

Article

Explicating Positionality: A Journey of Dialogical and Reflexive Storytelling

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers must be aware of and explicit about their social background as well as political and ideological assumptions. To facilitate this awareness, we believe that researchers need to begin with their own story as they seek to understand the stories of others. Taking into account the vulnerable act of storytelling, it is salient to consider how to share personal narratives in an authentic way within academic settings. In this article, we share our process and reflections of engaging in reflexive and dialogical storytelling. The focus of the article is the re-storying of one researcher's experience as she and her research team explore her emotions and positionality prior to conducting research on First Nations men's narratives of identity. We integrate a series of methodological lessons concerning reflexivity throughout the re-storying.

Keywords: positionality, reflexivity, narrative storytelling

The interpretive nature of qualitative research places researchers in a space where their own social and historical position is a vital element in the study process. This is based on the idea of “researcher as instrument” which is a defining characteristic of qualitative approaches to research (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Richardson, 2000; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). As one seeks to understand the other, one needs to begin with one’s own story—being as explicit as possible about one’s social background, political and ideological assumptions (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Hunt, 2010) as well as emotions and feelings (Collins & Cooper, 2014) throughout the research process (Lapum, 2008). Revealing self through storytelling is a vulnerable, but valuable act (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & van de Ruit, 2012), which can unearth the researcher’s positionality and inner self (Frank, 2002). By making the substance of one’s self and story explicit, we better understand how the researcher approaches research questions, interactions with participants, and data (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Frank, 2002), all of which ultimately shape emergent findings and discussions (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012).

In this article, we re-story one researcher’s experience (the first author, CC) as she positions herself to explore First Nations men’s narratives of identity in an urban environment, for which ethics approval was received from Ryerson University’s Research Ethics Board. She explicates her feelings and positionality through storytelling with the help of the research team who created a safe and supportive environment to explore, critique, and deepen her reflexive narrative. We share this process and example of storytelling so that other researchers can reflect on and story their own emergent narratives and explicate them throughout their research journeys. Throughout this re-storying, we provide methodological lessons concerning reflexivity, which can support a mindful, rigorous research process.

Preface

It is important to first preface that we use a dialogical approach to writing and framing this article to highlight the intersubjective nature of reflexivity that can occur between and amongst research team members. This approach is important considering that reflexivity is not mere introspection (Rosiek & Pratt, 2013), but an “intersubjective achievement” (Stronach et al., 2013, p. 291) in which self and other are integral to self-understanding (Frank, 2002; Stronach et al., 2013) and the reflexive encounter of self with other, the I-Thou of the research journey (Buber, 1958). This dialogical approach is mirrored after other authors who incorporated this style of writing in their work (Leung & Lapum, 2005; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). In our work, the first author was a thesis student in a graduate nursing program and the co-authors were her thesis committee members. Although the story is CC’s, through a dialogical process the committee members prodded the text and probed CC to elaborate on key details that remained within her purview to reveal. These interactions would eventually unfold the narrative and explicate her positionality and inner self within this research phenomenon. Because of the many voices that influenced this process, we highlight who is speaking when. The voices will be differentiated in the following manner: “CC” represents when the first author/thesis student is speaking; “JL” represents when the thesis supervisor is speaking; “LSM” and “LL” represent when one of the two thesis committee members are speaking; and finally, “We” represents when we are speaking as a group (CC, JL, LSM, and LL). We created the text so that it is a space within which you, as the reader, are invited to enter, reflect, experience, and respond. As such, this dialogical approach provides a better understanding for the reader of how reflexivity is not an individualized journey, but one that involves constant self-reflection, analysis, and engagement with others.

Background

“CC”: I began my thesis with JL as my supervisor. My plan was to use a narrative methodology to explore Aboriginal men’s accounts of identity, specifically the stories of men who identify as

living a balanced life in an urban area. As a White woman, I had worked as a nurse with the Aboriginal community in Toronto for a couple of years. While I was nursing with the Aboriginal community, I became more aware of the negative stereotypical stories about Aboriginal people, specifically Aboriginal men, told by the media and some of the members of my White middle-class community. Often, these stories painted Aboriginal men as corrupt, violent, poor, and drunk. These stereotypes deeply bothered me and I knew they were largely responsible for much of the racism and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal men. In my master's thesis research, I wanted to explore and share positive stories about Aboriginal men, like the ones I had learned while nursing, to counter these prevalent negative stories. I did not realize at the time, that my story would also become important to the research process. My first methodological lesson is focused on how my story becomes a reflexive platform to enter into and understand participants' narratives.

“JL”: As with all of my students who are interested in applying to the thesis program and conducting a narrative study under my supervision, I asked CC to start by writing down her stories. Why did she want to study Aboriginal men's narratives of identity? When she reflected back on her work with the Aboriginal community, what people stood out for her? Whose stories had influenced her story? How would she define her own identity and how it was shaped? This request was influenced by my encounters with the writings of Carolyn Ellis. As a scholar, who has influenced my own work, Ellis encourages her students to write down and share their stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). An important component of the reflexive approach is to understand our own assumptions and thinking, particularly why we have these assumptions and why we think in a particular way. By constantly questioning ourselves, as the researcher, we are better positioned to be open to the participants' world.

“CC”: Prior to starting the research process and sharing my own story, I was asked to tell a story from my experience nursing with Aboriginal men that would exemplify the power of stories and bring a past encounter to life. I immediately thought about a long conversation I'd had with a client who talked about the negative prophecies he had been told repeatedly throughout his childhood; he told me he had ended up living the prophecy. His story became part of my story and I retell it here in a way that protects the client's identity:

He sits in front of me, in my small assessment room. His thin salt and pepper hair is tied back under his baseball cap. His cheeks are slightly sunken, his face deeply lined. He has come to seek healing—he wants to be healed by his people, with his culture and teachings, so that he can be strong. He has come to tell his story. He weaves me through his lived experience of residential school, having his hair cut and body beaten. He speaks about the teacher's prophecy that he would be a worthless nobody. He turns to me and says “and you know what? It came true, I am a nobody. I have tried to kill myself many times, and have never succeeded.”

“JL”: As I read, my eyebrows crinkled in that way I do when I feel a deep sadness. This story quickly drew me into the complex historical, political, and social context experienced by some of the Aboriginal community. I felt a sense of guilt for not truly understanding the impact that residential school had on Aboriginal people. The reflection above was also evidence that CC had the narrative capacity to be a storyteller. However, it was not sufficient to be a competent storyteller, CC needed to work reflexively throughout the research process. In order to push CC into advancing her reflexive capacity, I asked her three questions: “Why did she choose to tell this particular story? What was her response to hearing this client's story? Why did she think he told her this story”?

“CC”: I chose to share this short narrative because it exemplifies everything that I wanted my research to deconstruct—colonization, the impact of oppression and discrimination, the role of

culture, and the power of stories. When this story was shared with me, I felt honoured that this man would trust me with this knowledge. I felt sad and my heart hurt, but I also felt privileged to sit with him, holding a space together where he could share his story. I believe he told me this narrative because we both had time to sit and be present. He told me this among many other things, so that I could know him within a larger context, so that I would understand his struggle against the prophecy of being a worthless nobody, and so that he could express why coming back to his culture for healing was so important.

“JL”: Thesis students, as well as all researchers, can learn to tell and share stories. However, in order to advance the methodological rigor of research, it is critical to be reflexive and thus examine the stories we tell. A key methodological lesson to maintaining one’s reflexive position is to be responsive to emerging stories of self and other and always ask why; this approach will allow researchers to dig further into the story and understand both its context and its importance.

“CC”: JL and I spoke about the ethics of doing research involving Aboriginal communities and discussed who should join the thesis committee. Drawing from the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, 2010) it was critical that I, as a non-Aboriginal researcher, work collaboratively with and engage the community throughout the research process. In addition to creating an advisory committee composed of Aboriginal community members, I also sought out a leading Aboriginal researcher (LL) to sit on the thesis committee, as well as a researcher with expertise in creative approaches to research (LSM). Hence, I had formed both my thesis supervisory committee and my advisory committee.

“LL”: When I was asked to sit on CC’s thesis committee I wanted to first meet with her to see what her story was in relation to wanting to do research with the Aboriginal community. I was intrigued by the strengths-based approach in which CC articulated her interest in gathering the stories of Aboriginal men. All too often we only hear the stories of struggle and oppression. I quickly learned that CC’s interests came from her work with the community and that she listened closely enough through her work to recognize the need for this type of focus with her thesis.

“LSM”: I was pleased to be invited to join CC’s thesis committee. My background involved working with clinical teams managing the persistent illnesses of adults from diverse cultural backgrounds. Over a period of eight years I worked in an advanced practice position wherein some of my clients lived on the Six Nations Reserve. As I read CC’s first drafts of her narrative story, I was flooded with memories of my clients. In particular, Claude, Cameron, John, and Molly, each living with chronic kidney disease, and requiring hemodialysis. Each of these individuals had a life story, a significant one, a powerful one. One was a fisher, one a lacrosse player, one a musician, one a homemaker and matriarch of a large extended family, so proud of her daughters and grandchildren. When Molly became critically ill, I worked with her daughters to bring a healer to the hospital to provide care, no mean feat, given this was a very traditional Catholic hospital, and in the mid 1980s, cultural diversity was not embraced as an expectation for holistic care in the way that it is in the present time. When Molly died, her daughters wrote a poem in her memory and gave me a copy, carefully typed and placed in a beautiful beaded frame. I have it to this day. As I read CC’s narrative, my own narrative came surging through me, and I cleaved my memories of the people whose life journeys had passed by me, if only for a brief moment in time, closely to me. My eyes filled with tears, I closed them, and pictured all their faces, heard their voices, saw their facial expressions and mannerisms, remembered their courage, their sorrow, their words, their pride, their resilience. I wondered why I had never spoken or written about the gift-poem before. I knew immediately that CC must gather and co-create these stories. I felt it in my body, in a warm way, and I smiled.

“JL”: As CC began focusing her research topic on identity, I asked her to continue her storytelling and reflect on her own identity. I told her to just write, no boundaries, no judgments, no questioning of relevance, just write. The reflexive questioning and constant examination would come later.

“CC”: I went home and read Chapter 2 by Thomas King (2008) in the *Handbook of Arts in Qualitative Research* to see an example of narrative writing. It was full of honesty. It was candid, not written in a typical academic format. It talked about oral histories and how they are sometimes viewed as inferior to “academic” literature. It talked about the power of story. It reminded me of Arthur Frank’s (2007) work, which taught me that academics can story knowledge and ideas through personal “I” stories. At first, I was not sure how personal JL wanted me to be in storying my identity. I kept asking myself, how vulnerable do I really want to be in a professional academic setting? Was this really academic work? Could I even be vulnerable?

Since I was young, I have kept a journal. I am comfortable writing about my thoughts, emotions, and fears when I am the sole audience, but it was intimidating to think that I was going to let my supervisor and committee (and others) into my personal world of vulnerabilities. To begin my journey into storying my identity, I started typing with no particular starting point, just thinking about where I come from, what has shaped me, what I strive for, and what I am looking for.

“We”: As we worked to probe and prod CC’s narrative of her identity, we too were aware of how our subjective experiences and positions influenced the team, the research, and the space we created for discussion. While engaging in reflexive, dialogical storytelling we encouraged and recognized authenticity and aimed to value coexisting dialogical narratives (Frank, 2002). Furthermore, using nonjudgmental language and direct questioning was essential to creating a comfortable space where everyone could reveal, to the best of their ability, their emotional experiences (Collins & Cooper, 2014), social background, and ideological assumptions (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Hunt, 2010). A key methodological lesson concerning the researcher’s reflexive approach is to open oneself to being vulnerable.

“CC”: My committee read my first draft and very gently showed me areas of my story where I had played it safe, stayed on the surface, resisted depth and avoided being explicit about what was really going on. I was good at being coy and storytelling in a way that let the reader in only so far, concealing the heart of the vulnerabilities. Specifically, JL asked insightful questions such as “If you felt more like yourself after that experience, how were you not yourself before”? This type of question pushed me to explore my story further and helped me decide what I was willing to share and what I was not. As I storied further, I not only became more self-aware, but also encountered my own stories through a reflexive lens, and it became clearer why I wanted to do this research and how I was going to approach and influence it.

“We”: Reflexivity is thoughtful engagement and active self-awareness (Doyle, 2013). As researchers engage in a reflexive approach, they are positioned to examine the intersections between self, other, and the research (Macbeth, 2001). Thinking, taking things in, and working through complex emotional experiences and attitudes requires safe thinking space where individuals can explore the discomfort, and confusion that reflexivity can bring (Doyle, 2013). The thesis committee held a safe space for CC to explore her story and to come to know new parts of her identity and how this would influence her research, and how her research would influence her. The power imbalance between the thesis committee members (JL, LSM, LL) and the thesis student (CC) was not explicitly discussed. But, to protect CC the thesis committee was explicit that some stories are too hard to tell or cannot be told. CC was aware that at any point she could choose not to share certain aspects of her story and would not need to provide rationale. Furthermore, when the committee asked probing questions, CC was encouraged to take time to reflect on the question with no pressure to answer during that meeting, if at all.

Although we recognize that reflexivity is subjective and what influences researchers cannot totally be known (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011), narrative accounts are essential aspects of honest, transparent, and ethical research (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011). The reflexive storyteller/researcher can enter into and out of the research in a way that how they see and interpret data and how they are influenced and influence the research are explicated (Collins & Cooper, 2014), enhancing the epistemological integrity of the study (Lapum, 2008). We also understand that our own stories, beliefs, and values influence what we say to CC. These things sit with us as we listen to her speak during meetings, come out of our mouths as advice and recommendations that will ultimately add a layer of meaning to CC's work, to our own interpretation of her narrative, and thus send an energy or flavor that appears in the emergent narrative. We know that to explicate this, and reflect on our own positionality as advisors, is important considering that research is never neutral, unbiased, or objective.

“CC”: And so, I told and tell my story. I intimately know that storytelling is a vulnerable act. There are some stories I am willing to tell, some that are too difficult to tell, and some that cannot be put into words. I do not share all of my stories. I tell some of my stories to provide a glimpse of who I am, how I entered the research and how I left. I tell some in prose and poetry and in whatever way I can. Here are some excerpts of my story.

My Story

“CC”: I am here, in this space, on this land, slowly examining my life purpose. I stand with my feet planted on the soil in the backyard of my downtown Toronto home. Toronto has always been my home, where I was born, where most of my blood relatives reside. I think about what it means to be from a land, to be born and to bury relatives, generation after generation, into this soil. I question what it means to eat and dance and love, to have thrived for generations on this land. Is this land in my bones? How is it reflected in my skin? How am I linked to others who feel a similar connection to this land and this city? As I venture to complete a thesis about urban Aboriginal men's narrative accounts of identity, I first need to tell my story and explicate my own positionality.

“JL”: From the excerpt above, I immediately feel that CC feels a sense of connection with Aboriginal people in Canada. She feels connected to this land. As part of a reflexive approach, I ask her to consider why she is so connected to this land and what does this mean for her? Although reflexivity involves introspection, it also involves an awareness of self where the researcher must also look outward (Leung & Lapum, 2005). Thus, I feel the need to ask her to answer her own question above: How are you linked to those that feel a similar connection to this land and this city? How are you linked to the Aboriginal community?

“CC”: This question is fraught with challenges of culture, ethnicity, power, and place. I am linked to people who call this land home by our sense of belonging, perhaps even by our respect and reverence for the Canadian wild. My family history links me to the fur trade and one Aboriginal bloodline, but my family are White settlers, colonizers, and I struggle to understand my responsibility in this place. I am constantly checking my actions for cultural appropriation of a culture I respect and a healing that I am drawn to. I am reminded of the wampum belts for respectful partnership between settlers and Aboriginal communities, and I yearn to repair this relationship.

“JL”: As I engaged in further dialogue and questions with CC, I began to understand her personal connection to the Aboriginal community. The idea of responsibility was laden throughout her story. It made me consider my own responsibility as a White settler. Until I read the above excerpt from CC, I never thought of myself as part of the history of colonization. That sense of guilt again bubbles to the surface. Her deep introspection opened up the possibilities of

how her thesis work was not only about Aboriginal men, but also about her own journey of repair and respectful partnership. A key methodological issue is for researchers to examine their own story in ways that explicate their own personal reasons to undertake the research. Although not all researchers have the capacity to do so, in doing so, the researcher further un-earths his or her assumptions and driving forces of the research.

“CC”: I am at this point in time storying how I got here. This story must have a beginning, but where to begin when I am not sure of the stories that come before mine, that link me to time and have shaped me. What to do when there are holes in the stories that cannot be filled? The stories that connect me to place, to time, and to blood are intangible; they change depending on the teller. I wish there were a collective of tellers. But there is not. I am the teller, and so I begin.

Young White educated woman of privilege
Doors open, limitless options—my future
Yes ... the word I hear most.
A seemingly linear ancestry—parents/grandparents/great-grandparents—White educated professionals

Seven generations of colonization on this land
A detailed family tree of our lineage of men.
Migrating from Western Europe, from where I’m not sure; mutts
My father’s ancestor, a Hudson Bay fur trader, marries a nameless Aboriginal woman
What was her story? It has never reached me.

What of my female ancestors? What of their names and stories?
Who will tell me their stories with all the storytellers dead?
How will I know where I came from and where I am going without my grandmother’s stories?
They are lost to me. I can only dream and guess.

I am searching for my story, searching for who I am. I was born into an educated family; my father is a financial planner, while my mother is an environmentalist and writer. I was born with a twin brother and an older brother already laying out a path for us. I am a dancer, a poet, a lover of landscapes. I am a wanderer, sometimes an introvert, who loves to laugh, but does not laugh often enough. I am serious and resistant. I am learning to surrender. I work in a healing profession but do not identify as a healer—not yet. I believe passionately in the necessity of free expression, equity, and stories. I am an environmentalist. I often feel that I do not belong. I am torn between the city and the woods, though my heart is more likely to be found in meadows or a river. These are all parts of who I am.

“JL”: There are multiple parts of who CC is. As one moves deeper into the reflexive journey, it becomes essential to explore not only who you are, but also how you came to be. By cultivating my own reflexivity over the years of my research career, I came to understand that my personal experiences have shaped me professionally. Considering I am the daughter of aging parents with heart disease, it is not coincidental that I have become a cardiovascular researcher piqued by issues of mortality. A methodological lesson of reflexivity is to consider the history and social “shapings” of your story.

“CC”: My love of, and need for, natural surroundings and artistic expression were cultivated by my experience of spending summers on Lake Memphramagog in Quebec. As a child, I spent many hours sitting with one of my favorite people at the cottage, a woman named Joni who had Multiple Sclerosis (MS). She was my mother’s age and lived in a rickety, slightly mossy trailer behind her family’s main cottage. Joni’s place was tucked in the dark woods by the water and inside she would secretly smoke cigarettes. She had salt and pepper hair, only one breast due to

cancer, and always wore glasses that had a slightly purple hue. Joni and I would sit together and write poetry and she would have me illustrate her books of poems with charcoal crayons and told me to do it however I pleased. She was dark and untamed and encouraging of self-expression, she was living as naturally and simply as possible. When I was with her, even as a little girl, I felt like we were creating something special, and that she trusted my artistic knowing. She trusted my intuition and encouraged me to do the same—to listen to the whisperings and urges that come from the ether, or my heart, or god.

My feelings of belonging and un-belonging come and go. My sense of un-belonging is my ultimate vulnerability; it is my deepest insecurity. I would not go as far to say that un-belonging defines my sense of self; it is one part of a much larger whole.

To belong
To join in
To embrace the other in me and you
Avoid rejection—un-belong
Reject first, loner
Can I step into the circle?
No obvious open space
To get in
I need a vision
Dream up an answer
And cut the head off of fear

Does belonging affect my sense of wellness? My sense of un-belonging creates a lack of wholeness and a restlessness in me, a searching for connection.

“JL”: I felt her feeling of un-belonging and I was thrown back to the first story she told about her Aboriginal client who had his hair cut, his body beaten, who felt like a nobody. Is there a connection between him and CC? Did he feel a sense of un-belonging in residential school? Did she resonate with something in his story? Is this why his story was the first story she told? Does his story still affect her today? Although CC may not deem my questions germane, it is this continual questioning that permits an extensive look inward and outward to advance the reflexive process.

“CC”: Perhaps it was the connection I felt in that moment of being present with this client that keeps me wanting to tell that first story. I felt a sense of purpose when I was there listening to him. Sharing the story of that client telling me about his life reminds me of being present and of cultivating trust and how these things heal me; being present is an antidote for my sense of un-belonging.

I sometimes find connection through being in nature, dancing, and spiritual practices. My desire to open my heart and connect is fuelled by un-belonging. My interest in alternative medicine and the sacred must come from this feeling. I do not remember when I started searching for my own healing—a personal healing consisting of having courage to be authentic and to join in, to embrace life and fear. It may have begun in Joni’s rickety old trailer. It may have started during my first sweat lodge.

Seven years ago, I found myself standing on a grassy cliff overlooking the ocean, standing in a circle of women, preparing for the experience of my first sweat lodge. A female Celtic shaman hosted the sweat: She practiced mostly traditional Celtic pagan traditions, but incorporated Aboriginal practices into her ceremonies. There were about 20 women who had gathered for the sweat. All of us were White; we were settlers. I remember hoping the sweat would not feel like stealing, like cultural appropriation. I hoped the medicines had been taught and truly gifted to the

shaman by the Mi'kmaq and that she stayed true to her own Celtic traditions.

“JL”: I was intrigued by her concern with cultural appropriation.

“CC”: As I progressed through the research process, my reflexive insight made me question my past actions. A key methodological lesson concerning reflexivity is to examine current ideas, but also past ideas. Acknowledging my positionality including my power and role in continued colonization of this land and social places is essential. Reflexivity is needed to aid the often-slow process of coming to understand harm that was done despite the best intentions.

I was nervous and excited. I did not know what to expect or how to act in such a ceremony. I shut my eyes and took deep breaths, steadying my mind in preparation for a spiritual journey. We were instructed to whisper “all my relations” as we knelt on the cold earth to enter the sweat lodge. This is an Aboriginal phrase used to honor our interconnectedness to all of creation. Black surrounded us, vision was useless, and the shamans began to sing. After the powerful singing was over, the shamans began to cackle in the dark, “we know why you’ve come, [pause] but now you’re too afraid, [pause] now you only sit in silence, [pause] but we know what you’re looking for.” At this point I became scared, this taunting was not what I expected. At first I felt unsafe like they were casting a spell on us, but as they continued to speak, my inhibitions lessened and I realized that I was there to find my voice and to let go of everything. In turn, in that place where rebirth was possible, I found my voice and my fear and my pain as well as my powerful spirit, a spirit that wasn’t afraid. Crying and singing, we traveled the journey together for four rounds of prayers and increasing heat.

When I emerged, when it was all over, I felt my eyes sparkle and my body light. I had seen my darkness, my fear. I had looked at my loneliness, at my desire to be accepted and always to do the right thing, and at my inability to feel connected, and I had screamed in the darkness. I had, in the lodge, risen up over all the things that bound me and I had felt my true strength. I knew that my darkness and fears were not going to bind me forever. I knew that it was going to be possible to overcome them.

“JL”: A sense of possibility seems to emerge in her story. As I am focused on advancing her reflexive capacity, I wonder whether this experience will allow her to see possibility in her participants’ stories? Will it allow her to see darkness and fears? But, I also wondered what it might conceal?

“CC”: That experience led me to see the value of strength-based approaches. Being strength-based means seeing possibilities and capabilities while acknowledging present challenges. It is my core belief that we all want to do better. I hope this view does not blind me to darkness and fear but allows me to hold the participants’ truth and presence within possibility.

I must pause here to comment that many years later, after attending other sweats led by other non-Aboriginal people I finally attended a traditional Aboriginal sweat in Toronto led by an Aboriginal healer. Upon reflection, the non-Aboriginal sweats were quite different from the traditional Aboriginal sweats, and I fear that they were practiced with well-meaning cultural appropriation. There were similarities between the Aboriginal and non-aboriginal sweat lodges such as the physical structure, the heating of the rocks, the practice of saying “all my relations”, the darkness, and the feeling of spiritual renewal and purification. But the prayers of the traditional Aboriginal sweat were all in Ojibway and I was instructed not to sing the songs because I did not know the meaning and had not yet been taught. Interestingly in this sweat led by a traditional Aboriginal healer I felt like an invited guest, but an outsider. I am not sure what this means, but I have a feeling that sacred Aboriginal healing traditions are being practiced without authenticity. And I have started to ask the question, does this harm?

I did not mind feeling like an outsider in the sweat. I understand that the people gifted songs and teachings have dedicated years to their spiritual cultural practices. They are on their path to becoming healers and I am not. I do not have the knowledge to fully understand the meaning of these medicines and so I am kept out of that knowledge, which I respect. A methodological lesson was the appreciation of some boundaries that cannot be crossed. Despite trust and sharing time and space together, it is important to recognize and respect differences in positionality and power between researchers and participants. Researchers must avoid thinking they are part of a group or the same as participants when they are not.

This experience, along with many others, fuelled my desire to live a life and practice nursing focused on holistic health, an approach that recognizes the interconnectedness and importance of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health. My first nursing job lasted three years and was in general medicine at a hospital. Within a few months of working there, I knew that I wanted to nurse in a community setting. I wanted to provide care in a way that honored the complex elements and relationships that make up who I am, and who my clients are.

I asked myself where I could find such a nursing job that held my values regarding the environment, holistic health, spirituality, community, and alternative ways of healing. I searched, and when nothing appeared, I decided to take a year off to explore other passions of mine. That year of travel brought me back to my family in Ontario, and to my great surprise and happiness, I interviewed at a community health center for Aboriginal people in Toronto and was hired. That job proved to be a wonderful fit. I learned about primary care from experienced nurse practitioners and physicians, and about healing from traditional Aboriginal healers and healers' helpers. I was educated about Aboriginal health by, first, learning about colonization, and then, Aboriginal ways of knowing and traditional health practices and beliefs. I also learned a great deal from the stories of my clients.

After I started working, I often spoke about my new job with friends and family (all non-Aboriginal) and was shocked to hear many misinformed, overtly racist comments about the state of Aboriginal affairs and health. Themes of the comments revolved around alcohol abuse, corruption, violence, laziness, non-tax payers, and demanding or expecting "us" to take care of "them." I heard no mention of colonization, the Indian Act, racist government policies, or intergenerational trauma. Instead, I heard comments that included the following: "Why are they even still on reserves"? "Why do they always have their hand out"? "They are violent and drunk." "We should just give them each \$80,000 and be done with it." These comments were from educated, middle-class Caucasian people who were raised in Canada and who apparently had never learned about, or fully realized the effects of colonization. I was appalled and saddened by their statements and beliefs. An anger rose in me. How could my community be so ignorant and lacking in empathy? I had to find a constructive way to deal with this.

I spent a lot of my time outside of working hours talking about colonization, the Indian Act, residential schools, current government policies, and the effect of racism and oppression on individual and collective identity and health behaviors. I reflected on my education as a child and indeed found that the stereotype of the peaceful noble savage and the hunter-gatherer had been taught. I felt that my education had failed me and reinforced settler culture. I thought about what our world might be like if my community was better informed and if this would create more empathy. Even in today's media, I hear stories of land claim disputes and addictions on reservations, and I see pictures of traditional Pow Wow dancers and artists. But these caricatures are locked in time (Knopf, 2010). They do not provide a real, dynamic, and layered picture into the lives of Aboriginal people today—they perpetuate stereotypes. Working with this knowledge is a privileged and confusing position to be in. I negotiate my part in being a settler and colonizing and decolonizing Toronto and the healthcare system. I find my voice to speak with my White middle-class community, but I am acutely aware of not wanting to speak for others. Is it

my place to seek out and share stories of Aboriginal people so my community can learn? Can I act as a bridge?

After a year and a half working at the center, I returned to school to complete my Master of Nursing degree. I planned to focus on Aboriginal health and healing to continue this nursing focus and to continue learning with this community. From the teachings I received from nursing with Aboriginal people, I knew that the center of the Aboriginal community was the family. I also thought about the transient nature of most of my male clients. I remembered many of them being estranged from their families, having experienced various types of abuse, and were often in low paying jobs and experiencing degrees of homelessness. I asked myself what it means to have members of the family be absent and for the center of the community to be stressed. What does it take to support the transient men I saw to rejoin the community? I knew that the Aboriginal community was craving healthy male role models and I knew that my community needed to hear strength-based stories of Aboriginal men who were living a good life, who were contributing to and healing their communities.

So how did I find myself at this place, about to make the journey into the lived experiences of urban Aboriginal men? How do all of my stories, memories, and choices bring me to this point? Is it because this land is in my body as it is in all the bodies of people who live here long enough? Is it because smudge and the sweat lodge made my spirit stronger? Is it because the Aboriginal health center was the only place I have nursed where I could engage in the type of healing and health that made sense to me? Is it because I want equity? Is it because I come from a community that needs to hear the stories I am about to hear? It is all these things woven together in this cloth of time that have centered me at this place. It is the subtle and obvious threads that connect us to our passions and wishes. It is the opportunity that does not make sense at first, but when we know the story, we know why it has come to be this way.

“JL”: CC’s experiences have shaped her so intimately. From a reflexive perspective, I wondered how this metaphorical idea of a bridge would influence the situational dynamics of the research interviews and the knowledge production of her research. As the researcher enters the research reflexively, it is not just about knowing self, but understanding the intersections of self and other. It is essentially this additional step that advances the rigor of research.

“CC”: Throughout this research process there were many bridges I contemplated how to navigate in order to “meet” my participants. I had to negotiate culture, gender, age, and power. For me this process involved not figuring out how to be similar to the participants but finding a place where we could meet and hold respect for one another, valuing our individual perspectives. I knew that my positionality would influence the research and that the research would have been different had I been a man or an Aboriginal person and I addressed this in three ways. One, I was explicit about my positionality with the participants and I reflected on my positionality throughout the research process in order to better understand how I influenced the research. Two, I used the theoretical framework of two-eyed seeing, which honors multiple perspectives by interweaving two vastly different knowledge systems, my Western knowing and the participant’s Indigenous ways of knowing while respecting each as valid; neither holding dominance over the other (Martin, 2012). Furthermore, I weaved back and forth between the two in order to better grasp the complex context of the participant’s stories and the research (Bartlett & Marshall, 2010). Three, I asked the participants for their input throughout the research process, always checking that what I was understanding to be meaningful and important in their stories was true for them. I was guided by the advice of two Aboriginal male friends. One said, “Just listen to us” and the other said “If it’s done in a respectful, honest way then things could unfold very smoothly.” I was also aware of how the participants responded to me—laughing with me; coming back to the second interview; and hugging at the end of interviews, which led me to believe the research was going smoothly.

The Hereafter

“CC”: This is a small excerpt of my story as I began my research journey. Throughout the research process I continued to write about my story, emotions, and power dynamics with the participants and share this work with JL, who supported and helped me explore how these elements of myself impacted the research. But, this part of the story is beyond the scope of this article. This reflexive dialogue continued and continues even now.

When I began sharing my stories, over a year ago, I was looking for an anchor to tie me to a community that felt like home. I craved belonging. Through my research with Aboriginal men, listening to their stories alongside reflecting on my own life experiences, I came to realize that this feeling of un-belonging had a lot to do with my mindset, and a feeling that “the grass is always greener.” By striving to be in the present moment I have come to feel home. It was my connection with the client in the first story I shared, and the feeling of understanding with the participants that has made me focus less on differences and more on being with one another. I have stopped looking for a group that fits me perfectly and instead have come to love and appreciate moments of connectedness, joy, and collaboration; now knowing that despite the presence of many bridges, I can feel connected. I no longer think of home and belonging as static. Home is complex, multilayered, and bigger than myself, and to this idea I surrender.

“JL”: CC surrendered to this idea of home, but even more important, she courageously permitted herself to be vulnerable and share her story. I too struggle with the idea of home and I resisted sharing this because of the vulnerability associated with storytelling, but I also did not want to infringe on CC’s story. Home for me is still a physical house that I spent the first 25 years of my life in and go back to visit a few times a year to see my parents. They have lived there for over forty years. I have not felt a real sense of home since I moved out many years ago. And I wonder, will I ever feel a sense of home again? I wonder, like CC, if I was better at living in the moment, will I again feel a sense of home. Am I drawn to the past and the future so intensely that it overrides my capacity to feel a sense of home?

I recall crinkling my eyebrows feeling deep sadness when she shared her first story about an Aboriginal client who felt like a nobody. I felt this experience opened her, as well as me, to empathetically shift and better listen to the other person. In addition, the vivid sharing of her own stories made it possible for me to feel her loneliness, and her un-belonging. It was apparent that this act of storytelling opened her up more fully to her participants’ stories so that she entered from a place of authenticity and understanding. It is this type of reflexive journey that also lends itself to a narrative that others can enter from various positionalities and still understand the story of another person.

Conclusion

“LSM”: In preparation for and during the dialogical process of committee work, I read and re-read CC’s first chapter many times. Each time, memories of my clients returned to me, more vividly than ever. I felt that in some ways, the opportunity to participate in CC’s journey brought home to me how humanity is strong and resilient in many ways. I felt hopeful, and happy. I re-read many of the literary works I had previously reviewed, including George Ryga’s (1971) *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and was touched that CC’s thesis work aimed to uncover a narrative of beauty and strength, a counter-narrative of resilience. This narrative has always been there, but not told aloud, not spoken of, not shared as the powerful narrative that it is. I realize that being part of this journey has healed something in myself—my never before examined grief at the loss of these people who touched my life, and made it better, for all that.

“We”: As qualitative researchers, we must constantly reflect on our emotions and positionality and how they influence our approach to research (Hunt, 2010). At the same time, we

acknowledge that reflexivity is imperfect and that we can never know exactly how the researcher affects the research (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011). In order to maintain a rigorous process, we need to constantly interrogate self as the researcher, our responses to participants, and the interpretive process of analysis. These steps will enhance the reflexive nature of research. This process of reflexivity and exploring our own stories belongs not only to the primary researcher and those within the research, but also to all those involved in the research process, including committee members and any readers who consciously engage in this work. Any story that we engage with affects how we perceive and live with our own stories. Perhaps this is best said by Thomas King (2003): “Don’t say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (p. 29).

“LL”: When I heard of CC’s experiences with “well intentioned cultural appropriation,” I felt deep sorrow reminiscent of how I felt when I sat on an island owned by Germans in the beautiful Muskoka, Ontario. As with traditional lands throughout Turtle Island, in the 1800s the people of this traditional territory were relegated to reserves to make way for settlers. Just as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis were/are disposed of their land, we were also disposed of our ceremony and knowledge. Cultural appropriation of our knowledge and ceremony does tremendous damage. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis are reawakening through ceremony. We need the space and time to do this and when someone takes our knowledge and ceremony and applies it in a way that was unintended, it enforces colonialism—incidentally, we are not in a post or neo-colonial time. It is important that the academy attempts to decolonize and not appropriate Indigenous knowledge. CC began her journey wanting to position her research from an Indigenous theoretical framework but the Indigenous knowledge was lacking. I asked her to explore the literature on two-eyed seeing and to commit herself to the western theoretical perspective that permeated her approach. To state that an Indigenous theoretical position would be used would be a form of cultural appropriation. Instead, CC decided on a two-eyed seeing approach using her understanding of Western theory and the Indigenous ways of knowing that were shared by her participants.

“We”: Methodological lessons shared throughout the article explicate practical implications for teaching reflexivity and implementing it throughout the research process. To actualize reflexivity, researchers can explore how understanding his or her own story is a platform to enter into and understand participants’ narratives. Opening up to being vulnerable as stories are shared with others and always asking why will allow researchers to dig further into their positionality, personal need to do the research, and assumptions that will ultimately shape the entire research process. Creating safe spaces for sharing personal narratives is crucial and can be done with the use of nonjudgemental language and giving individuals control over which aspects of their stories they share. Last, an important outcome of reflexivity is unearthing power dynamics and coming to know and respect the boundaries between researchers and participants.

We have all been affected by engaging in this research and in reflexive storytelling, and it has brought CC closer to honest, transparent, ethical research. As we supported CC to explicate her positionality, we all simultaneously explored our own narratives and subjective positions. We share this process as an example of creating a space for dialogical and reflexive storytelling so that other researchers can reflect on, and story, their own emergent narratives that explicate their emotions and positionality. Engaging in this process throughout the research journey can support a mindful, rigorous research process and produce more honest, ethical research.

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