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"I Can Stand Tall and Be a Métis Person and Just be Proud of it": Pathways to a Flourishing Métis Identity

Rose E. Cameron
School of Social Work, Algoma University

Denise Richer
School of Social Work, Algoma University

Meghan J. Bird
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

Esme Fuller-Thomson
F*actor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto*

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Abstract

The Métis are one of three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada and are defined by their mixed First Nations and European ancestry. In this grounded theory study, sixteen (n=16) Métis participants in Bawating[1], Ontario, Canada were interviewed to share their experiences as Métis people. Participants described common themes of being disconnected from their Métis identity in childhood, which contributed to a sense of loss and confusion. Following their experiences of having languishing identities, participants shared their complex and life-long journeys towards a flourishing identity. This journey involved learning and sharing cultural knowledge with others, connecting to the land, and engaging in traditional practices. The ultimate integration of these findings was an overwhelming and hard-earned sense of pride in being Métis.

Introduction

One of three recognized Indigenous group in Canada, the Métis People are known for their distinct culture, language, and heritage. Limited research exists on the unique experiences of Métis people in Northern Ontario. This, and the first author's experience of witnessing Métis students fear stigma and discrimination in the classroom, inspired this study on Métis identity.

[1] Bawating, meaning rapids in Ojibway, is the original Indigenous name of Sault Ste. Marie, a city of 72,000 people located in Northern Ontario, Canada

The sixteen (n=16) Métis participants in this study shared common experiences of feeling disconnected from their Métis culture in childhood, before embarking on a journey of identity discovery in adulthood. In individual interviews and sharing circles, participants explored factors that contributed to a flourishing identity.

Two authors, one of whom is Métis and the other of whom is Anishnaabekwe, independently reviewed and coded the transcripts before coming together to elaborate on the themes that had emerged. These themes were as follows: connecting to culture, connecting to other Métis people, and connecting to the land.

As exemplified by participants in this study, when Métis People are in touch with their cultural practices, community, and the land, they can be proud of their identity. To support Métis wellbeing, it is imperative that educators, healthcare and mental healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers are knowledgeable of the importance of cultural continuity and intentionally resist colonial practices that prevent cultural practices from being transmitted between community members and generations.

Background

Early exploration journals provide evidence that a mixed Indigenous-European population existed in the Lake Superior region of Ontario as early as the mid-1700s (Henry, 1966 [1809]). These first Métis people in Ontario were the product of close economic and personal relationships between French fur traders and Indigenous families (Gaudry, 2009). The children of these relationships gradually forged shared customs, practices, and a way of life that was distinct from their Indigenous and European ancestors.

Métis culture richly blends European and Indigenous traditions. In dance and music, Métis fiddling and jigging are performed at competitions, powwows, and community gatherings. Fiddling is also a regular practice in many households (Dueck, 2007). Métis artwork integrates Indigenous beading with European floral designs. Michif is the Indigenous language of Métis people in Canada and the northern United States (Iseke, 2013). While multiple variations of Michif are spoken across Canada, the language is most rooted in Cree, Ojibwe, and French (Rosen, 2008). In the 21st century, Ontario has the largest Métis population, with approximately 135,000 citizens representing 21.6% of Métis living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). Claiming a Métis identity often means having your identity questioned, being misunderstood, and having your rights to exist as a people challenged (Iseke, 2013). In 2002, the Métis National Council General Assembly stated that Métis means "a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, or is a member of the historic Métis National Assembly Ancestry, and who is accepted by the Métis Nation" (Métis National Council, n.d., para. 2). The 2003 Powley Case confirmed this definition of Métis identity. This case, which concerned Métis hunting rights, established legal criteria surrounding who qualifies as a Métis rights-holder. This case clarified, for the first time, that the Métis people are distinct and separate from First Nations and Inuit peoples in Canada (Reimer & Chartrand, 2004). This clarification has the potential to open the doors for the further extension of Métis rights, including expanded harvesting and fishing rights, as well as possible self-governance. Unfortunately, some people of Métis origin have been excluded from the definition of Métis that was adopted following the Powley decision. This is an important concern that needs to be addressed in the future to not fragment the broader Métis community.

This extension of Métis rights became a reality in June 2019 with the Métis Ottawa Accords. These self-government agreements between the federal government and the Métis Nation of Ontario, Métis Nation of Alberta, and Métis Nation-Saskatchewan permit Métis nations to develop their own constitutions to govern their communities. Métis were also granted jurisdiction over citizenship, leadership selection, and government operations (Tasker, 2019). While constructing a cohesive Métis identity is a first step in determining the scope and application of Métis rights, government-ascribed definitions can also exclude individuals who have European and Indigenous heritage and self-identify as Métis, but do not meet the necessary criteria. This can contribute to Métis people feeling like they do not belong among their own people. Identity formation is a complex and lifelong journey for many Métis people. This paper shines a light on the unique individual experiences of identity formation for a small sample of sixteen Métis people, geographically located in Bawating, Ontario.

In addition to the desire to address the glaring gap in literature on the topic of Métis identity, the current study was strongly motivated by the first author's experience as an educator, teaching Métis students in a faculty of social work in Northern Ontario. The first author noticed that students were reluctant to share their Métis identity openly in the classroom setting. The students would disclose their Métis identity in written assignments to the first author, who is openly Anishnaabekwe. In these class assignments, the students were explicit that they were uncomfortable with being identified as Métis by their fellow students because they feared being devalued and experiencing stigma.

Methods

This study is a grounded theory study of Métis identity and is part of a larger study with Métis people living in Bawating, Ontario. The sample includes sixteen (n=16) participants who self-identified as having Métis ancestry. Participants were between the age of 18 to 65, and were living in Bawating, Ontario. Fourteen participants were female and two were male. One participant chose to attend a sharing circle as a non-participating witness.

Non-probability sampling techniques were used to recruit the participants who would provide the necessary knowledge-base and life experience to enrich our research. Fliers were posted on bulletin boards at local organizations. The snowball technique allowed participants to share the content of the flier through word-of-mouth. The Ethics Committee Certificate of Approval #2014_RC_#24 was granted on May 9, 2014, and to end on May 8, 2015. The data was gathered between June 8 to August 28, 2014.

Six interviews and four sharing circles were conducted to provide a venue for participants to verbally share their life experiences and knowledge. The individual interviews were conducted at various locations including participant homes and gathering places in the community. The sharing circles were hosted in a board room at the Métis Nation of Ontario and were three hours long. There were eight (8) questions asked and the participants had the opportunity to talk about their history, childhood, way of life, heritage, family structure, and identity. Participants chose to either use their own name or choose a pseudonym for the purposes of transcription. These names and pseudonyms are also used in this paper.

Informed consent from each participant was completed prior to conducting the interviews. Verbatim responses from participants were audio recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts were subsequently verified by each participant. In keeping with grounded theory

methodology (Charmaz, 2014), two of the authors (one of whom is Métis and the other of whom is Anishnaabekwe) independently reviewed and coded several transcripts to develop themes in Nvivo 11 for Windows. These authors then met together and discussed and elaborated on the themes which had emerged. These two authors kept a research journal in which they wrote memos on the emerging themes and their explorations of potential patterns between the codes. They systematically compared codes and categories as they emerged using the constant comparative analysis technique. The authors felt theoretical saturation had been reached because no new themes emerged in the last two transcripts analyzed. Once all the transcripts were analyzed and the themes were identified, a summary report was shared with the external advisory committee which consisted of two Elders, one Métis and one Indigenous, and a Métis young adult, for member-checking.

A Métis Elder was present for all the interviews and sharing circles. Within Métis communities, Elder denotes a respected position within the community. Elders are invited to share their wisdom and provide guidance. Indicative of the esteemed position of Elders in Métis communities is the fact that, at many Métis gatherings, there are tables or rooms designated for Elders, where younger Métis attend to their needs (Cooper et al., 2020). The Métis elder who attended the sharing circle is a highly respected and established member of the Bawating community. They were invited to the sharing circles to highlight to members of the Métis community that this research project is legitimate, collaborative, and a safe place for Métis people to participate. Along with having an Elder present for the interviews and sharing circles, participants were also provided a medicine tie, a beverage, and a snack.

Identity Languishing

Many participants were not in-touch with their Métis identity as a child or did not know they were Métis until later in life. Respondents described experiences of being kept in the dark about their Métis identity. Some were excluded from aspects of their heritage – such as their French or Native ancestry – while others were unaware that their families were Métis.

Most commonly, due to stigma and shame, participants were excluded from aspects of their Native ancestry. One participant, named Mary described this experience: "...we grew up just like Aboriginal, but [we were] told we were white. I never found out until I was really old." Tabitha also described not knowing they were Native in their childhood: "...all my childhood... people asked me if I was Native and I said no, because I didn't know."

Other participants knew they had Indigenous ancestry but were forbidden from participating in aspects of their Native culture. Jeanne said, *"*My mother would say to never to do that... never to smudge." Michelle described a similar sense of shame in her Native grandmother: "Other than the hunting, fishing, trapping, the food and gathering... it was almost like my grandmother wanted to wipe that kind of lifestyle from her children." Lisa described hearing her family talk about being Native under the cover of night:

> ...always in the late dark of the night the discussion about the Indian in the background... when you are a kid, and you have big ears, and they're talking about it again, you know hearing all of the different stories... and then the laughter, and sort of the shame. You know, I've picked that up, there was shame that they were Indian. And they never talked about being Métis. That wasn't a word they used.

On the flipside, Jeanne was in-touch with her Native ancestry, but was excluded from her European roots: "I could acknowledge my Cree, but I couldn't my French... It was a big thing not being told who you are: having French background."

Other participants, while aware of the different parts of their identity, did not know that these parts constructed a whole, and that this whole was Métis. For example, Michelle said:

> It was actually in high school, grade eight or nine, when we [my family] realized that we were Métis... no one honestly knew what that meant... [my] French teacher in grade eight is the one who educated me as to what Métis was... she brought in a little fiddle music... and it just clicked.

Participants described Métis culture and language as being a part of their childhood, but not knowing that it was Métis. Michelle said, "We called it bush French. We were later told it was Michif but we grew up knowing it was bush French." Michif, a language created by the Métis People, integrates French nouns with Cree or Ojibway verbs to create a unique, separate language (Bakker, 1997).

The experience of Métis participants having their identity fragmented is well-documented. Throughout Canadian history, the Métis have been relegated to the margins of society, occupying a space that is neither fully Native nor fully white (Logan, 2018). Over the course of one life, a Métis person could be considered Native, non-Native, Métis, and then non-Native again, depending on changes in legislation. This experience, shared by participants, of being disconnected from parts of one's heritage is intergenerational. Métis people experience the colonial legacy of residential schools, forced adoptions, dislocation of land, and the denial of existence that sought to separate the Métis people from their identity. These repeated traumas have been associated with "stigma with being Métis" (Standing Senate on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013, p. 15). This history of assimilation and disconnection from one's heritage has likely contributed to the sense of shame and identity confusion shared by participants.

This experience of identity confusion felt like a loss for participants. Lisa said, "I feel cheated in many ways because I think that there is so much more that I could have learned... I lost my culture... the government tried to snuff [it out]." In a study on Indigenous cultural

connection, participants who were disconnected from their culture during childhood and adolescence experienced the emotional struggles of feeling lost, detached, and isolated (Lucero, 2010). Despite this, Métis culture continues to exist. Lisa, who was disconnected from her culture in childhood said: “It [our culture] didn’t die. We spoke English [and] my grandmother spoke Michif.”

Identity Flourishing

While participants shared experiences of being disconnected from their identity, they also spoke about how they came to understand and appreciate their Métis heritage in adulthood. Through their discussions about wellbeing, the participants described three key factors that contribute to a flourishing Métis identity: connecting to culture, connecting to others, and connecting to the land.

Connecting to Culture

Many participants connected to their Métis culture for the first time in adulthood. This bolstered their sense of wellbeing and allowed them to feel more confident in their Métis identity. One participant, Ellen, shared her experience of connecting to her heritage in adulthood: “I like learning about my culture. I did not know that I was Metis until about eight years ago. So, this is all new to me.” Theresa echoed this sentiment: “I never really learned how to jig, I guess. It wasn’t explained to us. So today... there is a desire in me to practice my cultural traditions.”

Tabitha described that, while they were not taught Métis cultural practices as a child, they discovered how to engage in these traditions on their own:

> I was never really raised with culture, per say... I have found out that, by digging deep, I can use some of my blood memory... I made a drum and gave that drum away... I don't really practice smudging every day, but if I feel like I need to, I'll smudge.

Auger (2021a) found that it is common for Métis individuals to connect with their identity in adulthood. Given a history of assimilation and cultural genocide, Métis ancestry and family stories are commonly hidden for protection, leaving individuals to discover their identity outside of their families. Richardson (2006) speaks to identity epiphanies, when Métis people first discover who they are, despite always knowing on a deeper level who they are.

A common theme among participants was that practicing cultural traditions improved their wellbeing. Lisa said, "...making a sash or doing beading... I did all that when I was younger, and my mother did all of that [as well] … I am very connected to that kind of work, and I like it. I see it as a part of my mental health."

For Theresa, practicing cultural traditions is a route to personal fulfillment and community:

> The reasons why I do that are fulfillment: spiritual fulfillment, mental fulfillment, and physical fulfillment, and of course, learning from others in terms of feeling good about myself and giving back. The whole idea of reciprocity; you share what you know.

For Laura, engaging in traditional practices simply feels good: "I have gone to different sweat lodges... I felt squeaky clean when I came out... I felt good. And to be honest I can't wait to go again."

Cultural continuity is conceptualized in Indigenous health research and emphasizes the importance of passing traditions on to subsequent generations through intact families and engagement with elders (Loppie Reading & Wein, 2009). Cultural continuity is a social determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, is associated with strong self-esteem, and plays a role in fostering strong families and communities (Greenwood & Leeuw, 2012). Iwaska, Bartlett, and O'Neill (2005) found that Métis women who participated in group

genealogy projects and craftwork experienced improved coping and healing. While the natural transmission of culture through generations was not possible for all Métis participants, cultural continuity can also include the maintenance of a collective memory (Oster et al., 2014). This engagement in collective memory was reported by many participants who turned to community members in adulthood to connect with their Métis identity and experienced subsequent benefits to their health and wellbeing.

Connection to Others

For some participants, learning about their family history allowed them to increase their acceptance of their Métis identity. This was the case for Ellen:

> ...my grandmother back five generations [was] a Cree princess. When I learned all this... it just makes me feel good... There are a lot of people that didn't want to be [Métis] or didn't want to say they were and shunned it. I am just the opposite. I am accepting it wholeheartedly.

For Lisa, learning about her ancestors opened up new possibilities for practicing her culture: "I practice both traditional medicine and alternative medicine... I found out that... my great aunt was a medicine woman." For Michelle, knowledge sharing with her family was an integral part of her Métis identity:

> To be Métis is to have a lot of family, have a lot of connections... you go to Grandma to learn how to make pie crust; you go to Dad to change the oil on your car; you go to Grandpa to learn how to plant cucumbers. It is knowledge sharing. For me, that is an important aspect for me being Métis.

For other participants, connection comes from being with other Métis people. As stated by Laura: "I feel like when we go down to the MNO [Métis Nation of Ontario] down there, I feel closer to them to be honest. I feel the connection, similarity, and laughter. I feel I connect with them." Laura also expressed that sharing with other Métis participants during this research project was liberating and helped her to feel like herself:

> [By] admitting that I'm Metis and being a part of it... it's setting me free more to be myself... You know, we're doing this all together, it's like we're all holding each other's hands and we're supporting each other in a very positive way. And for me, I feel good enough, I feel it's a piece of the puzzle that... some of the puzzle was missing and... coming here and reconnecting with everybody, and talking about this stuff, just getting real about things, and putting it on the table, and just being myself and not being phony.

For a Métis person living in the modern world, communing with other Métis people can take various forms. Auger (2021b) interviewed Métis people in British Columbia and found that visiting family, engaging in local politics, attending potlucks, and connecting on social media were all sources of meaningful Métis community engagement. Many participants reported that being a part of a Métis community contributed to feeling grounded, connected, and valued. This echoes the sentiments of participants in this study, who reported feeling "free more to be myself" and "accepting wholeheartedly" of their identity through Métis community engagement.

Participants commonly shared that teaching their Métis culture to others helped them to be more confident in their own Métis identity. Michelle recounted a memory from high school where she taught her class how to make dream catchers and medicine wheels. She said, "It was one of those teachable moments for myself as well. I got to explain to someone else what my culture was and that it is not just First Nations that believe these beliefs – it's Métis people too." Tabitha said, "...over the past few years I've come to understand and have been told that... it's important to... learn the culture and pass it on to others."

Lastly, identity flourishing for some participants comes from sharing their Métis traditions with their children. Michelle said:

> I am starting [to] venture out and learn Michif... my family has changed a lot because we went from being so ashamed and so quiet about it [being Métis] to my daughter being quite a decorated dancer, a Métis dancer, a jigger if you will... she grew up being proud whereas I grew up not knowing.

Ellen spoke about intentionally passing on knowledge to her children: "I make a lot of homemade salves and healing medicines... I am writing them down so I can pass them on to my

children." Isabel said they want their children to feel that they can explore their own Métis identities too: "the circle of exploration... I've left it open for my kids... It's [about] overcoming that fear that was instilled [in us]."

Edge and McCallum (2006) speak to the importance of role models and mentors within communities who participate in knowledge sharing. In an Indigenous context, storytelling has been described as medicine; it can strengthen culture and restore a sense of belonging for Métis people who have been disconnected from their heritage, often for generations (Auger, 2021b). Participants describe both the experience of receiving teachings and sharing their knowledge with others as affirming of the Métis identity.

Connection to the Land

Another pathway to identity flourishing for participants was connecting to the land. Laura shared that being in the bush is relaxing and grounding. She said:

> When I am all stressed out, I will go out in the bush... it is like taking a relaxing pill for me. I go for a little walk... I get re-grounded. You smell the leaves, smell the ground. Touch it. Go in the water... I feel rejuvenated just talking about it.

Michelle spoke about her family's trap lines and her understanding of life and death as a child:

> The importance of the land: we knew from an early age. My mother's father would bring us along the trapline in March and he would have the rabbits... that was our teaching. That is why those animals were there: to feed us.

Peter echoed this sentiment, describing how the land was central to his childhood: "With my two stepbrothers, I was always in the woods... when it comes to land, it felt like it was kind of a part of us."

Participants who did not have the opportunity to settle on the land with their families in childhood felt that being in nature was a spiritual experience for them. Isabel said:

> I'm from the big city, and I've always been attached to the land whether it's water – which is a big thing for me – and small animals and things like that... my kids are [also]

> very connected to the land and we talk about cycles of dragonflies... to be able to stop and look at that, that's important to me. To just stop everything so I can take in what is greater than me... for me, that's God. That's my spirituality, that's my creator.

This idea of nature as spirituality was echoed by many participants. One described how she struggled to understand religion until she connected to the land in adulthood. Lisa said:

> I know that when she [my mother] brought me to church all those years, I used to pray that I would find a God that I could believe in. I still remember, I was probably eight, because I could go every Saturday or Sunday, sitting there thinking, there's got to be something, this is not it. It wasn't until I was in my early thirties that I found it. And that was more a connection to the land, and that's the type of spirituality which has made me feel balanced, because there has always been a piece missing.

Métis people have been severed from the land through hundreds of years of assimilative policies. Métis people have been excluded from treaty processes and the majority of Métis communities lack a legal land base (Teillet, 2013; Dyck, 2009). Métis people have also faced threats to their cultural identity through challenges to their hunting and harvesting rights (*R. v. Powley*, 2003). Research shows that relationships with the land are vital for Métis health and wellbeing (Kermoal, 2016; Loppie et al., 2009). Participants illustrate this clearly, describing how connecting with the land is central to their spirituality and way of life as a Métis person.

Métis Pride

In conclusion, Métis participants in this study shared a common experience of being disconnected from their identity as a child. The ultimate integration of these experiences is an overwhelming sense of pride in being Métis. Laura shared that her Métis pride has been made strong despite years of identity confusion:

> ...I always felt I was like the odd ball or the black sheep. Whatever you want to say; I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like the puzzle there is some pieces missing but by admitting that I am Métis; it is those pieces that I thought that the dog chewed or got blown in the wind; well, I didn't know where the heck they were. They were just gone. There was a big hole. And not complete. I feel complete being Métis. Like the missing pieces in my heart and my soul and they are in me, and they are in others, and it is the

> connection with one another. That is the miracle. It is like the Higher Power - the Creator - God brought us all here to be, to support one another to say: I am Métis, me too, I am Métis too. It is a miracle, and I am proud to be a Métis.

Participants commonly shared how their Métis pride was about accepting all the different pieces of identity that contribute to them being Métis. Jeanne described how carrying all the pieces of her identity together is what allows her to shed the shame of the past and be a proud Métis person.

> It just kind of adds onto the shame that was carried from generation to generation. And then you go, ok. Listen. I need to shed some of this because I am who I am, and nobody can tell me anymore that because I have Cree in me, or I have French in me, or I have Irish in me that I have to be one or the other... I carry it all. And I learned little bits from different members of my family and all of that makes me, in a nutshell, who I am. Métis. Mixed.

Laura echoed this sentiment and said that her pride comes from: "... acceptance [of the] French, English, Native all in one. That I am good enough... So, I can stand tall and be a Métis person and just be proud of it. It gives me an identity of who I am." Michelle added that holding all the pieces of her identity together, as a whole, is a source of her pride. She said:

> I consider myself to be a very proud Métis woman. When I talk about nationality – especially when I go into the schools to teach the kids – I will break it down. However, I don't always see myself as fractured that way.

This Métis pride emanated from participants and affected those around them. Jeanne shared how she shared her Métis identity with her children: "Now that I have recognized it [my identity as Métis] .... I can teach my children to recognize it and to take pride and to be supportive and to be strong together."

Flaminio and colleagues (2020) studied the wellbeing of Métis women and found that pride in their Métis identity stemmed from gathering in the name of cultural continuity. Women found confidence in themselves through sharing and bolstering one another. In our study, participants also found pride in sharing teachings with others. Another source of pride for

participants was visibility. As a direct result of colonization, many families were forced to hide their Métis identity (Auger, 2021b). Participants in this study testify to the fact that when a Métis person can "stand tall" and be visible in their identity, shame is dispelled, and pride can take its place. Participants in this study shared a common experience of being disconnected from their identity as a child and reconnecting to their Métis self in adulthood through practicing their culture, connecting with others, and being with the land. While the journey of self-discovery has no end for these participants, the reward reaped from this journey is an overwhelming sense of pride in being Métis. As Laura said: "Oh I am Métis, and I am proud to be who I am."

Recommendations

Participants noted the connection between cultural engagement and improved mental health. It is crucial that mental healthcare providers adopt a practice of "Cultural Safety". First defined by Ramsden (2002), Cultural Safety means that quality care for people of different ethnicities must align with the cultural norms and values of the individual receiving care (Koptie, 2009; Wepa, 2015). Mental healthcare providers must seek to understand how Métis community members understand and make meaning of their own individual identity. Service providers can also provide opportunities for Métis People to teach their own culture and integrate land-based engagement into their programming.

Across all areas of practice, including community engagement, health and mental healthcare, education, and policy-making, it is vital that people engaging with Métis populations recognize the importance of cultural continuity in Métis wellbeing and resist colonial practices that disrupt cultural continuity in Indigenous communities across North America.

With respect to implications for research, any studies including Métis participants would benefit from using Ethical Métis Principles (National Aboriginal History Organization, 2023).

These principles emphasize fostering reciprocal relationships with Métis communities, creating a safe and inclusive research environment for Métis participants, and understanding relevant Métis history before proceeding with research.

Conclusion

In this research project, Métis participants described experiences of feeling disconnected from their Métis identity early in life, leading to a sense of loss and identity confusion. In sharing circles and individual interviews, participants shared their life-long journeys towards understanding their identity and having a sense of pride in being Métis. This journey of identity discovery involved learning and sharing cultural knowledge with others, connecting to the land, and engaging in traditional practices.

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