Final Report

Women's Narratives from the St. John's Native Friendship Centre: Digital Storytelling to Inform Community-based Healing and Violence Prevention Programs

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Women's Narratives from the St. John's Native Friendship Centre:
Using Digital Storytelling to Inform Community-based Healing and Violence Prevention Programs

St. John's Native Friendship Centre (SJNFC)

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Abstract

      This research is focused on a project that has been created as a partnership between the St. John's Native Friendship Centre (SJNFC) and Memorial University. The project focused on developing an understanding of how violence prevention services affect Indigenous women at the SJNFC. There was particular interest in identifying how community-based healing practices provide support for Indigenous women. This project was community-driven, combining participant observation, interviews, and participatory visual arts methods. We were eager to use a locally appropriate method, digital storytelling, which allowed women to engage in personal healing narratives. Digital storytelling is an emerging decolonizing method that is appropriate for Indigenous research. Throughout our project, women participants of the SJNFC, including Elders and young Indigenous women, created films that told their stories. Our project brought forward the experiences of strength, resilience, and empowerment of the five women involved. This project has allowed for the celebration of women by honoring and respecting their lived experiences. By the end of the digital storytelling workshop, an intricacy of detailed narratives had developed, providing rich embroideries of women's unique voices. Emerging themes from subsequent conversational-style interviews include: creating space for Indigenous women in an urban setting, resilience, understanding women's health, the importance of traditional knowledge, and the effects of structural and intergenerational violence.

Introduction to Project

It is recognized that violence against Indigenous women is a significant concern that women are faced with in varying degrees throughout their lives (World Health Organization, 2016). Canadian statistics suggest that Indigenous women are 3.5 times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women (Statcan.gc.ca, 2015). Research continues to be published that recognizes that violence is a national crisis (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). There are many organizations that exist to support women's healing programs. However, there is a gap in the knowledge of what types of programs and services women find helpful and useful for healing. Indigenous women's access to programs that promote healthy living and violence prevention are inextricably linked to Canada's colonial history. By accepting that settler colonialism and patriarchy are deeply linked to the status of Indigenous women, then we can begin to understand how to improve the lives of women by listening to what they want and need to continue on the road to healthy living (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this project was to explore the meanings of violence for Indigenous women who use programs and services at the St. John's Native Friendship Centre (SJNFC). There was a great interest in identifying how community-based healing practices provide support for Indigenous women. It was appropriate to use a decolonizing lens so that the project would allow for the celebration of women. The project wanted to avoid perpetuating negative health and social stereotypes of women who experience violence. Instead, the project sought to amplify Indigenous voices in the community. The goal was to create a meaningful project that provided a platform for women to share in their stories, to determine their needs, and to make recommendations on the women's programming at the SJNFC.

There is not a shortage of research on Indigenous peoples; in fact most Indigenous scholars would argue that Indigenous peoples are some of the most researched groups in the world (Smith, 1999). What is missing from Indigenous research is research by and for the community that is rooted in collaboration and partnership between academia and community organizations. Bopp, Bopp & Lane (2003) have argued that there is a gap as to what is actually occurring within Indigenous communities in relation to violence since there is a large misunderstanding about the complexity of domestic violence as a social phenomenon. Therefore, by listening to the community and working with participants through collaboration, we hoped to create a snapshot of what is occurring in the lives of women in Newfoundland and Labrador in order to better understand the extent of the problem.[1]

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[1] This is a small note to the staff and members at the SJNFC, I realize that a lot of what I discuss in this research project is all too familiar to all of you, but as a community, it is important to take part in research projects on Indigenous terms and use funding opportunities to foster change for future generations. I realize that using "problem" to discuss violence is not a reflection on how I feel about the community members in St. John's. I am not problematizing any woman and how she chooses to live her life; rather I am problematizing how violence has surfaced as a root issue as a result of settler colonialism.

1.2   Context: Violence against Indigenous Women

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (World Health Organization, 2016). Canadian Indigenous women experience higher rates of health inequalities compared to non-Indigenous women, including higher rates of violence. Reports from 2009 suggest 13% of all Indigenous women over the age of 15 have experienced some form of violence (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

Violence in relation to Indigenous women is extremely complex. The definition of violence must be expanded to address the links between the historical and intergenerational traumas that are a production of racist systematic and systemic policies, assimilation, and cultural genocide (Bopp, Bopp & Lane (2003). Examples of prevailing inequalities such as a lack of educational attainment and health status when combined with institutional racism, inadequate access to resources, and a break in cultural traditions are directly linked to violence against Indigenous women.

A myriad of formal social services are offered to women who are victims of violence (Sinha, 2013). In Canada, violence prevention programs are distributed across the nation with over 550 shelters existing for women and their children Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Other services include: counsellors, crisis lines, and community centres. According to the 2009 General Social Survey, 26% of female spousal abuse victims seek tertiary services, such as crisis centres/lines and community/family centres. These services are vital, as they are second only to individual counselling as the most frequently accessed resource (Sinha, 2013).

For Indigenous women, efforts are increasingly being made to initiate programs that go beyond the emergency and second-stage sheltering and counselling models, incorporating traditional cultural practices as part of the healing process (Bopp, Bopp & Lane (2003). This type of community-based traditional programming has been recognized as an important part of an effective healing strategy (Fry, 2011). Healing programs allow communities to begin to address the underpinnings of violence by providing an opportunity to utilize the strengths within the community (Fry, 2011).

1.3   Research Objectives

The St. John's Native Friendship Centre (SJNFC) has designed violence prevention initiatives aimed to provide services that empower women through mentorship, education, and culturally rich experiences.

Our aims:
- Identify needs, strategies, and challenges for violence prevention services at the SJNFC.
- Create a tool for violence healing strategies for the SJNFC.
- Make recommendations for community-based healing and violence prevention programming to the wider St. John's community.

1.4   Research Setting/Site: Background of SJNFC

The research project was initiated as a partnership between SJNFC and Memorial University. The SJNFC is the only Indigenous-based not-for-profit organization in the city of St. John's. The SJNFC offers a variety of cultural/wellness programs, including sewing circles, sports teams, tea and sharing circles, drumming, and cultural retreats. These programs provide women with a safe and welcoming environment where they can participate in traditional Indigenous skill-building activities. Healing is promoted through peer interaction/sharing experiences, and combines the therapeutic value of creative arts.

The SJNFC is part of the larger network of the National Association of Friendship Centres distributed across Canada. The SJNFC is open to all community members in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is 'status blind', in other words any person may become a member of the Centre and participate in activities and avail of the services for a small annual fee. The centre provides a web of services for urban Métis, Inuit, and First Nations. There are also particular services for those flying from northern and remote areas across Newfoundland and Labrador. As workers and participants have discussed, the SJNFC is considered as a cultural 'hub' for all peoples. The centre is perceived as a safe space and main point of access for social and Indigenous cultural programs. The goals of the Centre are to improve health and develop strong community leaders in the community. A wonderful example of how important Friendship Centres are for the community was mentioned to me several times during the research process. Many people used the term "Friendship Baby". Friendship Centres welcome all people and to many, the Centre is a second home and very often it is the only place to learn about Indigenous cultures. Many children grow up accessing the programs and then go on to also work at a Friendship Centre.

Team Project Members

The project members consisted of:
- Ashley Hong, MSc Student, Memorial University
- Breannah Tulk, BRec, Community Programs Manager, Community Lead
- Emma Reelis, Elder
- Rebecca Sharr, Undergraduate Research Assistant, Digital Storytelling Workshop Facilitator, SJNFC Staff Member
- Amelia Reimer, Cultural Support Worker, Digital Storytelling Workshop

Facilitator, SJNFC Staff Member
- Chris Sheppard, CCS and UP Management Technician
- Dr. Fern Brunger, PhD, Memorial University, Faculty Advisor

2 Methodology

Qualitative researchers use a variety of methodologies that may elicit positive and negative responses from participants during the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For this research project, using methods that aim to decolonize was not only appropriate, but also necessary in order to address the belief that colonialism continues to exist (Smith, 1999). Therefore, an important part of undertaking a project that is rooted in decolonizing methodologies is the recognition of using appropriate methods that give priority to the needs and approaches identified by the Indigenous community (Smith, 1999, Hendry, 2007, and Wilson, 2008).

2.1 Searching for Appropriate Methods

2.1.1 Digital Storytelling

During the conceptualization phase, we were searching for methods that were reflective of the women at the SJNFC. During my time at the SJNFC as a member and conducting participant observation, it became very clear that women loved sharing stories with each other, especially online. One thing that struck me as particularly interesting was that many women had family still living in many of the small coastal communities in Labrador and other parts of Newfoundland. Social media makes sharing images and short films with friends and family accessible, especially if there is a great distance between you and those you want to share information with (Cunsolo Willox, Harper & Edge, 2012). Therefore, it was appropriate to apply a narrative-based participatory research method because digital storytelling echoes the oral traditions and practices of Indigenous peoples, it is capacity-building, it has been demonstrated to be an effective instigator of dialogue on sensitive topics, and it is based on a research model of community collaboration (Lambert, 2012). The Digital storytelling workshop took place over a 3-day period with 5 participants and 4 project facilitators to assist women in making their films.

Digital Storytelling is an emerging decolonizing method for Indigenous research. From its inception during the early 1990's, creator Joe Lambert saw a need to provide mechanisms of community engagement and self-determination for communities that self-identified as having need for support and solidarity (Lambert, 2012; p.117). Digital storytelling is the development of personal stories through a medium of film using artwork, music, photographs, audio/video clips, and text. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the New Zealand Indigenous theorist who has been at the forefront of decolonizing methodologies, states: "Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful" (1999, p.144).

Digital Storytelling is a compelling approach to research because it explicitly attends to the context of historical marginalization of Indigenous communities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; (Cunsolo Willox, Harper & Edge, 2012); Lambert, 2012; Lundby, 2009). The process was not just about gaining rich data; it is equally about using digital media to function as a potential healing tool for the women involved.[2]

2.1.2   Conversational-style interviews

A total of 11 interviews were conducted over a 3-month period (August to November 2014) at the SJNFC. One interview was conducted at Memorial University. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Ten interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. One participant requested that I only take notes and keep the audio recorder off. Participants who took part during the digital storytelling workshop also did a one-on-one interview with me. The additional six women were members and staff from the SJNFC.

An interview guide was used, allowing the participant and me to share in personal stories. The purpose of conducting conversational interviews were to elicit opinions and feelings regarding the phenomenon of violence and abuse, as well as the women's history with the SJNFC programs and activities.

It is important to note that during the period that I was conducting interviews there was a sudden death of a SJNFC member. He was closely connected to everyone at the Centre and his friendly face appeared often, as he was a talented artist and all around great person. Although Newfoundland and Labrador is a very large place, people of the land are connected in many ways and the community was hugely affected by the death of this lovely man. Not only did the Indigenous community lose a friend, they lost an Elder. We must always remember to hold close to our hearts the traditional knowledges of our Elders. During this time, I stopped interviews and in the end, I made a personal choice not to ask the women closest to the man who passed away to participate in the interview process. In the spirit of collaborative and decolonizing research, I felt strongly that my role, as researcher was secondary in this experience. Sometimes we must respect the silence.

2.1.3   Participant Observation

Participant observation research was an on-going process at the St. John's Native Friendship Centre. I was able to spend a large amount of time with the women and program facilitators on a weekly basis. I attended Tea and Sharing, craft sessions, and outings. A Cultural Support Worker Amelia Reimer, functioned as my mentor. Being a member of the SJNFC allowed me to contextualize the digital stories and interview

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[2]   I use the term "potential healing tool" because this research project does not claim to be therapeutic. Of course our aim was to provide a safe environment for women to express themselves, but digital storytelling is not to be confused with art therapy.

discussions through participant observation. My thoughts and feelings also became an integral part of the research process. I kept a reflective journal, which I connected with the digital stories and interviews to bring out similar themes. The process was very organic and I met with community project lead Breannah Tulk often; she functioned as a gatekeeper and coached me throughout the process to assist in making appropriate recruitment and research decisions. For example, she informed me that no matter what one's job title is at the SJNFC, everyone plays the role of counsellor in some capacity.

Chris was key to the initial design and development of the project early on in the collaboration, meeting regularly with Breannah and me to discuss the research process. He also played a vital role during the digital storytelling workshop when we experienced technical difficulties. It is crucial to know that your community partners support your work during all the ups and downs of the research process. Breannah, Amelia, and Chris have a wealth of knowledge and strong relations with all of the SJNFC members. They assisted in the recruitment of participants and acted as liaison between the women's needs and the project aims, advising me as to the appropriateness of timing for individual interviews, for example. Not surprisingly, given the history of oppression of Indigenous communities through research, projects with Indigenous communities continues to raise many questions by community members, especially when the topic is violence. Women at the SJNFC have good and bad days like any other people, so having gatekeepers such as the staff members at the SJNFC was extremely helpful for me, so that I knew when and if it was an appropriate time to invite women to participate. It was clear to me, through my participant observation research, that it is important to spend time with those that you are interviewing and collaborating with, because without this sort of "insider" knowledge it can become quite easy to conduct colonialist research even when it is well intentioned (Smith, 1999).

3   Data Analysis

Using thematic coding, the interviews, digital stories, and reflective journal were analyzed together. The main focus of the analytic themes was to produce practical information for identifying strengths, challenges and strategies for the SJNFC to employ in programming for women who have lived through violence. A key aspect of this project was that findings must be appropriate for the SJNFC, with results not leading to harm the community. I conducted this research based on the fundamental assumption that I am accountable to all my relations -- not only the women who participated, but also to the wider SJNFC community. As a researcher, it was important for me to share the process of analysis with the community; this was done to ensure that my findings reflected the SJNFC appropriately and accurately (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Discussions with Breannah and Chris were on-going throughout the research project and they edited reports to ensure that all information was reflective of the core values of the SJNFC. This collaborative approach is important not only in research; all Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies have a responsibility to speak out against colonial practice and to promote lifestyles that are empowering to Indigenous communities and to reduce external and lateral violence.

4 Themes

4.1 Urban "InDiginizing" Storytelling Workshop: "Her"stories

In the context of discussing the digital storytelling workshop with a participant during an interview, discussed with me:

> *Just let them literally get it all out, and that is healing, right? So that's what this storytelling thing was really about, and that's why I felt it was such a powerful exercise because you actually gave them a platform to just let it all out, and it was... you know...you never heard that about her. Maybe nobody has ever asked her.*
>
> -Digital Storytelling Participant

This quote demonstrates how important it is to address colonialism head on. From the point of European contact, the colonial regime has worked continuously to oppress and silence the voice of Indigenous women (Smith, 1999). Digital stories allow women to confront the colonial narrative by using a counter narrative. This is considered to be healing and medicine (Episkenew, 2009).

Research as Ceremonial

The workshop was an extremely emotional process and it started very organically with three rounds of sharing circles. Asking women to share their stories meant that all women must allow themselves to become vulnerable in order to discuss sensitive topics. All participants and workshop facilitators were sharing personal narratives; therefore, we all worked collectively to create the films. As Wilson (2008), Smith (1999), and Kovach (2008) remind us, sharing circles are a sacred process, and since we conducted sharing circles to elicit personal feelings, that information stays with all the women involved in the project. Instead of amplifying the pain and sadness, the analysis occurs based on the film that each woman created. We must honour women's voices, but we must also keep our sharing circles confidential and maintain Indigenous protocol. At the end of the day, we are accountable to each other, over everything else.

Meaning Making Process

One of the most important research results of this project – as was noted by several women who took part in the process – was the process itself, the three days we spent together laughing, crying, smudging, drumming, and singing. That experience will never again be replicated. That process was the healing. The final outcome or the final film may be one aspect of the healing journey, but the type of healing and collaboration that takes place during the digital storytelling process is the medicine. The healing comes from the circle and it comes from women gathering. Whether we are sharing in a circle while sewing, knitting, beading, or making films, the knowledge sharing and the healing process are not shaped solely by one particular activity, but rather through the entire process.

4.2   Addressing Complex Issues:

The 3-day process allowed all members involved to examine and (re) construct their sense of self and community while discussing many topics. The workshop had the explicit goal of empowering women through voice and storytelling. The left side of this chart highlights how women have been treated in the past; the right side demonstrates what the workshop sought to accomplish and, we believe, succeeded in doing:

Culture in the Western World (Historically)	Cultures in the Women's Worldviews ('Her'stories)
Repressed	Re-claim
Reduced	Enlarged
Colonized	Decolonized
Ignored	Take Action
Made invisible	Visible or anonymous by choice (autonomy, agency)

Topics discussed included:

1. "Her"story: countering social constructions and demystifying Western histories
2. Complexity of Culture: Who am I? What is my culture?
    a. Culture is evolving and never static
3. Loss of Identity/Identity Politics
    a. What does it mean to be Indigenous in an urban setting?
    b. How can I promote and maintain an Indigenous identity to a wider audience?
4. Lack of access to traditional lands
    a. Structural violence prevents members from getting back on to the land to heal and gather medicines.
    b. How do I adapt so that I can still connect to the land and my ancestors?

5 Summary of Recommendations Voiced by Women (Participants from Interviews)

Category/Theme	Suggestion/Recommendation
Education and Training	1. **Peer Healing:** Increase number of members who are trained in crisis intervention and violence prevention. For example, provide violence prevention/crisis intervention training for women. A great deal of healing and counseling occurs not only by SJNFC staff members, but also between women members during programming (e.g. during drive homes in SJNFC vehicle, outings, tea and sharing, arts and crafts, and retreats). 2. Allow women to provide recommendations to NL Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre, because they feel their needs are not recognized. 3. Continue educating and promoting Indigenous cultures in the wider St. John's community: create a larger group of individuals to assist in the promotion of their cultures to schools, businesses, and institutions. 4. Develop a resource manual that would assist women in accessing materials or other programming across the St. John's area 5. Develop a resource manual that focuses on reconciliation and that addresses Canada's colonial history: promote strong relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in NL and Labrador.
Economic Development	1. Hire a professional to assist members in job searches and career services. Women discussed feelings of disappointment over the closure of the Employment Resource Centre, including the loss of computers. 2. Bridge gap between individuals moving to St. John's for the first time, specifically for individuals that may be experiencing culture shock (e.g. employment, educational, and housing assistance).
Programs and Services	1. **Tea and Sharing:** Women discussed the feeling of wanting to attend on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but due to conflicting schedules, they could not attend. When possible, allow for more flexibility for multiple generations to spend time together (e.g. Elders and Youth program). 2. **Yoga and Zumba:** Provide transparency to women as to why "non-Indigenous" programs are offered. This caused some confusion for women; greater transparency is needed to address how funding is allocated.

	3. **Land-based Healing:** Implement programs that allow families to get back on to the land to practice traditional activities and healing. 4. **Elders' Programs:** Create trauma/strength-based programs that allow women and men who attended Residential/Day Schools to gather together. 5. **Family-based programs:** When possible, include intergenerational programs and services (especially retreats). 6. **Networking:** Create a pan networking/trading group that would allow members to access traditional teachings (e.g. workshops, online resources, teacher guests for crafts/singing/dancing). 7. Use trauma-informed approaches to healing. 8. Continue to carry out programs on a case-per-case basis; each person has unique and complex needs. 9. **Art Program:** Continue to support local artists and expand art showcase. 10. **Healing Circles:** Continue to hold sharing circles, increase frequency if possible.
Traditional Materials/Medicines	1. Having access to traditional medicines would greatly benefit the members. 2. Working with traditional materials during arts and crafts workshops and sessions are top priority for members. 3. Increase number of drums and access to space to practice. 4. Access to kitchen/space to be able to prepare and serve traditional foods (especially during feasts).
Language	1. Consistent language revitalization programs.
Support Staff	1. Employ a counselor who is Indigenous or who has a strong understanding and respect for Indigenous peoples, an individual who can address the needs of families (e.g. issues with social services, accessing health care, educational problems, and violence/trauma). 2. Have available an Elder at the SJNFC to support and encourage members (Women members said that the SJNFC was normally the only place they feel safe to seek out help). 3. Continue to practice self-care and team building between staff members (short term contracts and different job titles adds to an already stressful position). 4. Continue investing in and mentoring young volunteers because they will become the staff of the future.
External Support Services	1. Continue to partner with external organizations (Aboriginal Resource Office, Memorial University, and other Women's Centers in St. John's). 2. Seek out innovative approaches with Memorial

	University, for healing (e.g. art and music therapy)
	3. Continue to facilitate strong relations with the department of ethnomusicology in order to preserve and promote Inuktitut and Moravian Church music.
	4. Continue to train and provide outreach to non-Indigenous agencies to increase level of comfort for women who access external services.
Terminology	1. Address and discuss racial and discriminatory stereotypes that have created stigma for members.
Evaluation	1. Continue to evaluate the usefulness of programs by asking women to voice their opinions and suggestions because their needs are continuously evolving and changing.
	2. Continue to take weekly attendance of programs and services.

6 Conclusion

This research explored how urban Indigenous women make sense of and define violence in the context of their everyday lives. This project demonstrated through arts-based methods and through conversational interviews that Indigenous women at the St. John's Native Friendship Centre do not subscribe to the negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated through colonial practices. Instead, this project reflects the power and sacredness of women's lives. By participating in interviews and the digital storytelling workshop, women promoted and encouraged healing by living a good life that is rooted in cultural continuity through the preservation of their identity. Women demonstrated that they are experts on their own lives and that they have a strong understanding of what is required to heal and move forward.

Digital storytelling is a promising decolonizing counter-narrative to the master-narrative that is proven to inspire other women to break their silence and to speak out against violence. Emerging themes from this project include: creating space for Indigenous women in an urban setting, resilience, understanding the unique needs of women's health, traditional knowledge, and the effects of structural and intergenerational violence. Women provided important strategies and recommendations to help improve their healing journey. Strategies included: land-based healing, the importance of traditional foods and activities, peer healing, access to Indigenous counselors, and the important role that Friendship Centres play in shaping their lives.

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