a national tragedy. Every family affected by such loss deserves the chance to heal. This research is about helping make that happen through “finding the truth, honoring the truth, and giving life to the truth as a path to healing” (MMIWG, 2017).

The number of victims is large and also varies. In a 2014 report the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) confirmed that there have been nearly 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women between 1980 and 2012. Taking into account the under-reporting of violence against Indigenous women and girls, the lack of an effective database, and the failure to identify such cases by ethnicity, Indigenous women’s groups have documented the number of missing and murdered to be over 4,000 (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2017). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015a, 2015b) supported the call for a national public inquiry into the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous women and girls. On 8 December 2015, the Government of Canada announced plans for the launch of an independent national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Canada is breaking the silence around the MMIWG tragedy. Research has been undertaken into individual cases, and agency and national responsiveness (see for example de Vries, 2003; Anderson, Kubik & Rucklos Hampton, 2010; Walter, 2015; Lavell-Harvard & Brant, 2016) and the field of trauma informed practice is expanding (see for example Poole & Greaves, 2012; Clark & Drolet 2015; Clark, 2016). To-date there is little research exploring how family-based healing occurs, and even less on Nłe?kepmx (Thompson) practices.

This research will explore my own family’s story of loss and how the practices of Nłe?kepmx (Thompson) culture and traditions contributed to healing, building resilience to continue on as a family, and finding a purpose to live on. This research will expand understandings of healing by gathering, sharing and discussing stories unique to the cultural and historical traditions of Nłe?kepmx. Findings from this research will provide practical solutions for indigenizing social work and education practices that can be used by individual professionals, Social Work and Education training organizations, and policy-makers towards healing and solutions to trauma, in particular the MMIWG.

The research questions are:

- What are the practices of Nłe?kepmx (Thompson) culture and traditions for healing families experiencing grief and loss?
- How can a family’s experience in healing for grief help professionals in Education and Social Work working with families and communities

affected by the MMIWG tragedy? How can professional practices in Education and Social Work help healing at times of grief?

- What does a study of Nê?kepmx healing practices suggest about how the knowledge systems, experiences and aspirations of First Nations are essential to building a successful shared future for all Canadians?

The purpose of this research is to improve the practices of professionals and leaders in Education and Social Work who work with Indigenous families affected by trauma. Most broadly, this research will go some way to answering the question: how are the knowledge systems, experiences and aspirations of First Nations essential to building a successful shared future for all Canadians? (SSHRC, 2017). The study and sharing of the family's experiences may lead to greater connection and understanding – particularly of the work ahead first for professionals involved in healing communities, and second for the nation of Canada. As one family member has said, “When you talk about healing it is our heart, our life our being”.

The theoretical framework for this research is drawn from Indigenized methodologies, with exceptional consideration for Nê?kepmx. The core assumptions are five-fold: that Indigenized research is strengths-based (Smith, 2002); that there is power in the culture and teachings of Nê?kepmx; that the voices of family and community are authoritative and share knowledge; that storytelling and conversation circles are forms of knowledge dissemination and teaching (Archibald, 2008; Iseke, 2013; Kovak, 2010), and finally that healing happens when Nê?kepmx are involved in the knowledge making and practices for the healing of Nê?kepmx from trauma.

The research will use qualitative Indigenized research methods. Qualitative research methods reveal the reality and truth constructed and shaped through the interaction between peoples and the environments in which they live (Silverman, 2000; Freebody, 2003). The number of people involved in this healing journey was “incredible” according to the family: neighbors, family members, medicine men, healers, Elders, indigenous mental health leadership. The qualitative research method of gathering individual's stories will make possible the sharing of these diverse experiences and provide rich data of both the individual and combined influences on healing (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007).

Indigenized research methods ensure the research integrates core indigenous values:

- *Respect* is demonstrated toward Aboriginal Peoples' cultures, communities and wellness by valuing diverse indigenous knowledges.
- *Relevance* is demonstrated by training and research that is meaningful to indigenous peoples rather than the researcher(s) and academic research process.
- *Reciprocity* is accomplished through a two-way process of learning and research exchange. Both community and university benefit from effective training and research relationships.

- *Responsibility* is accomplished by active and rigorous self-reflection, engagement and consultation with community and an ongoing emphasis on roles and research ethics (Caron et al, in press; Archibald et al, 2006).

The methods will incorporate the indigenised research perspective in every step of the process—from the conception of the research question through knowledge translation and exchange (Drawson, Toombes & Mushquash, 2017). To be respectful and consistent with Indigenous research methodology, the Indigenous family involved in this study and their community has the ability to determine the direction and approaches that are preferred (Drawson, Toombes & Mushquash, 2017). To-date there have been discussions held about doing this research, Further discussions with family and community will share the proposed research and methods, and seek support.

At this stage in planning and discussions, the research methods will be an Indigenised research method that blends autoethnography with Indigenous research methods and paradigms will be used (see McIvor, 2010), and Indigenous Conversations (Kovack, 2010).

This first combines storytelling (an Indigenous research method), autoethnography (i.e. the telling of one's own story), and the connection between the researcher and the participant(s) (McIvor, 2010). Of key importance are caring, respectful relationships. A guiding question for using this Indigenised autoethnography is: How do the research methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic I am studying and myself as researcher (on multiple levels)" (Wilson, 2008, p. 77)? This research method will be a combined Indigenous research paradigm- autoethnographic approach (Smithers-Graeme, 2013); one in which storytelling in which autobiography (stories about ourselves) and ethnography (stories about peoples) are combined (Lashua & Fox, 2006); and one that gives exceptional consideration to Nê?kepmx.

Sharing Circles following Nê?kepmx practices will take place for the sharing of stories. Storytellers from family, community, professions, and others involved in the family's healing will be invited to share. About 20 storytellers will take part in Sharing Circles that are likely to range in size from two to ten. Story telling sustains Indigenous communities, confirms experiences and ways of knowing, nurtures relationships and shares what is known (Iseke, 2013). Iseke describes how storying informs discussions of (a) storytelling types (mythical, personal, and sacred), (b) storytelling as pedagogical tools for learning about life, (c) storytelling as witnessing and remembering, and (d) sharing stories of spirituality as sources of strength (Iseke, 2013).

The Sharing Circles will use the Indigenous Conversations research method (Kovach, 2010). Kovach (2010) likens Indigenous conversations in Kanata/Canada to Indigenous practices the world over in which oral traditions are used for sharing knowledge: storytelling, yarning, talk story, re-storying, remembering (Thomas, 2005; Bishop, 1999; Absolon & Willett, 2004). Relationships are of key significance as is operating within an indigenous paradigm:

The conversational method is means of gathering knowledge found within Indigenous research. The conversational method is of significance to Indigenous methodologies because it is a method of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm. It involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core (Kovach, 2010)

Of importance will be the recognition and support of existing relationships the researcher has with storytellers and making sure that the research process itself is safe and strengthening – mentally, spiritually, and culturally (Kovach, 2010). A Cultural Advisory Group will be created to guide the cultural dimensions of this research. The advice of Indigenous mental health practitioners may be used for designing the research practices, and to be available to the story-tellers.

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## **Proposed structure**

### **1.) Beginning: Intro**

- Lit Review MMI Methodology / Methods (Qualitative) Narrative/ Stories/Interviews

### **2.) Family's Story**

- Strength based – empowerment & resilience
- Cultural Knowledge – Practices and Survival
- Indigenous sovereignty over Indigenous knowledge

### **3.) Data on MMIWG**

### **4.) Grief and loss / or healing**

- Community members (what is grief). It takes a community working together to heal - elders, medicine people, Spiritual, family leaders, family, FN Political support
- What are healing practices for grief? (Traditional and Cultural Practices)

### **5.) Grief and Loss**

#### Professional training

- Social Work & Education: How can professional practices in SW & Educ help healing at times of grief?
  - Social Work** – Learning and understanding the impact of Trauma for an Indigenous family and community. Being better prepared while working with students and First Nations communities.
  - Education** - Professionals in Education gain an understanding of the magnitude while working with First Nations families and communities.

### **6.) Ending – Overall**

- Recommendations
- What next? & Initiatives / next research

### **7.) References**