Traditional Healing Practices in an Urban Indigenous Setting: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

A growing number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers are actively working towards the decolonization of their practice. However, incorporating traditional healing practices within an urban Indigenous setting requires commitment and dedication to understanding these practices. Relationships with Elders and access to traditional healing practices have been advanced as critical in this process.

Frameworks on how to do this work have been proposed, yet few have included stories of how these approaches are interwoven into daily practice in an urban Indigenous context. The goal of this autoethnography is to share experiences and reflections of frontline work and to further the dialogue to improve services for urban Indigenous peoples accessing social services. It is through the process of decolonization that social workers, not only fulfill their ethical professional obligations, but also contribute to reconciliation and the healing journey of Indigenous peoples.

I was sitting, legs folded to my right side, in a *wâpi mîkowâhp* (white teepee in Cree) surrounded by the towering landscape of manmade structures, watching smudge of sage and other sacred medicines swirling and rising towards the smoke flaps. As I drummed and sang along with a number of other people, I suddenly heard a man's voice singing close by. Since I like to lightly close my eyes when singing, I opened them to see who had joined us. I looked around, to my right, left, behind, and above me. I looked at

the singing man sitting beside me at my left, but this deeper voice that I was hearing did not belong to him. I looked behind him and above him, and saw no one, but I could still hear that melodic voice, which came with a gift of calmness and reassurance. In that entrancing moment, I was overcome with inner-peace and reminded that I am connected to all things.

While I sit in circle and ceremony, I am sometimes aware of the presence of my ancestors. It is always a welcoming and healing experience that keeps me grounded in the work that I do as an Indigenous social worker. Engaging in ceremony and collaborating with Elders is integral to my social work practice and my day-to-day living – it is a way of life – my way of life.

This exploration follows my autoethnography of reclaiming my Indigenous identity and its impact on my social work practice (St-Denis & Walsh, 2016). I now turn to explore the challenges and opportunities of my professional practice, that is, introducing traditional healing practices in my urban Indigenous setting. The setting brings together First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, all of whom come with their own creation stories and ceremonies, as well as historical and ongoing experiences of colonization. Urban Indigenous peoples in Canada are "geographically distributed, culturally and linguistically diverse in which many members retain strong links to rural and reserve communities" (Newhouse & Peters, 2001, p. 12).

Urban Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing population; in 2011, 56 percent of Indigenous peoples lived in urban centres, compared to 49 percent in 1996 (INAC, Urban Indigenous Peoples, 2016). However, in contrast to experiences of Indigenous peoples living in rural and remote areas the experiences of Indigenous peoples living in urban communities are "frequently overlooked in the social work discourse" (Gray & Hetherington, 2013, p. 28). Also, cultural dynamics within diverse cross-cultural urban settings differ markedly from those within homogenous rural Indigenous settings. It is thus critical that we attend to the realities and lived experiences of urban Indigenous peoples when providing social services within urban settings.

I chose to frame this exploration through autoethnography as it "seeks to enrich our understandings, expand our awareness, increase our sensitivities, and provide insights that can lead to practical action (Witkin, 2014, p.10). Storytelling is also a form of

sharing knowledge within an Indigenous framework; although, traditionally, stories are shared orally, not in the written form (Little Bear, 2000). Lastly, Briskman (2013) suggests that using ethnography as a research method in social work provides an important foundation for reflexivity, as a way to examine and counter the dominant discourse that is too often imbedded in the policies that govern social workers and that continue to discriminate and oppress vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples.

LOCATING OURSELVES

Within an Indigenous framework, it is important for authors to present themselves and be transparent about where they are from, and establish what they "may know and not know" (Absolon, 2010, p. 75). It is also notable that one's self-location is an ongoing and evolving process because: "Our knowledge bundles develop over time with experience, teachings, and reflections" (Absolon, 2010, p. 75).

I am Natalie St-Denis of Acadian and Quebecois heritage with Mi'kmaq and Mohawk ancestry, born in Ste-Agathe-des-Monts (Quebec), a small town nestled in the Laurentian Mountains. I am also *Mistahaya Maskwa Iskwew*, which means grizzly bear woman in Cree, a spirit name given to me by a ceremonialist Cree Elder who provides ongoing guidance. I am also *oskâpêwis* (helper in Cree) to my Elders and community. Since 2011, I have been on a journey of reclaiming my Indigenous identity (St-Denis & Walsh, 2016); this deeper exploration into my identity was not planned, and I believe that the call to take this path came from the Creator with the purpose to be a helper in the healing journey of Indigenous peoples. I am thankful and grateful to be guided with inclusion, compassion and kindness by many Elders and my spirit family throughout this ongoing journey.

Christine Walsh has been my academic advisor on this journey. She is a white, feminist, settler who has collaborated in community-based action-oriented research with Indigenous peoples, families and communities for more than 20 years. She undertakes her work from her personal moral stance and her "professional discipline's imperative of social justice … [and] as an apology in an effort to redress "white expert" colonial dynamics" [Walsh & Aarrestad, 2015, p. 67]. She recognizes that the profession of social

work is not benign in the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and has historically and continues to contribute to the oppression of Indigenous peoples. As an ally, she hopes that her work can counter these forces.

DECOLONIZING SOCIAL WORK IN AN URBAN SETTING

There is an increasing number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers and scholars actively engaged in decolonizing social work education, practice, and research from anti-colonial and post-colonial frameworks (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2009; Simmons & Sefa Dei, 2012; Tamburro, 2013). Adopting post-colonial and anti-colonial approaches compel practitioners, educators, and researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the traumatic impacts and responses arising from the violence of colonization. The impacts of historical and ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples has been well documented and includes, among others, land dispossession, starvation politics, stolen children, as well as missing and murdered women and girls (Blackstock, 2009; Daschuk, 2013; Tamburro, 2013; Trocmé et al., 2004; Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015a).

Post-colonial theory "supports the credibility, voices, cosmovisions, multiple knowledges, histories, skills, stories, and values of Indigenous peoples" (Tamburro, 2013, p. 7). And anti-colonial theory seeks to "denaturalize the colonial discourse in that it supports and is based upon Indigenous world-views and practices" (Hart, 2009, p. 37). Decolonizing social work from post-colonial and anti-colonial frameworks support re-connection to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, not only in an academic discourse, but also, in the context of lived experiences, in the way we interact with and relate to all living things and the cosmos (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002; Sinclair, 2004; Tamburro, 2013). "Decolonization, once viewed as the formal processes of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power" (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012, p. 101). Re-connecting to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing provide a solid foundation for "critiquing and dismantling colonizing knowledge and mechanisms of oppression" (Absolon, 2010, pp. 78-79). Hart (2009) argues that anti-colonialism is complex and must address and "de-legitimize" political, historical, social, and economic structures rooted in Eurocentric ideology. He asserts that anti-colonialism:

… seeks to reaffirm Indigenous knowledge and culture, establish Indigenous control over Indigenous national territories, protect Indigenous lands from environmental destruction and develop education opportunities that are anti-colonial in their political orientation and firmly rooted in traditions of Indigenous nations. (p. 32)

Within an anti-colonial framework, the process of decolonizing and indigenizing social work within an urban Indigenous setting requires that social workers and social service agencies provide Indigenous peoples access to Elders and traditional healing practices. Traditional healing practices are spiritual in nature and include a wide range of ceremonies, such as smudging and sweat lodges, vision quests and sharing circles, as well as teachings and guidance from Elders (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002; Hartmann & Gone, 2012; Nabigon & Wenger-Nabigon, 2012; Oulanova & Moodley, 2010; Rowan et al., 2014).

Frameworks on how to decolonize social work practice, education, and research have been proposed (see Absolon, 2010; Gray et al., 2013; Nabigon & Wenger Nabigon, 2012; Sinclair, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2009; Tamburro, 2013). Few, however, have shared how these ideas are interwoven into daily practice within an urban Indigenous setting (Hartmann & Gone, 2012; Oulanova & Moodley 2010; Rowan et al., 2014).

A substantial body of scholarly literature advocates the use of traditional healing practices to support the healing journey of Indigenous peoples. There is a modest, but growing, understanding within non-Indigenous communities that "conventional psychological interventions fail to take into account the holistic understanding of health and the central place of spirituality that persist in Indigenous communities" (Oulanova & Moodley, 2010, p. 346). In advocating for this practice, Baskin (2002) suggests that, "social work practice from an Aboriginal world view deeply involves spirituality and cannot be truly effective without it" (p. 4). Rowan et al. (2014) reviewed the literature on cultural interventions for treating addictions in Indigenous populations and found that traditional healing practices are necessary when supporting Indigenous peoples in their healing journey, and that clinicians and social workers should be "encouraged to advocate for access to culture-based approaches in their work with Indigenous clients" (p.24).

Oulanova and Moodley (2010) found that Indigenous mental health professionals in an urban setting who integrated traditional healing practices into their practice relied

on their traditional teachings, while being mindful of their client's experiences and place of origin. The authors reported that, in this mode of practice, mental health practitioners avoided taking an expert role and supported their clients to express their interest or not in traditional healing. One practitioner, for example, stated that providing clients visual access to sacred objects, such as an Eagle feather, fostered "a strong positive sense of identity" which "in this context is in itself therapeutic" (p. 352). They further observed that beyond merely incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into their practice, they were "mindful of the history of trauma and oppression that characterizes the experiences of many Aboriginal communities" (p. 352). In addition to understanding the underlying sociohistorical factors, Walsh, MacDonald, Rutherford, Moore, and Krieg (2011), also recommended the incorporation of traditional practices for Indigenous women in justice settings as a promising practice to "establish a sense of identity and connection with Aboriginal culture, tradition, and spirituality" (p. 363).   Finally, Oulanova and Moodley (2010) found that helpers most often worked in collaboration with Elders who guided the healing journey. In defining *Mino-pimatisiwin* [the good life], Hart (2002) explains:

> Elders are sought by helpers for their supervision, support, direction and/or as direct resources for the people seeking help. […] Helpers also support participation in other ceremonies and rituals that are respectful, helpful and deemed important by people, regardless of whether they are from another culture or themselves. (p. 108)

Hartmann and Gone (2012) interviewed service users from an urban American Indian health organization and found that participants from different tribal affiliations were uncertain about who was trustworthy and they expressed a desire to have knowledge keepers and helpers that were aligned with their tribal affiliations, "as a means of providing community members access to the knowledge and sense of identity specific to their particular tribe" (p. 550). Traditional healing practices and teachings among Indigenous peoples across Canada are diverse and "Elder protocols are varied depending on the nation and territory" (Absolon, 2010, p. 80).

DECOLONIZING MY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As I grow and evolve in my role as an Indigenous social worker and in understanding and incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, I provide those I serve with access to traditional healing practices, not only by connecting them to Elders and ceremony, but also by working with them within an Indigenous worldview. My first words to individuals when I meet them are: I am here to support you in whatever you feel you need, I am not here to tell you what to do, or what you need. Even though I am in your life in the role of a social worker, I am here simply as another human being offering help and support. And we are going to learn from one another as we work through some of the challenges you are facing.

I follow these words by introducing myself, sharing with them where I am from including my heritage and ancestry, and where my teachings come from. As we continue our conversation, I ask individuals where they are from and if they would like to access traditional healing practices, and if so, what would they prefer.

Ceremonies, Hart (2002) explains, "help establish connectedness and balance and help harmonize a person's physical, emotional, spiritual and mental aspects, not only within but also beyond the individual" (p. 98). As an Indigenous social worker and in my personal life, I regularly engage in ceremony. I smudge at home as way to start my day; it provides me with the space to cleanse my spirit, body, mind and heart so that I can start the day feeling grounded and centered. I also smudge later in the afternoon, or in the evening as it provides me with the space to let go of the day's stressful events. As I learned from Elders, smudging is a ceremony where individuals burn medicines, such as sage, sweet grass or cedar, as well as many other sacred medicines, and wave the smoke towards their head and body, as a way to cleanse themselves from negative energies and invite positive energies; during this time one can reflect, and pray for oneself and others.

My experience of sharing ceremony with those I serve, such as smudging, has been very positive. Individuals have commented on how it helps them relax, and feel stronger and more focussed. One challenge of smudging in an urban setting, however, is that it is not allowed in most office buildings. And although many urban agencies have policies and good intentions with respect to honouring and respecting cultural diversity, there is often a lack of understanding about Indigenous beliefs and practices. Indeed, in the absence of lived experiences of ceremony and teachings from Elders, it is difficult for

non-Indigenous social workers and their employers to truly understand what it means to practice from an Indigenous worldview.   In my attempts to bridge this gap of understanding, I have offered information, as well as requested to meet with those we serve in culturally appropriate ways. For instance, I often suggest that we gather through a talking circle, in a neutral space, even outside, if possible, rather than sitting across tables or in an office with a desk, computer and parchment papers on the wall designating expertise. This typical setting assists in creating a space in which professionals take an expert role and prescribe advice and mandated programs. I share this story to illustrate this point.

I am sitting outside on a *sipihko akohp* (blue blanket) adorned with Navajo inspired designs in shades of orange, red and brown. The sun is bright, almost blinding, and warm, flies are buzzing. I can hear the faint beat of a drum in the distance, powwow music emanating from the house's open front door, at times interrupted but the sound of low flying airplanes as they near their landing strip. We are in a multi-cultural suburban setting, with nearly identical gray-beige vinyl homes compressed, side-by-side, as far as the eye can see. I am sitting in circle with an Indigenous family that I am serving, along with other professionals. We take turns talking, sharing thoughts, stories, ideas and feelings about the reasons that have brought us together. Although our conversations are at times challenging and interspersed with long pauses, they are also infused with humour, and are grounded in a setting that is respectful of the family's articulated preferences. It has been my experience, that when meetings are held in this way, that interactions between professionals and those being served are more collaborative and lead to resolutions that honour all those involved.

Not all professionals from social and human service agencies are open to meeting in this way. In advocating for culturally appropriate ways to serve urban Indigenous peoples and ways to honour the preferences of those we serve, I have encountered resistance from professionals and their organizations, and have been labelled, by some, as "difficult to work with". This direct experience of resisting, and at times confronting, the dominant discourse reinforced by those who refuse to open their hearts and minds to Indigenous ways of addressing and resolving life challenges has been physically, mentally, and emotionally draining for me. This is hard work. Thankfully, I have found

refuge and strength in ceremony, particularly the sweat lodge, and in spending many hours speaking with my Elder for guidance. I have also found support in joining social justice groups; I don't feel as isolated when pursuing social justice for urban Indigenous peoples accessing social and human services.

In reflecting on these experiences of resistance, I have thought about the types of training that non-Indigenous staff in social and human services organizations receive within their workplace. Typically, organizations require staff to complete six hours of Indigenous training/awareness per year in order to fulfill accreditation standards (Canadian Accreditation Council, 2016). I would argue that this is grossly insufficient to foster the deeper understanding of the impacts of colonization and reconciliation that is necessary. Consequently, this leads to a lack of engagement in the decolonization of services and a fallback to the reliance on culturally competence practice. However, there have been a number of critiques in the literature concerning cultural competency and its ineffectiveness in creating culturally safe environments when working with Indigenous peoples (Downing et al., 2011; Kirmayer, 2012; Wendt & Gone, 2011). Downing et al. (2011), for example, found "the evidence for the effectiveness of indigenous cultural training programmes in Australia is poor" (p. 247). Wendt and Gone (2011) stated that the construct of cultural competency "remains controversial because of concerns about its purportedly atheoretical nature, its limited empirical support, its questionable feasibility, and its possible association with cultural essentialism" (p. 207). For instance, these authors argue that psychotherapists need to move from cultural competence to cultural commensurability, explaining:

> Rather than merely attending to the cultural competence of the psychotherapy practitioner involved in treating the culturally different, critical appraisal of the status of psychotherapeutic interventions as cultural artifacts in their own right is in order. (p. 212)

I have witnessed an openness from some non-Indigenous professionals to consider traditional healing practices to address addictions, domestic violence and mental health issues, as the following story will elucidate. I am sitting in a dim-lighted room with other professionals who require specific outcomes from an individual we are serving. A list of tasks is outlined in a legal document, which includes obtaining treatment for addictions, among many other requirements. Knowing this individual and their

preferences based on previous conversations, I advocate for traditional approaches, such as regular sweat lodges, as well as guidance and teachings from Elders as a personalized program to best support this individual in their healing journey. When professionals question why this would work better than residential treatment, I explain how protocols around the sweat lodge support sobriety and healing, as well as provide healthy connections to other people and to the community which help develop and maintain *mino-pimatisiwin*, the good life, which is a "wholistic" approach to wellness that draws on the wisdom of the medicine wheel, of traditional teachings, and the interconnectedness of all things that spans through time and space (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002; Manitowabi & Shawande, 2011). In this instance, the professionals agreed to substitute a residential treatment program for traditional healing practices and would assess its outcome through a hair follicle drug test in three months. Many individuals that I have served who engaged in traditional healing practices have found balance and wellness in their healing journey, and have become part of my spirit family.

In light of the TRC (2015a) and its 94 Calls to Action (2015b), it is clear that six hours of Indigenous training a year is insufficient to address ongoing oppressive practices that continue to maintain barriers for urban Indigenous peoples. Access to traditional healing practices and services that are grounded in an Indigenous worldview are key to reconciliation and the healing journey. The Calls to Action invite all Canadians and professionals working in social work, education, health care and the justice system, specifically, to not only consider culturally respectful ways in working with Indigenous peoples, but to be open to changing the dominant discourse. As stated in the Summary Report of the TRC (2015):

> Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered. (p. VI)

One promising step towards decolonization and reconciliation within a social work context is to evoke Ermine's (2007) concept of ethical space, which he argues "is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage with each other" (p. 193). An ethical space embodies "a neutral zone between entities or cultures" (p. 202), where all those engaged in dialogue are respecting each others' cultural values and beliefs, and there is an understanding from all stakeholders that "the legacies of dominance and social inequity, borne out of policy and legal apparatus, are human constructions" (p. 199). Within the context of social work, Gray et al. (2013) recommend that in order to decolonize the profession, we need to:

> ... acknowledge its complicity and cease its participation in colonizing projects, openly condemn the past and continuing effects of colonialism, collaborate with Indigenous Peoples to engage in decolonizing activities against public and private colonizing projects, and seek to remove the often subtle vestiges of colonization from theory to practice. (p.7)

Anti-colonial and post-colonial frameworks provide a foundation for social workers to de-construct and de-colonize racist social policies still ingrained within institutions and systems that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples today.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to kindle the conversation about decolonizing approaches for social and human service professionals and agencies serving urban Indigenous peoples. Within this context, we highlighted some of the challenges and opportunities of integrating traditional healing practices within an urban setting. Stories and reflections in this paper illustrate the healing benefits of providing access to traditional practices within an urban Indigenous setting and how these approaches support the decolonization of social work praxis. The issues foregrounded in this paper underscore the ongoing colonization agenda as evidenced by the structural and systemic barriers that urban Indigenous peoples encounter when seeking traditional healing practices within social and human services.

Given that urban Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing population in Canada (INAC, Urban Indigenous Peoples, 2016), there is a clear need to rethink concepts and practices related to cultural competence, cultural safety and education for current

practicing social workers in social and human services. As a profession, and as human beings, we have an obligation to de-construct and de-colonize social work education, practice and research to ensure that future generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers are truly paving the path to a journey of reconciliation and healing.

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