Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People
Connected with the Criminal Justice System

By

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ABSTRACT

This participatory and community-based research project aims to foster hope and healing for Aboriginal people whose lives have been affected directly by the Criminal Justice System (CJS). In this project, I recorded the experiences, views, and stories shared by Aboriginal participants to shed new light on the conditions of power that inform their experiences and to create opportunities restory their histories in ways that might foster growth and healing. This restorying circle project is committed to three connected objectives: first, to enable Aboriginal people involved with the CJS to improve their lives; second, to create greater awareness of colonial impediments to justice for Aboriginal people by fostering counter-narratives to the prevailing political rhetoric that we need ‘more jails’ in Canada to lock up the ‘bad guys’; and third, to create new culturally safe models for politically engaged healing.

The restorying circles designed for this project placed Aboriginal men impacted by the CJS in dialogue with other Aboriginal men who had endured similar experiences. The restorying circles adopted an approach similar to that of the sharing circles utilized in many cultural and spiritual ceremonies within Aboriginal communities. These restorying circles were adapted to serve the needs of Aboriginal former inmates who have varying levels of traditional knowledge, spiritual connection, and cultural experience.

This project demonstrates the continued need for culturally supportive practices for Aboriginal people involved with the CJS, a need that is particularly acute in urban centers. The project also suggests that Aboriginal people involved with the CJS benefit from the spiritual connections and cultural support enabled within the restorying environment. Furthermore, the project shows how socio-economic factors played a significant role in the paths of these Aboriginal men towards the CJS. In this dissertation, I contend that restorying circles foreground
the agency of participants, foster a sense of community that is often lacking for these individuals, and offer opportunities to imagine alternatives to the stories these men have often heard about themselves. The stories created and shared by the participants offer alternatives to disempowerment and criminalization, and they propose a healthier pathway for other Aboriginal people.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. v

Chapter One: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

  Indigenous Storytelling Practices and Restorying Circles ................................................................. 4

  Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal Former Offenders ...................................................................... 10

Chapter Two: Methodology ................................................................................................................. 18

Chapter Three: Isolation and Incarceration ......................................................................................... 26

  Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 27

  Loneliness and Isolation ..................................................................................................................... 30

  Role Models ...................................................................................................................................... 34

  Isolation, Substance Abuse, and Incarceration ................................................................................ 36

  Carceral Trauma and the Heightening of Isolation ....................................................................... 40

  Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 43

Chapter Four: Restorying Circles and the Rebuilding of Community ................................................. 44

  Circles of Community: Moving beyond Isolation ....................................................................... 45

  The Persistence of Hope .................................................................................................................... 48

  Spirituality and Culture ..................................................................................................................... 53

  The Restorying Process ..................................................................................................................... 58

Chapter Five: Recommendations ........................................................................................................ 72

Chapter Six: Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 77

References ............................................................................................................................................ 88
Appendix A: Medicine Wheel Tipi I .................................................................93
Appendix B: Medicine Wheel Tipi II ...............................................................94
Appendix C: Medicine Wheel Tipi Model .........................................................95
Appendix D: Letter of Information .................................................................96
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form ...............................................................98
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This participatory and community-based research project aims to foster hope and healing for Aboriginal people whose lives have been impacted by the criminal justice system. I recorded the experiences, views, and stories shared by the participants to shed new light on the conditions of power that inform their experiences and to assist these participants with potentially more positive restoried self-formations that might foster growth and healing. Through the practice of restorying, this project has three interconnected objectives: first, to enable Aboriginal people involved with the criminal justice system to improve their lives; second, to create greater awareness of colonial impediments to justice for Aboriginal people by fostering counter-narratives to the prevailing political rhetoric that we need ‘more jails’ in Canada to lock up the ‘bad guys’; and third, to create new culturally safe models for politically engaged healing.

That the Criminal Justice System (CJS) has long failed Aboriginal people in Canada is well documented (RCAP, 1996; York, 1990). Statistics continue to show the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in all areas of the CJS. In 2010/11, Aboriginal people represented just over 3% of the Canadian population, but represented roughly 27% of admissions to provincial prisons and 20% to federal prisons (Dauvergne, M., 2012, p.11). My hypothesis entering this project—built from my experiences as a Cree scholar who has worked in the CJS for 21 years and has studied colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and carceral spaces like the residential school and child welfare system—was that restorying circles for Aboriginal people involved with the CJS will begin offering opportunities to contextualize experiences within an unjust colonial history, to deconstruct negative personal narratives, and to enable healing to begin (or continue). Remembering, sharing stories, and revitalizing our consciousness in a safe and culturally
engaged sharing circle with the support of Elders and other Aboriginal men might enable the participants to reframe and restory their own histories in positive and generative ways.

My biological mother was a residential school survivor who was exposed to a volatile environment that robbed her of a healthy lifestyle. Her trauma led to the fragmentation of my family and my placement in several foster homes before eventually being adopted into another dysfunctional family. Growing up in a negative environment and being exposed to violence, alcoholism, and abuse informed my own troubles with the law. After spending time reflecting on, revising, and restorying my personal history, I have been able to rise above intergenerational trauma’s attendant challenges. The vision for this project has emerged by braiding together my experiences as an Aboriginal man working within Corrections with my experiences confronting the Canadian legal system as a youth and with academic understandings gained during my studies in Sociology, Native Studies, Education, and Cultural Studies.

The present project builds from my Master’s thesis, which interrogated the roles of residential schooling, the child welfare system, and intergenerational trauma in the incarceration rates of Aboriginal people, and illuminated the limited opportunities available to Aboriginal inmates—a population with access to few culturally relevant resources in the service of healing and empowerment. This project is also facilitated by my certifications in Aboriginal Perception-Cultural Competency, Reality Therapy, Control Theory, and the “Coming Full Circle” training program, as well as by my participation in and facilitation of sharing circles conducted by Elders within the prison system and in Aboriginal communities, some of which are ongoing.

Anishinaabe writer Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm notes that “[a] lot of Indigenous men have learned what it means to be an Indigenous man from the worst possible sources, like residential school or Child Welfare System or jail, or parents who went through one or more of those
systems and lacked the parenting skills that they needed in order to guide their sons” (p.182, qtd in McKegney, 2014). Ironically, the programs that connect many Aboriginal inmates to their cultures within prison settings are often unavailable to them upon release, particularly if they do not return to a reserve-based setting. For Aboriginal former inmates who reside in an urban space like Kingston, Ontario—a small Canadian city of 125,000 people with a small but vibrant Aboriginal population, multiple prisons, and limited cultural resources—the lack of opportunity to engage with personal and cultural histories may adversely impact healing and may indeed contribute to recidivism.

The restorying circles enacted in this project are designed to address the aforementioned void by enabling Aboriginal men in Kingston whose lives have been impacted by the CJS to engage in group discussions informed by Aboriginal spiritual practices and attuned to the transformative power of stories. Traditional stories have served historically as a means through which Aboriginal people have honored the past, understood the present, and envisioned the future. Storytelling is a culturally appropriate way of mobilizing past experiences and forms of knowledge to confront new challenges and concerns. Sharing stories can validate the experiences of the storytellers, arresting authority from non-Indigenous “experts” and investing authority in all members of the collective. The act of sharing stories can also offer others the strength, encouragement, and support they need to tell their own stories (Brown L. & Strega S., 2005, p.252). By sharing hidden experiences, the participants in the restorying circles can help each other see the relevance of their own life journeys and make re-interpretations that can foster healing. The restorying project of developing and consciously evolving one’s story is designed to be a lengthy process. In this sense, it is quite distinct from a singular testimonial paradigm such as that showcased in the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One
of the aims of restorying is to rediscover, to understand, and to gain interpretive agency over the past. Past pains can be rewritten as battles won, not scars collected. Maybe we can outgrow the stories we’ve told ourselves; maybe we can become something different; perhaps we can even become the true selves that colonialism has sought to deny us.

**Indigenous Storytelling Practices and Restorying Circles**

The restorying process envisioned for this project is inspired by traditional and non-traditional storytelling practices adapted to serve the needs of Aboriginal former inmates with varying levels of cultural knowledge and experience. This project employs an Indigenized collaborative research approach indebted to Linda Tuhuwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) and elaborated in Jo-Ann Archibald’s *Indigenous Storywork* (2008). It is built on a foundation of substantive critique of the unjust nature of historical Indigenous confrontations with colonial education (Milloy, J., 1999; Stonefish, B., 2007), colonial systems of gender (Anderson, K., 2000, McKegney, S. 2014), and the colonial justice system (Rudin, J., n.d., 2002; Rymhs, D., 2008). However, this project aims to move beyond critique in order to honor the agency of participants in creative ways. It recognizes Indigenous former inmates not as passive products of colonial social engineering but rather as active agents whose experiential and critical knowledge is well positioned not only to critique the contemporary Canadian justice system but also to imagine other possibilities in which the restorying of their lives can participate in individual and communal healing. The project thus seeks actively to produce new knowledge that extends the critiques outlined above in the direction of Indigenous well being and empowerment.

Many Indigenous cultural practices such as storytelling have been fractured by decades of forced assimilation in residential school and elsewhere. As has been widely documented in
historical records and survivor testimonies, students in residential schools were punished for speaking their language and sharing their stories, often violently (Milloy, 1999, McKegney, 2007, TRC Final Report, June 2015). Yet, Indigenous storytelling practices survive and continue to foster resiliency within Indigenous communities. According to Maori scholar Linda Tahuawai Smith, "‘The talk’ about the colonial past is embedded in our political discourses, our humor, poetry, music, storytelling, and other common sense ways of passing on both a narrative of history and an attitude about history" (as cited in Corntassel, 2009, p.137). Indigenous storytelling practices have been a means of transmitting and sustaining culture for Indigenous groups from time immemorial. Prior to contact with Europeans, stories were passed down from generation to generation to keep Indigenous ceremonies and spirituality strong. Indigenous storytelling practices emerged from Indigenous worldviews, incorporating holistic approaches that connect different realms of life (human, animal, plant and spirit) and tie together physical, emotional, and spiritual teachings (Archibald, 2008, p.11, 12).

Indigenous storytelling practices encourage individual health and community balance through the incorporation of oral traditions, spiritual/cultural practices, ceremonies, and teachings (Brown L. & Strega S., 2005, p.252). As such, Indigenous storytelling disrupts colonial assimilation by honoring the resilience of teachings within one’s culture as they endure and empower community members to live balanced lives. As Archibald (2008) notes, traditional storytelling is often employed as a teaching tool within Indigenous communities (p. 29). Elders’ stories and histories educate communities by transmitting Indigenous knowledge and spiritual wisdom in ways that sustain culture, such as respecting the Seven Grandfather Teachings in order to stay in balance spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally as represented on the
Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People

Medicine Wheel. The Seven Grandfather teachings are wisdom, love, bravery, honesty, courage, respect, and humility.

The medicine wheel tipi (MWT) model was utilized in the restorying circle project to assist the participants in sharing their life stories, starting in the East (childhood years), going to the South (adolescent years), onto the West (adulthood years), and finally to the North (Elderly years). There are certain questions/key words described within each of the four quadrants of the medicine wheel to guide the participants with their story sharing. These questions are used to prompt reflection in ways that might lead towards positive self-transformation. The questions/key words offered in the MWT are intended to create conversation and lead participants to think differently about their past histories. The change of thought pattern will hopefully lead participants to be able to begin to restory their own stories. In addition, the medicine wheel tipi model is designed to encapsulate Indigenous former offenders’ personal statements relating to their life journeys and prompt them to think not only about the harm they have suffered but also about what one can do to reverse this harm.

The medicine wheel teachings and the tipi are culturally recognizable by a majority of Indigenous people across Canada. The medicine wheel has been used in passing on Indigenous historical written and oral knowledge for centuries. The tipi is a place where storytelling sessions traditionally took place among several Indigenous cultures, including the Cree, Blackfoot, and Dakota. My own healing journey and re-storying process contributed to the evolution of the medicine wheel tipi model. A number of Federal and Provincial prison systems have tipis set up on their properties to allow Indigenous Elders to facilitate teachings, which often include discussions of the medicine wheel, to incarcerated Indigenous offenders. As well, several Indigenous programs offered to Indigenous inmates include the medicine wheel teachings.
Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People because of the importance of this cultural teaching tool in relations to healing. The MWT is designed to help the participants improve their interactions with each other by fostering more open and individualized ways of perceiving situations and problems, and provoking new insights through the process of listening to others share their own stories. The medicine wheel tipi model was used to assist the participants in remembering their own histories but in a controlled and sensitive manner. Visualizing through a symbolic art form like the MWT can create new ways of thinking about one’s history that provide personal creative control. The MWT model is a teaching tool that will hopefully prompt reflection and remembering to assist with the restorying process.

The medicine wheel helps us understand things that we can’t see physically but that include ideas or visions. The medicine wheel teaches us to balance the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual elements of our identities in order to stay healthy. Everyone who uses the medicine wheel will see things slightly differently. This difference is because everyone has their own unique gifts that are needed to serve themselves and others. Many cultures use different symbols for their own teachings of their stories. When we look into a medicine wheel, we see our weaknesses and our strengths. One must visualize oneself in the middle, connected to all points of the medicine wheel. The east is the place of new beginnings; all of us will return to this place, as we experience new things in our lives. Everyone has a place in life’s journey; if we do not or cannot recognize what we are to do in this journey, we tend not to grow as a person. Perhaps this is why many incarcerated Aboriginal people have such difficulty understanding the nature of their journeys: due to their own inability to recognize the gifts they were given at a young age. The most difficult and valuable gift of the south is to be able to express one’s feelings openly and freely and to do so without hurting others. The gift of prayer occurs in the west. This
allows us to be spiritually connected. People need to find room in their life to prayer to reflect on their own creation and what they are to do with their lives. The greatest lesson of the west is to accept ourselves for who we really are. As human beings we develop and grow in relation to our decisions, good and bad. Many people imagine themselves to have far less potential than they actually do. The north is the winter, white snow like the white hair of our elders. Not all gifts come easy and to gain the wisdom of age takes hard work and patience. To be a whole person, according to the teachings of the medicine wheel, is to be alive in a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual way.

On the first day of our restorying circles, I introduced the men to the medicine wheel tipi and indicated how it could be used to help them with their reflections. In this meeting I told them that the key words and phrases on the wheel were taken from my own experience and some of the difficult experiences of Indigenous men I had dealt with in the prison system throughout the previous two decades. I then indicated that in each subsequent meeting I would focus in on a particular side of the medicine wheel tipi that is aligned with the subject matter of that day’s discussion—whether that was childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. In other words, I let the participants know that on the day that we would be discussing adolescence, I would identify some key words and themes for them to consider, using the medicine wheel tipi. When the men would share their stories each day, I invited them to use the MWT as a prompt, if they so desired. However, I stressed that this was entirely optional and that they did not have to use the MWT if they didn’t want to. Also, I should note that the somewhat pan-Indigenous character of the medicine wheel tipi could be altered to make other models that are more tribally specific in future restorying circles. The medicine wheel tipi model could be transformed into another cultural symbolic model or teaching application, where it would serve the needs of a particular
Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People

Indigenous community. If one were conducting restorying circles in Iqaluit then an Inukshuk might provide a more useful cultural symbol to provoke reflection than a tipi. Or if one were conducting a circle among entirely Haudenosaunee men, then a Medicine Longhouse might be better.

Woolner (2009) contends that valuable lessons can be learned by incorporating teachings from Elders’ stories into one’s life journey. The stories teach respect for self, family members, Elders, communities, neighbors, and for all life (p.3). Archibald (2008) argues that “some stories powerfully inspire the listeners to make dramatic life changes” (p.124). Indigenous storytelling offers the opportunity for resiliency and healing within the Indigenous community. This resiliency is an ongoing process in which healing transcends trauma, enabling Indigenous peoples to resist losses of culture and selfhood (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009, p.43). Indigenous storytelling practices have always been recognized as powerful within Indigenous communities. Although storytelling circles may be limited to men or women or families, when storytelling sessions occur everyone within the group specified is welcome and no one is turned away, ensuring that all people have the opportunity not only to listen but to share their own stories—to be part of the stories. Archibald quotes Leslie Marmon Silko as saying, “The old folks said the stories themselves had the power to protect us and even to heal us” (2008, p.27). And as Brown and Strega remind us, sharing stories also validates the life experiences of the storytellers (2005, ch.9).
Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal Former Offenders

The Criminal Justice System has been deemed racist, unfair, biased, and colonial in its treatment of Indigenous people (Rudin J., n.d., Milloy, 1999). The respected Ojibwa Elder Art Solomon has famously referred to the Canadian legal system as the “just us” system. Rudin (n.d.) argues that the CJS is designed to perpetuate the colonial subjugation of Aboriginal people (p.66), which contributes to the over-representation of Aboriginal people at all levels of the system. Unfortunately, due to the culturally genocidal effects of systems like residential schooling, many Indigenous people do not become introduced to their culture until they find themselves embroiled within the CJS. It is often during their incarceration that Aboriginal offenders begin addressing their spiritual needs and healing by participating in Indigenous programs. However, once they are released, their continued need to stay on the healing path becomes restricted due to the limited Indigenous-specific resources available outside the prison walls. There tends to be limited services to address the needs of Indigenous offenders released from the prison system, especially in urban areas where there is a small Indigenous population. Within the city of Kingston, there used to be the Katarokwi Native Friendship Centre but it closed down a few years ago. There are only a few remaining Aboriginal organizations—including the Métis Nation of Ontario, Kagita Mikam Employment and Training, Tipi Moza housing, and Four Directions, the latter of which primarily serves the Queen’s community but also does some community events—to serve the Indigenous population in Kingston. These Indigenous organizations have limited services to meet the specific needs of Indigenous offenders upon release. Unfortunately, these organizations do not offered spiritual and cultural ceremonies like sweat lodges or talking circles on a regular basis, which is what these Indigenous offenders would benefit the most from. Indigenous offenders may find it more difficult to access
cultural and spiritual services in the community, whereas these services were more readily available in prison system. In addition, some Indigenous offenders find it extremely difficult to seek out the resources they require upon release because they are ashamed or scared to ask for help as well. For most of their lives they have been told what to do, and when and how to do it. They seldom had to look for assistance to help themselves because they were incarcerated and things were taken care of by other people employed within the criminal justice system, be it in prisons, young offenders’ facilities, or group homes.

Many are forced to articulate their new life journeys alone, without much in the way of cultural assistance, upon release. Many struggle to create a new story that fits their current release environment and many end up back on the inside. For some, the same old story keeps creeping back into their lives, entrenching them within the Criminal Justice System.

Many Aboriginal people involved with the CJS have experienced some form of intergenerational trauma since childhood. This can be traced back to their individual histories and often to the legacies of the residential school system. The offending circumstances of Aboriginal offenders are often related to substance abuse; inter-generational abuse and trauma; residential schools; low levels of education, employment and income; and substandard housing and health care, among other factors (Spirit Matters, p.7). In addition to dealing with the bureaucracy of the CJS (reporting, curfew, release conditions), Aboriginal former offenders may experience intergenerational trauma as overwhelming and destructive to their emotional, psychological, mental, and physical state.

The restorying circle project is designed to provide a safe, supportive, and culturally aware environment in which Aboriginal men who have been involved with the CJS can use story to work through what can at times be overwhelming feelings and navigate the tides of trauma to
restore balance in all four areas (emotional/physical/mental/spiritual) reflected in the Medicine Wheel. Too many Indigenous people have become institutionalized and resign themselves to doing prison time rather than reclaiming freedom. By encouraging participation in the restorying circles, the goal is to change the attitude and imposed belief that ‘I belong in prison.’ Prisoner participation in similar community circles for restorative justice has been demonstrated to reduce the likelihood of reoffending by illustrating to former inmates how their behavior has impacted victims, families, and communities (Hyatt, A., 2013, p.9). Sharing stories can bring repressed trauma into the light and allow for renewal to begin; restorying is designed to facilitate not only awareness but also the rebuilding and affirmation of identities. The healing journey typically involves: identifying areas of change, telling one’s story with space for a new Aboriginal identity to emerge, analyzing the trauma and links to unhealthy behavior, and creating a new vision of self where individual healing is part of community healing (Meseyton, 2005, p. 212). The key to this healing journey is the ability to open up a dialogue with oneself and others to discuss the hidden and often damaging incidents that have occurred in one’s life in a safe and supportive environment to reflect on these past experiences in a healthy manner. Creating a new vision of self is to enlighten a healthier story about one’s past and begin living a different story which will transform an individual’s healing and identity. Visiting the past and examining the trauma, an understanding begins to develop on why you do the things you do. A realization surfaces that their current negative behavior relates in many cases to past negative trauma. Through this realization a person begins to make positive choices leading to positive consequences and healing. For example, growing up Participant A had the ability to become a good writer; however, due to his harsh upbringing, he did not have the opportunity to develop this talent. During his years in prison, he began writing and he achieved a university degree. He stated, “I
had to stifle this for a bit, but my talents shone through throughout my writing periods and when community members asked me to write them something for their college or university. I also wrote stories for my children, magazines out of corner stores.” Here we see one of the participants having looked inward, nurtured gifts and strengths, and then used those gifts to strengthen others within his community, whether that is through stories for children or through writing on behalf of others for college or university.

This restorying project clearly demonstrates Meseyton’s (2005) thesis and reveals the importance of creating spaces for supporting Aboriginal ex-offenders on their healing journeys. This project also points to the need for ongoing support for individuals with the continued aim of creating healthy communities. Everyone has a story and these stories can be changed; no one story sums us up. By participating in circles, Aboriginal former offenders endeavor to gain insights into their lives through listening to others’ stories and the sharing of their own. This interweaving of stories within a safe environment populated by those with similar experiences and backgrounds can encourage participants to view their lives differently, potentially in more balanced and healthy ways. The participants can change negative ways of thinking and speaking, and find renewed ways of storying their lives and their identities—ways that focus on their own strengths, gifts, and potential rather than on identities imposed from the outside. Growing up, these Indigenous participants never had the opportunity to explore their own strengths and gifts as violence and inappropriate role modeling were on constant display. As children entering school, they often struggled and were ridiculed for their inability to learn within this education system, topped by the fact that they endured taunts of racism from other non-Indigenous students. These acts of racism were not only in the school yard but carried on into the streets of society, where the police began targeting them due to their socio-economic and racial
appearances. These participants have been told that they are hard, tough criminals, that they can’t contribute to society, that they are “less than” because they’re Native. They started not only believing but living this tough and criminal lifestyle, which led to involvement with the criminal justice system and joining others who were also not given a chance in life to showcase their talents and gifts.

Over the years of incarceration, and introduction to Indigenous cultural and spiritual ceremonies, Indigenous people re-discover their gifts and potential to become who they want to be. These Indigenous programs, culture, and spirituality benefit the Indigenous person by identifying strengths within one’s core identity. Alternatively, mainstream Eurocentric culture tends to reflect an opposite system of values which causes the Indigenous person to struggle and, more importantly, to hide their cultural identity away on the inside. Reclaiming Indigenous identity means recovering traditional values, beliefs, philosophies, ideologies, and approaches, and adapting them to what you need for today. This healing begins on the inside which carries through to the outside to one’s family and community. As one participant mentions, “it is my life, I look back at it, all those years I was in, I was defined by what other people called me. Who other people told me I was. And I realized there was this one person that wasn’t telling me who I was and that was me. And I decided who I was, what I was, what I was about, what I was going to think, what I was going to do, how I was going to do it, it was my decision from now on.”

Sharing experiences that were previously held back can enable participants to make the biographical relevance clear for their life journeys and reinterpret incidents in ways that can change their lives (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 923). Restorying also creates space for challenging the dominant narratives of Canadian history, and rewriting historical narratives in ways that
Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People

acknowledge past injustices and foster reconciliation (Woolner, 2009, p.39). Restorying also means creating spaces in which Indigenous peoples can reclaim their voices and begin to piece together identities that have been fragmented by colonial oppression—fragmentation which has been sustained, even exacerbated, by incarceration—and in doing so to transform stories of victimhood into stories of resiliency, in order to heal from intergenerational trauma. The purpose of this “Project Based” dissertation is to implement a process that supports Aboriginal people, even ex-offenders with significant criminal histories, in generating hope and healing through the storytelling process. Although significant limitations persist due to a lack of funding and the time constraints of doctoral work, this project nonetheless seeks to offer support to the participants, while adding to knowledge about resilience, restorying, and potential pathways for policy change and community action. This restorying circle project is an innovative initiative toward healing in order to calm the waves of trauma suffered by Aboriginal communities and their members.

When a person is asked to remember they are also being asked to create. The act of remembering is fundamentally creative within a story sharing environment because the person remembering chooses what from their history to share and how to share it; the men in our circles ultimately have control over the stories they tell about themselves and their histories. They are not just victims of their histories, but rather they are empowered to a certain degree to understand those histories in ways that work for them. They are creative agents and not just passive victims. As Participant C describes, “My childhood as I try to reflect on it, sometimes I have a hard time remembering the good things, and a lot of the bad things stand out more, but I question it more and more each day, and a lot of times I try to focus on the good things in my life that I’m doing today.” Remembering and revitalizing our consciousness in a healthy manner (within a
restorying circle amid the supports of others) permits individuals to endorse their own agency to reframe their histories in a positive context.

This creation and restorying has an important healing element. History is an interpretive event as much as memory is a story we construct. As Participant A proclaims, “We learn from stories, from the elders, ourselves, from our relations, our kids. And it’s true, we heal from them. This has been a safe place for telling stories, which is good. Our lodges are the same thing. And I’ve come to realize that with a core group of people, a core group of brothers in there, you can say anything. And you know you’re going to be safe. And they’re going to support you. Even in prison where they say you can’t have any friends. Or you can’t trust who’s inside with you.” P. R. Krech agrees, arguing that “Storytelling, talking circle, ... and community based spiritual ceremony have begun to find inroads into the process of ‘re-storying’ one’s life, thereby bringing about a reframed sense of ‘self’” (Krech, P., 2002, p.90). I agree that the safe and supportive atmosphere within the restorying circles was critical to the ability of the participants to open up about their pasts and to begin the restorying process. The spiritual and cultural components of the circles is important, but having the participants’ expertise and understanding is just as crucial to assist each participant with answering questions of their past towards a “reframed sense of ‘self.’” The sense of community and support developed among the men in our restorying circles was the single most important factor in their success.

This dissertation will discuss the stories shared by the participants in the restorying circles. I endeavor to highlight how the stories shared by the participants illustrate many of the common aspects of intergenerational trauma – early experiences with abuse, dysfunctional families or foster care, substance abuse and addiction, isolation, lack of positive role models and schooling, and poverty. As expected, many of their experiences involved harsh, isolating, and
traumatic events which led to negative peer influences, negative choices and behaviors, such as substance abuse, and eventually incarceration. Although these narratives seem inevitable and predictable, they were not the only stories shared. Each story was unique and interwoven with glimpses of hope and positive memories teaching us that restorying is not a simple process of replacing negative perspectives with a positive outlook, but that stories like life itself are complex and ever-changing.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

“Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People” is a qualitative research study involving Aboriginal people impacted by and involved with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in Kingston, Ontario. Qualitative research was chosen because its malleability enabled me to engage in an exploration of the perceptions and experiences of the Aboriginal participants, while offering those individuals considerable autonomy of self expression. Adelman (1993) notes that Action research gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision, and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on “private troubles” that they have in common (p.8). Kovach (2010) indicates that oral storytelling is congruent with the goals of Indigenous research (p.1).

This project involved six weekly restorying circles that began on Friday, July 15, 2016 and concluded on Friday, August 12, 2016. The restorying circles lasted approximately one hour and 30 minutes. The restorying circles adopted an approach similar to that of a sharing circle created and utilized in Aboriginal communities for cultural and spiritual ceremonies. The sharing circle is part of the cultural teachings that assist with the storytelling. The goal was to capture these stories in terms of self-transformation, personal growth, and positive healing and change.

I distributed information letters to various organizations that serve the target population and displayed recruitment posters in a variety of familiar community locations. The criteria for attending the restorying circles were as follows: the desire to restory one’s history; the desire to share one’s story in a manner that might foster the healing of one’s self-identity; the desire to listen to and share in discussions about the stories of others similarly impacted by the criminal justice system.
Four male Aboriginal participants attended six restorying circles. The participants’ ages ranged from late thirties to early fifties. All of the participants were male. Three of the participants were First Nations and the fourth was Inuk. All of the participants had participated in previous cultural activities like talking circles. They had all experienced incarceration within a federal institution. Three of the participants had resided in young offenders’ facilities, such as a group home, open custody facility, or secure custody facility. All of the participants had served periods of incarceration in a provincial jail. All of the participants had served multiple terms of incarceration. All of the participants were living in the community throughout their participation in the restorying circles. Half of the participants were employed full time. During these restorying circles, all participants were supervised by the CJS and had certain conditions to follow.

During the beginning of the restorying circle project, it appeared that the participants were already engaged in their healing journeys. Their desire to participate in the restorying circles might itself act as evidence that their commitment to healing actually preceded our first in-person encounters. The participants were fairly open from the outset, but their willingness to share more difficult and personal matters increased over time as they became more connected and committed to their fellow participants. The men appeared sincere and honest as they shared their experiences, and they were thoroughly attentive to each other as they were sharing.

During the first gathering, the purpose of the restorying circles was clarified for the participants and advised that there were six restorying circles occurring on a weekly basis. At each of these restorying circles, the participants were invited to share as much or as little of their personal story with the group as they desired. Every session would cover a different stage of the participants’ life journey, starting with childhood, then the teenage years, then adulthood, and
finally future goals. This story sharing occurred throughout the restorying circles. The participants were advised that their participation was completely voluntary; were they to sign letters of agreement permitting me to record their stories, they could always choose at any time to have their recordings left out of written work emerging from this project. Issues of consent were explained to each participant and forms were signed by all participants. I answered any questions/concerns related to this study. The Aboriginal participants were advised of the dates, times, and locations of the restorying circles. The Elder(s) and the Academic Research Assistant were also led through the consent process upon which they signed off. With permission of the participants, all the circles were audio-recorded for later transcription. Personal identifiers were eliminated from the transcribed materials, which were later analyzed by me in relation to the project’s primary research questions. I was attentive to any indicators of healing and personal growth in the participants’ stories. I explained how the restorying circle project developed and also how the structure of the circles evolved from several years of research and professional/personal work.

I explained and listed to the participants the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations resources/contacts that they could access during the restorying circles. I had developed this list over the last 17 years through employment with Correctional Services as an Aboriginal Community Development Officer. Some of these resources include the Métis Nation of Ontario, Kingston Frontenac Mental Health, Four Directions Aboriginal Students’ Centre, and Street Health. The participants were encouraged to contact the appropriate resources to ensure that their emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical needs were met throughout this restorying project.

The Elders and Aboriginal Research Assistant (ARA) were made available to the participants before, during, and after each restorying circle. I have organized and participated in
spiritual ceremonies facilitated by these Elders and knew they would be of great assistance to this restorying project and its participants. The Elders and ARA were provided with explanations of the purpose of the research study and the processes involved with the restorying circles. The Elders recruited to oversee the spiritual and cultural elements of the circles were Victor McCoy and Linda Zaluska and the ARA was David Gorman. Victor McCoy is from Michipicoten First Nation, and Linda Zaluska is from Kitigan Zibi Anishinebeg reserve. David Gorman is from Six Nations. Zaluska currently works as an Elder for Correctional Service of Canada. McCoy is a guest speaker for AA/NA organizations in the Kingston area, as well as a volunteer one-on-one counselor for Aboriginal people involved with the CJS. Gorman is employed with Correctional Services of Canada as an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer. Both of the Elders have offered their services to Aboriginal people impacted by the CJS for over twenty years. Zaluska and McCoy carry formidable cultural knowledge and have facilitated many talking circles, healing circles, sweat lodge ceremonies, and change-of-season ceremonies. Gorman has worked with Aboriginal people impacted by the CJS for over a decade.

I informed the participants that the research findings will be kept anonymous and that the findings will potentially be mobilized to make recommendations at the policy level and to formulate best practices for other Aboriginal organizations. The Elders’ participation added to the cultural/spiritual component of the circles which assisted the participants to stay connected to, or to reconnect with, their culture more effectively. The Elders acted as collaborators during this research project. The Elders opened and closed each restorying circle with a smudge and prayer, and they also contributed to discussion when they thought it would be beneficial. Because the perspectives of all involved in a circle are valued inherently in Indigenous contexts, all of those in the room were permitted to enter the dialogue.
I secured the friendly and comfortable environment of the Four Directions Aboriginal Students’ Centre at Queen’s University—which offers services, supports, and programming to Aboriginal people—for the running of the circles. I met with the staff at this organization and explained the restorying circle project. The management at Four Directions approved my request to host the circles at their site. I have worked previously with this organization and am quite aware of the centre’s services. Four Directions hires and works regularly with community Elders, who conduct spiritual ceremonies and cultural events for students at Queen’s. The mandate of Four Directions is to offer space, cultural information, and support for Indigenous students and community members in the broader Kingston community, which included my participants. The room at Four Direction used for the restorying circles was perceived as friendly and welcoming, and the energy found therein was felt by me to be genuinely positive. The chairs were comfortable, the lighting was subdued, and the space had a welcoming and homey—as opposed to sterile and institutional—feel. The participants were offered snacks and coffee at every circle. I had to retrieve a key from Four Directions to open and closed the main door of the centre, and to key in the alarm code before and after each restorying circle. On no occasion was the centre occupied by anyone unaffiliated with the project during the circles.

The second restorying circle discussed the participants’ childhood stories. The third circle discussed the participants’ teen and young adult years. I also shared at this time the Medicine wheel tipi model (MWT), which had been developed as part of the research process (see Appendix A and Appendix B for MWT pictures). The participants were shown how a tool like the MWT could help them with visualizing and sharing their stories. Visualizing through a symbolic art form like the MWT can create new ways of thinking about one’s own history and thereby open up avenues to restorying. Built by combining the culturally relevant symbols of the
medicine wheel and the tipi, the MWT was developed as a teaching tool to prompt memory and reflection. For Plains Indigenous nations, the tipi has historically provided a space in which storytelling can unfold, and the medicine wheel offers a culturally rich interpretive guide. The Medicine Wheel is a symbol which represents many First Nations worldviews. It represents a holistic way of healing. The Medicine Wheel helps individuals stay in balance or suggest ways to achieve balance in their lives (spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical). The Medicine Wheel can capture the life story of an Aboriginal offender from an early age to the elder years. The Medicine Wheel model can be used to analyze a person’s life story beginning from the east, to the south, to the west, and to the north. The Medicine Wheel can indicate how the individuals have impacted their own families, communities, and nations. The individual starts in the east, the family in the south, west holds the community, and north encompasses nation.

The MWT model was used to encourage participants to reconnect with parts of themselves that have been damaged by trauma suffered as children and to connect with other participants through a process of restorying and mutual disclosure. The fourth circle discussed the participants’ adult experiences and stories. In the fifth circle, the participants reflected on and discussed some of the previous narratives to uncover strengths within themselves that those stories display; the participants were also encouraged here to think about next steps and pathways forward in their healing journeys. During the final circle, participants shared their thoughts on the restorying/reflecting/revisioning process, with regards to the project’s entwined goals of sharing with others, working to heal from past difficulties, and moving in the direction of empowerment, balance, and personal and collective wellbeing. The Aboriginal participants were thanked for their participation and contribution to this research study. The participants were
provided with a framed graduation diploma from the restorying circles and provided with a gift card to thank them for their generosity in sharing.

The participants were assigned a letter of the alphabet to replace their real name during the circles. Traditionally talking circles are composed of five to ten participants; the restorying circle project incorporated six—the four participants, the Elders, the ARA, and the Researcher. This study focused on the quality of the information offered by the participants in relationship to their restorying processes. The participants were allowed to show up to and leave the circles at any time. No requirement was placed upon these individuals to share their stories; as we went around the circle at each session, the men were informed that they could share, they could pass, or they could leave the circle, if they felt uncomfortable about any topic of discussion. Those who decided to participate in the research element of the project were invited to record their stories during the restorying process, but this was also voluntary. Tellingly, all participants agreed to have their stories recorded and incorporated into the findings of this study.

The main goal of the restorying circles was to make use of the experiences, views, and stories shared by the participants to shed new light on (and perhaps even arm them with) a potentially more positive self-formation that might foster growth and healing. In order to further protect the anonymity of the Aboriginal participants, I hired a transcriber, who signed a confidentiality agreement form. I shared the audio recordings with the transcriber, who then provided transcripts through which I could begin analyzing the data. I then edited or deleted any identifying data of the Aboriginal participants (including names of places and names of people). At this point, there was no further collection of data. After returning the audio recordings and transcripts to me, the transcriber deleted all reference to the project. Then, after analyzing the data and producing the written dissertation, I provided the recordings and transcripts to my
doctoral supervisor at Queen’s University, who will store them on a secure server and in a locked cabinet for five years before they will be destroyed. Upon the completion of this research project, I have shared this dissertation and its findings with the participants.

I analyzed the data and searched for common themes from the participants’ personal stories. These personal experiences, stories, and themes provided a more nuanced series of understandings as to why these participants became involved with the CJS. Having listened to the transcriptions of the restorying circles several times in order to become familiar with the data, and having read and re-read the transcriptions and highlighted data related to the research questions, I was able to identify thematic clusters and place quotations from the participants under a series of relevant themes. In the ensuing chapters, the project analyzes themes of isolation, loss, substance abuse, culture, connections, and hope in relation to the experiences of participants in this study.
CHAPTER 3

ISOLATION AND INCARCERATION

There was an eagle soaring high in the sky. He was bringing all the prayers to the Creator for the Aboriginal people. These hunters shot and wounded him. He couldn’t fly anymore. He fell in the ditch. This farmer came and put him in the chicken coop with all the chickens. There was a fence around the chicken coop. He could fly up and leave anytime. The farmer helped with his wing and took care of him. He said, “Any time you can leave because that’s not where you belong in a chicken coop.” Nothing happened, the eagle stayed.

One day, this big Anishinaabe man came walking and he asked the farmer if he could have a drink of water. The farmer said, “Sure, I’ll go get you a drink of water,” and when he did that the Aboriginal guy looked over in the chicken coop and he saw this eagle in there pecking, scratching, and flapping in the dirt like a chicken. The Aboriginal guy said to the farmer, “I’ll take the eagle off your hands if you want. He doesn’t belong there.” The farmer said, “Take him, that’s one less mouth to feed.”

The Aboriginal guy put the eagle under his arm. He was telling the eagle what a magnificent bird he was and he didn’t belong there with all those chickens. He had lost his identity and become a chicken. That Anishinaabe man took the eagle to the highest mountain and he said, “I’m going to throw you off here, I want you to soar, and bring all those prayers for the Anishinaabe people to the Creator. Talk to the Creator about all the help we need down here about the alcohol, drugs and violence that are happening with our Aboriginal people.” The eagle went up in the air, but as soon as he hit the ground, he started to peck and scratched like a chicken. The Aboriginal guy took him back up again, and kept telling him over and over what a magnificent bird he was, the gifts that he carried, and that he was so valuable to the Aboriginal
people. He threw him over and over again, but the eagle would not fly. He was pecking at the dirt and scratching.

Eventually the eagle started to soar because he was told by people who loved and cared for him that they wanted to see him move into a good part of his life. He came to this earth as a young baby full of gifts, love, and kindness, caring, respect, and courage; he lost it all when he was pecking around with the chickens.

The eagle story was shared by Linda Zaluska, the Elder who facilitated a few of the restorying circles. The story was offered to help the participants believe in themselves and to recognize the many gifts that they all possess as Aboriginal men. As a child, everyone has gifts: love, kindness, caring, respect, and courage. These gifts can be lost when we forget who we are—getting lost in the criminal justice system which can obscure our identities. Eventually, people begin to reclaim their identities and find their gifts to heal from the past.

Introduction

By becoming trapped within the chicken coop of incarceration—from residential schools to foster care to group homes to young offenders’ facilities to the prison system—many Aboriginal people have experienced the suppression of their identities. The purpose of my research is to examine the stories of Aboriginal men involved in the criminal justice system. According to Welsh and Ogloff (2008), “As of April 9, 2006, Aboriginal offenders represented 16.6 percent of the federal offender population despite comprising only 3.38 percent of the Canadian general population (p. 2)”.

Many Aboriginal adult inmates have ‘graduated’ from Young Offenders’ facilities to Federal prisons. As children some of these Aboriginal individuals were removed from their
families and placed into residential schools, and/or apprehended by the child welfare authorities and placed into foster homes or adopted outside their communities, which mean that from a very young age their lives had been (re)organized by the coercive power of Canadian law. Such involvement with the justice system often accelerates from youth to adolescence to adulthood. It can start out as probation, go into days or weeks at a group home, continue into months and perhaps years at a young offenders’ facility, evolve into years at a provincial jail, and finally escalate into years in a federal penitentiary. Such Aboriginal inmates become institutionalized at a young age through their encounters with the criminal justice system and thereby become further disconnected from their individual, familial, and cultural identities. The present project-option thesis employed narrative research methodologies, while reviewing historical and current policies, practices and processes of the justice system, in order to delineate ways to disrupt the trajectories leading to incarceration among Aboriginal people. As “story work” is foundational to Indigenous research (Archibald, 2008; Rymhs, 2008; McKegeley, 2007), my own story and the stories of the restorying circle participants, who have been involved in the criminal justice system, will create greater awareness of Aboriginal issues related to the criminal justice system by fostering counter narratives to the political paradigm that we need more jails in Canada to lock up the ‘bad guys.’

Suffering harsh treatment growing up, supported by negative stories of isolation, poverty, drug abuse, and violence, the Aboriginal men participating in this study unsurprisingly became embroiled in the criminal justice system. These negative experiences impacted the stories these men shared initially in our circles, often describing themselves in a negative manner, as wounded like the eagle and feeling as if they do not belong. The participants in the research study learned life lessons from their peers within the criminal justice system, stories that often took them
further from a core of cultural identity, family, and personhood. They learned to behave in
different ways, to present themselves in different ways, to cope in different ways, to align
themselves with expectations about carceral masculinities, indigeneity, and power. Keeping their
eyes to the ground like chicken pecking seeds, the Aboriginal participants in this study described
being conditioned to perform identities that they never fully claimed—identities at odds with
stories they would ultimately tell about their gifts, aspirations, and cultural rootedness. Such
dissonance can be experienced as alienation from oneself and one’s family. One participant
explained how, after his release from prison, “Every time [he] saw a family member, [he]’d take
off in the opposite direction because [he] didn’t want to be around [his] people, I guess because
of their lack of care or concern.” Yet each of the participants expressed a desire to reconnect with
Aboriginal culture and with community, a common aspiration of Aboriginal peoples grappling
with ongoing settler colonialism, as argued by Susan Dion in *Braiding Histories* (2009, p.22).

At the time that the Aboriginal men agreed to participate in the restorying circles, each
had already taken steps along his healing journey, many having found Elders, spiritual
ceremonies, and healing circles to help them begin to bring forth and affirm their identities.
Although the men all shared stories about being lost and isolated—one participant, for example,
described that “inside” his younger self was “a little boy who had to be loved and cherished,
because he was lonely”—they had begun to find their healing paths and an opportunity to share
and hear different healthier stories. Our circles provided a safe and supportive environment in
which they could speak to their earlier experiences, gain insights from each other, and identify
the strengths that would continue to sustain them on pathways toward wellbeing and
empowerment.
In the pages that follow, I survey the responses of the men during our restorying circles, identifying recurrent themes while acknowledging distinguishing features of each man’s story. I begin by discussing isolation and loneliness that was experienced by the participants growing up. Much of this isolated and loneliness was a choice or escape made in order for the participants to feel safe from the violence and abuse that was taking place in their family homes. Feelings of isolation and loneliness lead these participants towards criminal behaviors due to boredom, lack of structure, and hanging out with the wrong crowd, eventually leading to incarceration. The experiences of loneliness and isolation were further entrenched by segregation within the prison system. It would appear that the behaviors of loneliness and isolation experienced by the participants growing up prepared them to be functional within the prison system. Loneliness and isolation was a learned behavior and normal for the participants, so once they became imprisoned they did not have a feeling of shock or discomfort—perhaps the opposite occurred. Hence, they were recruits for the prisons due to their dysfunctional upbringings. In order for these men to start to feel greater interpersonal and cultural connection, most were introduced to spirituality as young adults. It was during these times of spirituality or cultural activity that many of the participants began to feel a sense of belonging that eased feelings of loneliness and isolation. One of the goals of the restorying circles is to bridge this gap of isolation and loneliness while fundamentally valuing the integrity of each participant’s voice and story.

**Loneliness and Isolation**

One of the most striking commonalities among the participants’ stories of their early years was the frequency of experiences of loneliness and isolation. At a young age, loneliness began and it continued throughout the majority of the participants’ teenage years. “My growing
up was loneliness,” said one participant. “That’s the one thing I remember was being alone.” At school, several of the participants struggled to focus on their learning, bullied by others and distracted because of home life problems. In most cases, family members neglected these participants, as opposed to getting them involved in social groups and activities. Without consistent guidance by their parents or guardians, anger often surfaced and as children the participants often acted out their emotions in ways that got them in trouble with the school or with the law.

Within the restorying circles, the participants described multiple layers of isolation that became naturalized over time. One layer emerged for multiple participants when they had to seek safety from violent and/or intoxicated family members or acquaintances as children. A second layer occurred as participants became acclimatized to their youthful solitude. One participant claimed, “My mum said it years ago to me, she said, ‘it’s how you were, you were always alone.’” A third layer involved feelings of shame and guilt about circumstances, which led participants to withdraw from others and thereby avoid people asking questions. A fourth layer often involved a tactical escape from difficult experiences by seeking refuge in drugs and alcohol, which further separated participants from others. A fifth layer involved being labeled as ‘criminal’ and distanced from family and others. “I stole a lot of gas,” said one participant. “Stealing the gas, or break into the Hudson Bay or Coop, to get some more money for gambling, for drugs, gas, booze. The cops came to me later because they knew me.” The final layer segregating the participants from family, community, and society involved the isolation of incarceration.

Participant A stated, “My adolescence, I start moving away from people, [from] having friends.” This type of isolation can stunt the development of social skills. Also, some
participants described feeling unloved by their family members, which led to feelings of loneliness. Some participants had to escape from their homes just to avoid being hurt by their family members. The violence in the home made the participants feel embarrassed and ashamed, which contributed to their senses of isolation. As one participant stated, “I felt the best when I was alone and in the bush.” The participants’ loneliness was exacerbated in some cases by the thought that they were the only person suffering from the abuse and nobody was there to help.

Few of the participants grew up experiencing trusting relationships of love, kindness, understanding, and respect. People have a better chance to develop trust by having their personal needs met growing up. The ability to trust and have trust reciprocated was not developed through experience within the majority of the participants’ lives. We tend to trust someone whose actions correspond with their words. The participants didn’t trust others because in their experience people’s actions seldom aligned with the words they spoke. In the words of one participant, “I didn’t know anything about trust because that was taken away from me… when I was younger individual.”

Research has suggested that trust has been diminished at different levels in First Nations communities (Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007, p. 50). Thibodeau & Peigan (2007) argue that this diminished level of trust is a result of the historical traumatization and oppression experienced by First Nations people. As suggested by the participants, there is a lack of trust at a personal level. Aphrodite Matsakis (1998) describes the connection between trauma and a loss of trust in oneself:

Trauma survivors not only lost trust in some of the basic premises that kept people functioning such as the assumptions of personal invulnerability and that the world is just and fair but they can also lose trust in people, including themselves. (p.57)
Many of the participants in this study described being unable to turn to their family members for support in light of maltreatment and victimization within the family, experience corroborated by the research of Thibodeau and Peigan. Many Aboriginal people have been mistreated and dishonored within their families as a byproduct of decades of assimilationist and genocidal policies in Canada, resulting in diminished levels of trust within that domain (Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007, p.51).

Trust was broken many times in the participants’ lives, which impacted their perceptions of relationships with others. Some participants were told not to trust anyone. Participant B, for instance, states, “I remember my dad taught me ‘you can’t trust them, they’re not your friends.’” Some participants did not trust authority figures. Participant D recalled, “The police were bad, anybody with authority was bad, the teachers were the authorities, and from what I had seen they were all bad.” Participant A never spoke to correctional staff for five years while incarcerated due to his lack of trust for authorities.

The messages and stories engrained in the participants’ minds growing up were not to trust anyone and rather to take care of things themselves. One participant noted, “I was very leery of anybody who wanted to be my friend, I was very untrusting of people, I realize that I had this need that I wanted friends, but I also realized that those people who said they were my friends were never my friends.” As a result of this distrust, some Aboriginal people have experienced a limited ability to be open, to share and contribute to self and family (Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007, p.57).

Isolation and loneliness from not feeling connected or loved was exacerbated by experiences with drugs and alcohol and unhealthy relationships on the streets. As one participant
said, “no one cared for me and I didn’t care what happened to me either.” To survive, these men did not allow other possible role models such as teachers to get close or be an influence.

**Role Models**

Positive role modeling is vital during childhood in order to develop understandings of appropriate behavior and to develop aspirational projections for selves in formation, yet such role modeling was missing in the lives of the majority of the participants. On the contrary, negative role modeling impacted the participants’ childhood and teenage years, encouraging poor decisions and behaviors that, in some cases, led to incarceration and negatively affected individuals’ futures. There were limited learning opportunities and experiences through role modeling to encourage success for many of the participants. The absence of positive role models experienced by the participants in this study aligns with Hyatt’s (2013) research findings, which suggest that Aboriginal inmates tend to have fewer positive role models than do non-Aboriginal people (p.43). During their early years, some participants recalled having minimal positive interactions with their fathers. “I couldn’t ask my dad anything because right away I should know this stuff,” one participant stated, “and well, when you’re a kid, you don’t know anything.”

Children, growing up, imitate the behavior they witness. Many of the participants described imitating negative behaviors observed in terms of the violence and substance abuse. As one participant mentioned, “my parents and relatives were all partying, so we joined them and partied as well.” Another participant described witnessing his dad beat up his mother. Participant C stated poignantly, “I used to look up to him until I saw him doing that first violent stuff to my mother. I loved this man, I looked up to him as a role model, but it started to change. It’s like coloring a picture, going from white, to grey, to black.” The participant’s father, who was his
role model/hero becomes the enemy, turning from white to black. The use of colors eloquently illustrates the evolving relationship between the participant and his father: The color black portrays the harmful role modeling instilled into this participant, which would not only destroy trust and love but also increase isolation and feelings of hopelessness. A participant shared in the circle, “I felt powerless when I witnessed violence against my mom and siblings but could do nothing to change the situation.” This allowed feelings of anger to grow and solidified the role of victim. Unfortunately, as this participant acknowledged, the cycle continued as he himself was involved in domestic violence in later life.

As young teenagers, most of the participants started to hang around criminal associates that might be considered bad role models. Two participants shared how they learned their life lessons while incarcerated. Participant B recalls, “[I] met a guy named ________ at the jail, who sat me down; he said ‘this is the way you do things, kid’ And I followed that, all these years. I met them on the street years later, we drank together, partied together, and we laughed together.” Participant C states, “People that I met inside that got released ahead of me, I met up with them and the streets were my newfound friend, they were drug dealers.”

However, as the stories of these participants indicate, it is never too late for individuals to seek out positive role models in their lives, like Elders, who, in some cases, were introduced to these participants while incarcerated. Participant A stated, “This is when I met Art Soloman. And he planted a seed as far as my spirituality was concerned. Elders came into the brotherhood on a regular occasion, and I found myself talking to them.” Elders play a role in the healing process and are frequently reported to be the reason that many Aboriginal inmates reconnect to their cultural identities, by providing cultural histories and traditional teachings (Wilson, 2002; Nielsen, 2003).
Despite having few positive role models in their lives as younger men, these participants described wanting to give back to the youth and become better role models themselves. The expressed goal was to prevent these youth from going to prison. As Participant A states, “I can share my story with them and hope they can learn something. I can empathize with them and how they feel—the loneliness, despair, and the reasons for using drugs or alcohol. I will not judge them; I can listen and will listen. I may not have solutions much of the time, but we share common problems. I can only tell them how I worked through them.”

Isolation, Substance Abuse, and Incarceration

Isolation, substance abuse, and incarceration contributed to each participant’s ability to address his past issues, making it difficult for him to share stories in a positive manner. The stories of the men involved in our circles tended to demonstrate causal relationships among isolation, substance abuse, and eventual incarceration. Each of the participants’ lives was impacted negatively by substance abuse. As Participant C stated, “I always remember my family, father, mother, and uncles were always drinking, they were all partying, and so did we. I started smoking more and more and more, and drinking more and more.” The participants thought nothing was wrong in abusing substances as they witnessed their parents and other family members engage in these behaviors.

Participants reported often having abused illegal substances to deal with past trauma, loneliness, and isolation. Abusing substances meant becoming involved with criminal activity for these men, eventually leading to incarceration. Dependence upon illegal substances was a contributing factor leading to break and enters, thefts, and other offences. Participant D explained, “I was starting to get in a lot of trouble with the law for sniffing and starting smoking, hash, a lot of break and enters.” The participants’ crimes were often forms of theft in order to
gain money for alcohol or drugs. Participant B stated, “I’m the one who started breaking into houses, stealing to make the money so that we could drink. And once, when I had no money, I decided to rob people on the street. This was my first encounter with the law. I got pinched doing a robbery with violence one evening.” All participants committed their crimes to feed their substance abuse habits. At a young age, most of the participants started abusing drugs and alcohol, as well as, for some, sniffing gasoline, which propelled them towards young offenders’ facilities and/or group homes. Participant C recalls, “I was too young, sniffing lots of gas and glue. I started with gas, then there was anything they could get their hands on.” These experiences share commonalities identified by Latimer and Foss (2004), who note that “in the year 2000 the rate of incarceration for Aboriginal youth was 64.5 per 10,000 population, as compared to 8.2 per 10,000 population for non-Aboriginal youth, and 8 out of 10 incarcerated Aboriginal youth had a substance abuse problem” (p.3).

These participants in the restorying circles reported continuing to abuse substances in prison, as drugs were as prevalent on the inside as the outside. Participant A describes that “it was not uncommon to watch some guys’ drop 27 to 30 hits of acid at a time when the drug came into the institution. Valium use was not uncommon where 75 to 100 ten milligram pills were eaten every day.” Participant A told of having overdosed in prison seven times due, as he explained, to his desire to get higher each time he took the drugs. He was dubbed a “functional addict” by prison authorities. According to an inmate survey, 34% of offenders admitted to injection drug use prior to incarceration and 11% indicated they have injected since they have been in custody. 25% of inmates reported that they are under pressure to smuggle drugs into the institution (McVie, F., n.d., para 2).
While incarcerated, the participants rarely shared feelings of loneliness. Prison is not the place for reflection and opening up about such emotions. It is not a place to seek out support, share feelings, or look for acceptance from others. If a person decided to open up about his feelings regarding isolation, he would likely be picked on and further isolated from the inmate population. As such, prisoners are often conditioned to develop masks of hypermasculine performance and posturing that prevent other prisoners from sensing their vulnerability.

Winnicott (1965) argues that “in prison, the objective of developing a prison mask could be compared to description of the False Self, whose … defensive function is to hide and protect the True Self” (p.142). Offenders take on false senses of self as a means of protection, as they do not want to be harmed for betraying their genuine identities. Instead, inmates must deal with false selves and negative expectations that can lead to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors. This in turn, feeds into feelings of isolation, encouraging inmates to avoid others and exacerbating loneliness (psychalive, 2016, para 2).

Such feelings of loneliness and isolation continued for a majority of the participants in this study upon their release from prison. Upon release most did not have the support of family and friends because of their past offences. Shame and guilt were experienced by the offenders, which prevented them from wanting to go out into the community and build new relationships. As well, the relationships developed inside the prison may no longer exist because some offenders are prohibited from hanging around others who have criminal records. A special condition can be imposed by the Parole Board of Canada which requires the former offender not to associate with any person he knows or has reason to believe is involved in criminal activity (Kings County Advertiser, Conditions Imposed section, para 6). The absence of a strong network of support within the community upon release created conditions in which recidivism was highly
probable for many of the participants. Participant C stated, “My adult years, and that’s where I got caught up in the system more. Then I started getting stuck in the federal system. It’s like where’d my 20s go, where’d my 30s go, I lost it all. I started to get lost in the system. It’s like a haze to me.”

The participants experienced incarceration for an extensive period of their lives. Participant A served 25 years inside the prison system at various federal institutions across the country and at different security levels: “I have approximately eight years maximum time, twenty years medium time, and four years minimum time.” In a similar manner to how they described becoming comfortable with being alone as children and youth, most participants described becoming comfortable with incarceration and institutionalization. Participant C said, “It’s just the way I lived my life at that time I guess, in and out of prison, jails.” This experience was connected to his realization: “I grew up with the understanding of loneliness.”

The participants often escaped the harshness of their realities on the outside by turning to substance abuse. Participant C explained:

But I ended up choosing other things in life that led me on my path of destruction. I didn’t even know at that time that the choices I was making were the beginning of my incarcerations. You know the downward spiral. All the hurt, shame, guilt, the things that I’ve seen I didn’t want to believe was actually happening. It hurt to realize that it was real. What was I doing, I was just adding more fuel to the fire and running away from my own problems. And getting involved with drugs and alcohol and eventually growing up in the system as a young offender and which turned into an adult.

Sharing their stories, many of the participants demonstrated marked self-reflexivity about the relationship among their experiences of trauma, chosen methods of escapism like drugs and
alcohol, and further isolation through incarceration. Here Participant C poignantly reflects on the ways in which chosen methods for coping with the “hurt, shame [and] guilt” of personal experiences too troubling to “believe” they were “actually happening” actually ended up exacerbating the difficulties—“adding more fuel to the fire.” The downward spiral guided this man toward institutionalization and incarceration.

The participants also described having mastered over time the skill of incarceration. Participant C stated, “I think about it now, I was actually comfortable inside these open custodies and secure custody places as a young offender.” The toxic prison environment no longer had an effect on him, as it seemed much better than living on the streets. Sure he was incarcerated, isolated and still embroiled in substance abuse, but he no longer had to worry about having enough to eat, about finding work, about ensuring he had a place to sleep. As Participant A put it, “You get three meals a day and everything else you want.” However, over time the participants described how prison weighed on them, leading them eventually to desire something different, something better. Participant A explains, “I found out I had a chance to get out of prison. Prior to this, I just figured I would live my whole life there and I would eventually die. This changed for me and I really began working on myself.” Participant C distinguishes between the point of being fully institutionalized and the moment of taking ownership over growth and wellbeing: “I always let the drugs and the alcohol take care of me, and this time it’s me taking care of drugs and alcohol in the good way.”

**Carceral Trauma and the Heightening of Isolation**

In their stories, the men described how their experiences of trauma, caused by personal isolation and other negative social factors, led them to make negative choices such as dropping out of school, breaking the law, and using drugs which then heightened the possibilities of future
incarceration. These experiences must also be placed within the broader context of the marginalization of Aboriginal people due to ongoing settler colonialism in Canada, which puts them at a greater risk for high rates of violence and abuse. According to Laforme (2005), “The long-term consequences of trauma among Indigenous peoples include: intergenerational ineffective parenting; poverty; unemployment; substance abuse; low levels of education; and the widespread acceptance that violence is the norm” (p.17). These conditions inform Aboriginal overrepresentation in the prison system, and they are the terrain of existence for the men in this study.

Poverty, violence, and lack of employment often created and reinforced isolating behavior among our participants. Participants described how experiences of loneliness came to be internalized as unworthiness and despair, which affected their life stories as they grew older. Many participants shared negative experiences of not fitting in at school. Participant B described how “every day at school was a constant struggle. And school I didn’t like because there were bad teachers. I wasn’t doing anything, school was boring.” They spoke about instances of violence and attacks by other students: “I got my ass handed to me a number of times on the school yard.” One participant described being given an ultimatum by the principal to stay in class or to leave school for good. He told of lighting up a cigarette in front of the principal and walking out the doors of the school—he quit. For others within the study, however, the school was a safe place to escape from a volatile home life. Participant C stated, “I used to love going to school because it was getting me out of the house, away from my father. I was there just to kill time to get away from my mother’s place because she was drinking more because of her addiction.”
In every case, the participants in this study dropped out of school before grade 10, largely due to their negative experiences at the school and at home. Participant B stated, “I quit high school, I just turned 16. I was in grade 9. I walked away from it pretty quick.” The school experience surrounding bullying, violence, failing in class, and not fitting in with their fellow students influenced the lives of the participants negatively as they grew up.

The experiences of loneliness and isolation that most participants described in relation to their home lives and most described in relation to their experiences of schooling become further complicated when we take into account the disciplinary apparatus of the criminal justice system. An immediate consequence of incarceration is the loss of personal control over daily decisions (Haney, 2001, p.7). As Indigenous former inmate Yvonne Johnson gravely adds: “the people who have control of your stories, control of your voice, also have control of your destiny, your culture” (Rymhs, 2008, p. 55). The coercive restrictions on personal agency further impact the limited sense of control the men experienced over their own lives and futures. They were told what to do and how to do it, either by the guards or other prisoners, who were higher in the prisoner hierarchy. As Participant A shared, “my crime placed me at the top next to the cop killers, bank robbers.”

In these ways, the participants in this study described how the isolation they experienced as youth was intensified by their experiences of incarceration, in which they were discouraged from being vulnerable and self-expressive, were controlled via the power structure of carceral discipline, and were disconnected physically and emotionally from family members and loved ones. The prison is often perceived as an unwelcoming environment, which prevents many family members and others from choosing to visit. The only connection with loved ones for many offenders is over a limited phone call with other prisoners in close proximity listening in.
This structural discouragement of family connection inside the prison system functions to further isolate offenders, as described by Participant C: “My mother came to visit me a couple of times, but there were times when I reached out to her and no one was there. That’s when I started to feel like I was abandoned. I just became lost pretty much.”

**Conclusion**

Reflecting on the painful stories shared by the participants, the isolation, abuse, and poverty, could lead us to assume that the trajectory from victim to offender was inevitable, that the powerlessness and pain which the participants fought to diminish through substance abuse would ultimately lead to incarceration. However, although we see the similarities between the loneliness and isolation in the participants’ early experiences and their experiences in prison, it does not signify an unbreakable causal connection. Patterns are indicative of learned responses but do not necessarily explain future behavior or describe all that is within a person. As the story of the eagle in the chicken pen highlights, describing the broken eagle as a chicken does not change its core identity. In the next chapter I will discuss how the participants were also resilient and how their stories offered myriad glimpses of positive character traits and personal strengths. Through the process of restorying, the participants were encouraged to focus on these gifts and to share their stories differently in order to rebuild, restore, and renew their purpose for living.
CHAPTER 4

RESTORING CIRCLES AND THE REBUILDING OF COMMUNITY

Although the Aboriginal men participating in this project had undoubtedly experienced profound hardship throughout their lives—hardship implicated in their various pathways toward incarceration—each refused from the very beginning to have his narrative confined solely to negative personal history. The participants’ narratives included not only their many experiences of abandonment, abuse, anger, despair, and self-destruction, but also experiences of learning from and caring for others, of cultural knowledge, and of personal strength and accomplishment. Although the men shared negative life experiences, which they often acknowledged as causally related to their eventual incarceration, threads of hope and resilience were woven throughout the stories. Long-buried experiences of trauma lost some of their negative energy as they were shared in a supportive circle among others with similar stories. The men could not whisper words of worthlessness, despair, and self-destruction when all members of the group could see and recognize in their tales the efforts of a lonely and hurting child trying to survive in a largely uncaring environment. All participants could witness each other’s efforts towards self-preservation and the protection of more vulnerable family members. Listening to the stories of the other participants appeared to inspire each man to seek after threads of hope in his own story, to not only remember the painful moments, but indeed to recognize his own survival, strength, and resilience, to understand that even though past years seemed to “pass by in a haze” there could be a healthy future ahead.

In this chapter I endeavor to discuss how Aboriginal culture and spirituality, specifically the support of Elder(s), the practice of smudging, and the passing of the eagle feather in talking
circles can facilitate the work of restorying. Restorying is a dynamic form of storytelling that revisits and recuperates in order to restore (Voyageur, Brearley & Calliou, 2014, p.4).

Although it was hoped that this project would demonstrate significant change between the participants’ early and later narratives, this was not clearly evident. However, each of the participants mentioned the benefits of the project and their narratives revealed developing trust and greater vulnerability in the later sessions. These restorying circles created a welcoming, safe environment to connect with others who would listen to and support them as they shared their stories. Passing the eagle feather allowed them to gain wisdom and the strength to fly higher. The person holding the eagle feather is the only person permitted to speak in the circle, which helped encourage each participant to recognize that his voice and his story matter. As participant A indicated, “I asked for the feather because when we talk with the feather, it means that we have to speak our truth.”

Circles of Community: Moving beyond Isolation

The first step for many of the participants to begin combating the senses of isolation, which had developed in their childhood and adolescent years and had then been exacerbated through experiences in the prison system, was to begin to open up about long buried experiences and feelings. By keeping their experiences of isolation trapped within themselves, the men had, unsurprisingly, felt those feelings worsen. Traumatic experiences common to Aboriginal peoples grappling with ongoing colonization and generations of cultural genocide often persisted within the unspoken territory of silent memories; such experiences served to fragment the men’s self-perceptions as well as their stories. The restorying circles provided the participants with opportunities to open up about difficult memories within a context of community support.
Sharing these stories involved opening up and exposing what had been hidden, giving voice to what had been silenced (McKegney, 2007, p.5).

The restorying circles offered the participants opportunities to express their stories, feelings and thoughts and to claim agency over the narrative arc of their life experiences, in some cases for the first time. Participants no longer needed to exist in isolation and silence, but rather became integral parts of a community based on reciprocity and sharing. Listening to other participants’ stories gave the men the strength and courage to open up about their own previously hidden issues. Participant D shared, “Coming to the circles helps me. As everybody shared, and I shared, it helps me reflect on where I’ve been in life. There are always things I learn from listening to other people. I know that I’m not the only person who had a lot of problems in life.”

With multiple voices sharing similar experiences, the participants were reassured that they are not alone. Their attentiveness and responses to each other’s stories validated the various experiences of the storytellers, and the tales gifted within the circle gave others with similar stories the strength, encouragement, and support they needed to tell their own stories (Brown, L. & Strega S., 2005, p. 252).

The organization of the restorying circles enabled participants to engage in group discussion in a manner informed by Indigenous spiritual and transformative practices. Indigenous spirituality is not described as a “religion” but more as a way of healing and living. For most participants, spirituality and cultural connection are very important. “Coming to the circles helps me stay balanced,” reported Participant C. “I try to follow and stay on a good path, to live a good life, and smudging every morning helps me. It’s how I begin my day, with a prayer.” While one participant voiced his skepticism about the existence of a higher power, arguing that only he could control his own destiny, the men expressed collectively their
appreciation for the cultural and communal safety ensured by the presence of the spiritual
advisor/Elder and the comfortable setting of Four Directions Aboriginal Students’ Centre. This
sense of safety and collective purpose encouraged the men to allow themselves to be vulnerable
and to share experiences that they had hitherto kept locked away.

The cumulative nature of the sharing within the circles proved extremely important to the
participants. That the participants revealed more in successive circles was an indicator that they
were building a sense of belonging and trust that allowed them to feel less isolated over time.
Talking circles have been shown to enable those who had previously been forced into silence to
speak and express their feelings and thoughts, perhaps for the first time (Waldram, 1997, p.136).
Many participants expressed feelings of empowerment through the sharing of their personal
issues and stories, and the acceptance of needed support and advice from the other participants.
Because the men tended to share experiences to which others could relate, moments of
embarrassment or even shame proved extremely rare within the circles. Participant A stated,
“And that’s where I learned I can do that today, I can say what happened to me, I still have some
apprehension about some of the things I say because I’ve not told that too many people. But I’m
not ashamed of it. I just know that I lived that story. And I’m here today because of that story,
because of my story.” The restorying circles provided these men whose lives had been impacted
by the criminal justice system with a community of care and dedicated time to address their
issues through Indigenous storytelling practices. This confirms Lalonde’s contention that many
Aboriginal males relate to a narrative rather than to an essentialist identity as highlighted in
storytelling ... and community based spiritual ceremony have begun to find inroads into the
process of ‘re-storying’ one’s life, thereby bringing about a reframed sense of ‘self’” (p.90).
The Persistence of Hope

Even though the participants in the restorying circles experienced many negative situations throughout their lives, the stories they shared were often peppered with positive reflections throughout our circles. This was somewhat counter to the expectations of the project, whose hypothesis had been that the initial sharing of life experiences by Aboriginal men whose lives had been impacted by the criminal justice system would tend to gravitate toward the negative and that over time these stories could be re-imagined to take on more positivity. The positive moments shared by the men created dynamic energy within the circles, and it provided participants with a shared sense of hope right from our initial meeting. For example, Participant A recalled his central purpose as a younger person as being to protect his brothers from their parents when the latter were on a drinking binge. “On these occasions,” he explained, “I would lead ______ and ______ away from home, sometimes for a couple of days until the drinking was over. These times were hard in some respects but I managed to keep my brothers safe, and that was my intention.” These moments of protection instilled in him parental skills of caring and nurturing, which he stated had taught him to be a better parent to his own sons. He also shared that he was forced to clean and accomplish certain tasks around the foster home, which he shared taught him a sense of responsibility and accountability when he began his life as a worker. Today, he takes his responsibility of working hard to take care of his family very seriously. Even though most of the experiences that he shared about his foster family were negative—including constant and escalating physical and emotional abuse—he was able from our inaugural meeting to recognize some positive contributions to his character that were informed by his difficult early life.
Participant D shared how when he was young, he learned how to hunt and survive off the land. The ability to live in the frigid cold through hunting and fishing, while supporting the survival of others, was understood by this individual as a personal accomplishment: “Getting out on the land, I did that a lot before, so people taught me how to survive. It’s very hard, it’s very dangerous especially in the winter time.” Though he recounted how poverty and substance abuse appeared to map out his pathway in life, these stories of survival and resilience helped him express how prison was not his only destiny. He described in his early adulthood teaching others in the community to fish and to hunt, and he explained to us how he even started his own business: “I did two weeks on the land for students to teach them the land, the names, how to skin caribou, fish. I was happy, I liked it because we were with real people, and we got boats-canoes, teaching young people.” Not only did this participant express a sense of satisfaction with these accomplishments, but he self-identified as having the knowledge and experience to serve his community and to make it stronger, irrespective of his difficult history of incarceration.

In addition to opening up about their issues and struggles, participants demonstrated a willingness within the circles to voice the need for help, which proved to be a major positive step in combating isolation. After having been in the prison system for so many years, asking for help would not seem initially to be an option for these men, as asking for help would be perceived within the prison cultural as a sign of weakness. However, asking for help and opening up about personal issues could assist these men with avoiding difficulties in the future that might again involve incarceration. Participant C described having trouble remembering his younger years, but when sharing his experiences on the streets—which included committing offenses to support
his addictions—he was able to reflect on the lessons he had learned throughout his years in the prison system and to see alternative opportunities for himself. He stated:

I’m thankful I went to prison… because it opened my eyes this time around, because I always let the drugs and the alcohol take care of [me], and this time its [me] taking care of drugs and alcohol in the good way. Instead of fighting it, I find I don’t let that stuff come into my life anymore because I know what it does to me and I don’t like being the only person, what it does to me, how I feel, how I think, and where it leads me to.

While incarcerated, some of the participants had been recognized for being role models for other inmates who looked up to them. This is somewhat ironic because these participants had also described having few positive role models while growing up, so becoming role models inside the prison system represents an unsung accomplishment. Participant A shared how he was able to deal with his life sentence spent in different institutions: “The other guys in the institution looked to me as a leader as far as Native politics were concerned, and I was quite often the Chairperson of each of the Native brotherhoods in each institution I was housed.” He also described receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree while in prison. Experiences with work, education, and groups inside the prison system formed for these men part of what Maruna (1999) calls a “generative script” (p.10), in which the benefits gleaned from prison activities are connected with plans for future productive work on the outside. Participant A stated, “I’ve been working with the same company for almost seven years now and have established a place in the Native community in both [two major Canadian cities].” Persevering in this fashion after having been incarcerated for much of his life, having had few positive role models, and having dealt with his own victimization as a child—while simultaneously dealing with the shame and hurt that came with the offences committed towards his victims—speaks to this individual’s capacity for resilience and
survival. Participant A’s story and current life show evidence of his restorying. His participation in this project was a stimulus and encouragement for the rest of us.

Resilience refers to the “capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back” (Vaillant, 1993, p.284). All of the participants in our restorying circles would be considered resilient because they are all trying to have a good life now despite the preponderance of extremely challenging negative past experiences. To many people their lives may not appear to display positive accomplishments, but for these participants, survival and hope are major achievements. Participant A stated, “I never did like accepting compliments for positive acts, probably because it was absent while growing up. But now I’m getting used to it, but that’s something else. At least I can recognize when I’ve accomplished something I’m proud of.” The men in the circle recognized the difficulty of and the long-term commitment required for processes of healing, but they were careful to illuminate the strengths they had displayed in their journeys toward these goals. Participant A declared elsewhere, “I abused my mind and soul with drugs to forget, but the memories are just as alive today as if I lived them yesterday. But with proper nourishment, they do not hurt as much and some cases, they do not hurt at all even though they scarred me for decades. The healing is slow and does not come over night.” This balance between genuine acknowledgement of ongoing difficulties—both systemic and interpersonal—and commitment to recognizing personal strengths and accomplishments augured well for the men moving forward.

Once personal healing begins, one’s eyes are often opened to opportunities to help others trapped in negative situations. Some participants mentioned how they would like to give back and speak with youth in their communities. Participant A shared:
Now that I’m a little older, I know I have a responsibility to help the youth through their experiences. I can share my story with them and hope they can learn something. I can empathize with them and how they feel—the loneliness, despair, and the reasons for using drugs or alcohol. I will not judge them; I can listen and will listen. I may not have solutions much of the time, but we share common problems. I can only tell them how I worked through them.

The volunteering in which some of the men are involved also shows that they are being accepted by society instead of being further excluded. McCormick (1995) confirms that reconnection to family, community, culture, nature, and spirituality is the primary source of healing for Aboriginal people (p. 4). This was missing in the participants’ young lives. Many of their narratives shared how alone and isolated they felt as youth. Even though there were many others in prison or on the streets, they recognized that they were not connected with others. However, sharing these positive aspects of caring for younger siblings and wanting to mentor and support others in the future revealed that the desire and capacity for connection with others had not been lost.

These participants’ stories throughout the restorying circles have not demonstrated miraculous changes, but many factors have combined to suggest that they are moving in the right direction. Concurring with Howell’s (2008) nine categories representing a crime-free life, these factors include: staying sober, opening up to spirituality and cultural connection, recognizing positive personal identity, attaining and keeping employment, and attending culturally informed healing groups such as the restorying circles (pg. ii). Through a combination of these factors, the participants are actively turning their lives around. Some of these factors have had more influence than others on different participants, but their stories share a growing positive sense of
personal identity. Such cultural tools enabled the participants to restore, build, and strengthen their identities as Aboriginal men, to come to know themselves as an important and valued members of the community, and to develop senses of belonging within a network of care.

**Spirituality and Culture**

Many researchers have acknowledged the importance of Aboriginal spirituality and culture in helping individuals, families, and communities to heal (Waldram, 1997; Rudin, J., n.d.; Milloy, 1999). The criminal justice system has addressed this by providing Elders and cultural and spiritual programs for inmates within prisons. Many inmates have found these programs invaluable in helping them to heal, to develop healthy personal identities, and to find a supportive community. Most participants in these restorying circles articulated connections with culture and spirituality when sharing their stories of their early lives. Participant A shared how he comes from a long line of Iroquoian people and how his family is very traditional. Participant B shared, “my dad had taught me who I was, the Mohawk nation and that we have a certain way of doing things.” One of the ways he described was that “we don’t stand up for God Save the Queen, we don’t stand up for The Lord’s Prayer, those aren’t our ways.” Participant B’s dad talked about the Creator and following a certain traditional way: “As I grew up, I tried to connect to the ideal of the Creator, but I never found that connection, the only time when I was young that I felt a connection to anything, was when I was by myself in the bush.”

Participant B’s father was highly traditional but the integration between traditional teachings and the broader socialization through mainstream education and dominant Christianity created tensions for the participant as a young person: “Now even though the old man tried to teach me about the Creator, the directions and everything else, he still allowed me to go to
church. I walked away from that pretty quick after I figured out what was going on there. There was a lot of hypocrisy.” Such hypocrisy negatively impacted the participant’s experiences with spirituality and culture to this day. He described, for example, being forced by his father to become someone he wasn’t. As a young child, he was confused because his father told him it was okay to be Aboriginal and then he was being punished at school for expressing his Aboriginal identity: “Unfortunately, going into school, I found a lot of conflicts with it, with teachers and that school in particular had a principal that used to run a residential school, or was part of a residential school.” His experiences in his community caused further confusion regarding his identity. He explained, “I didn’t suffer from racism from white people, but I suffered racism from Native people because at the time, being Native down there wasn’t the thing. You weren’t supposed to know who you were; you weren’t supposed to accept the idea that you’re supposed to be Indian.”

He experienced confusion, hypocrisy, and little guidance in terms of cultural teachings and their relevance. It is little surprise, therefore, that he has apprehension and negative feelings towards spirituality and the Creator. Participant B stated:

I’m not a spiritual person. I say I’m not a spiritual person because in a sense I don’t believe in a creator. I don’t believe in god, I don’t believe in a higher power. I believe in myself. All my life, somebody has defined what I’m supposed to be. And I finally realized if I’m going to follow who I am, if I follow what I think is true in my heart, I can’t believe in somebody else to help me, I have to help myself.

Although very connected to Aboriginal spiritual practices himself, Participant A responded to some of Participant B’s statements with support, seeking out common ground. “People don’t
have to believe in the Creator anytime either,” he said. “There were years when I didn’t want to believe in that. But to believe in something, even if it is yourself, is a good thing.”

Although the teachings he received were inconsistent and complicated by tensions within the community, Participant B had the advantage of more opportunities to learn about his culture growing up than most of the other participants. Growing up, the other participants seldom had positive experiences related to cultural connection and understandings of spirituality. Participants A and C both discovered their spirituality inside the prison system. Participant C explains,

I knew who I was as a person, as a young Native person, but I wasn’t brought up with the teachings. My first teachings I remember as a young person, I was in the _______ Youth Centre. That’s when I started learning about our traditional ways, but I didn’t want to disrespect the medicines because every time I got released I got back into drugs or alcohol, and I didn’t want to bring that around the medicines.

Participant A concurred, stating, “I was on the fence from time to time from using drugs and alcohol, but I never mixed this with going to ceremonies. I just stayed away spiritually and never mix drugs and ceremonies.” Participants A and C agree that the most profound healing they experienced while in correctional facilities came from Aboriginal spiritual practices rather than through Eurocentric counseling programs. Participant C stated, agreeing with something Participant A had spoken prior, “As I heard earlier, I got more out of a sweat lodge than a six-month program. I learned more about myself in that sweat lodge than what I did with any other program.”

While Participant B stressed that he does not view himself as a spiritual person, he conceded within the circle: “I don’t mind coming to [cultural ceremonies]. I like the smell of the sage, sweet grass, the smell of the incense burning. I like to hear other people talk, I like listening
to their stories, and I like hearing the sincerity.” Like Participant A, Participant B was willing to honor and respect the particular beliefs of others in the circle even as they did not align with his own. This commitment to openness and to supporting others along their divergent pathways of healing did a great deal to enhance the atmosphere of safety and reciprocity within the restorying circles.

Participants A and C each referenced being given Aboriginal spirit names, which impacted and shaped their identities. Participant A stated, “My spirit name is ________, given to me by the Lakota people, and it means ‘One Cast Aside’.” Participant C described being given his spirit name, “__________,’ which means Morning Sky.” He continued, saying the man who gifted him the name “blew my mind just the way he came about my Indian name because as a child I remember I always used to look up at the sky and here’s this man, 40 years later, telling me something I reflected on to help me get through the day, that time of the morning.”

Participants A and C both agree that spirituality and culture is an important piece of their daily living and that attending group cultural events like these circles is important to their healing. Participant A stated, “The traditional teachings gave me an ideal foundation of how I wanted to live, and I earnestly believe that this was possible once released. I work with elders, go to ceremonies, and do one-on-ones with people when I have to. And I believe strongly in our traditions. Prior to coming in contact with the prison system, I wouldn’t have said that.” Participant C stated in a similar vein, “That’s why I turned to our medicines every morning just to help me get through the day. Coming to the circles helps me stay balanced I guess. I try to follow and stay on a good path, to live a good life, and smudging every morning helps me. It’s how I begin my day, with a prayer. Whereas in the past, I didn’t bother, I didn’t care.”
Another aspect of spiritual practice that was mobilized during the restorying circles was the holding of an eagle feather during particular sessions while participants were sharing their stories. Participant A described the relationship between the feather and the strength to speak the truth: “I asked for the feather because when we talk with the feather, it means that we have to speak our truth.” However, Participant B expressed concern that people do not actually want to hear the truth in circles like the one in which we were participating. He explained, “I guess when I get in the circles mostly and I get talking about stuff, I realize that not a lot of people want to hear the truth.” Participant B indicated that in such spaces he felt as though, whether or not he spoke the truth, people did not genuinely listen to him, and he likened this to his teenaged years, during which he felt that his interactions with others often acted as wallpaper covering a moldy structure underneath: “I’d do something, get people laughing but basically nothing, there was no substance there, no truth to it.” In the past, Participant B did not trust others’ reactions to him or his stories because he was only acting, not sharing his true self as he felt there was no substance in previous sharing places. His story about his relationship with family, especially his father, had a direct impact on how he views others. He has a tremendous distrust of people’s sincerity because he was always the one getting hurt or turned away as a child. The pain and suffering he went through growing up relates to the moldy structure of his relationships and the wallpaper speaks to people acting like they care, when to him, they don’t really care. Just as the wallpaper only covers up but does not eliminate the mold underneath, Participant B worries that people’s feigned concern will never eliminate the their ill-intentions.

Profound skepticism regarding the motivations and sincerity of participants and organizers informed Participant B’s ambivalence towards cultural ceremonies: “I have for years stayed away from ceremonies, I’ve stayed away from smudging, and I’ve stayed away from a lot
of things when it gets into a group gathering.” Participant B connected to his spirituality by spending time on bike trails and alone in the bush rather than in organized spiritual settings. “I get out into the trail,” he explained. “That’s where I feel my peace, my comfort, where I feel my spirituality. It’s where I’m at my happiest, where I feel my most free. It’s the place I feel I belong.” As such, for Participant B to attend all of the restorying circles was a difficult challenge, and one from which he described gleaning potential benefits:

So overall, I understand the reason for the groups, I understand why they’re put together and they get the circles going because guys need it. Maybe I need it in a way at times, get me thinking again about things. Maybe get me talking about things I don’t talk about enough. But in general I did enjoy listening to what people had to say, there are mirrors in my life, there are things that I thought about that I could have said that was already said with their stories.

The Restorying Process

It has been said that we are the stories that we tell ourselves (Wagamese, R., 2017, para 1). How do we change these stories which seem to own and direct us? How can individuals externalize their traumas and see that they could write their story in a different way, which could lead to different outcomes instead of continuing the legacy of intergenerational trauma? I define restorying as a practice of changing one’s eyes to see the past differently and hopefully to create a vision of a healthy future. The vision for this project was to create a space for Aboriginal males in an urban setting who were involved with the criminal justice system where they could share stories and learn to restory in a supportive setting. As noted in previous sections, the participants attended the weekly sessions and shared their life experiences growing up and within the prison
system. The following section considers whether the sharing that occurred in our circles is indeed indicative of a restorying process.

Unfortunately, for many Aboriginal males involved with the criminal justice system, including the participants in this study, negative early life experiences are often compounded by the hypermasculine identities encouraged by the prison environment. The stereotypical hypermasculine male offender within the prison system can be described as tough, street smart, cunning, angry, deceitful, intimidating, stubborn, selfish, thoughtless, and uncaring. By examining first-time Aboriginal offenders entering the system, many of these characteristics are prevalent. Aboriginal inmates have the highest rate for alcohol abuse, lower levels of education, and much higher levels of unemployment than other inmates. For example, only 22.5% of Aboriginal offenders have any vocational (employment) training and about two-thirds had no previous skilled employment (Linden, R., 2001, p.32). Even though many of the characteristics associated with hypermasculinity are negative, many inmates strive to develop these characteristics on the inside of the prison out of the need for survival and to gain respect from fellow inmates. A prisoner learns quickly how a man should act, talk, and walk. He gains a clear understanding of the prison hierarchy and finds his place within that hierarchy, by choice or default (D. Rymhs, 2008, p.45). Inmates are taught within the system that it is necessary to present a hypermasculine public façade, even though it may conflict with their self-identity. Various metaphors are used, such as mask or armor, to emphasize a disjuncture between a public and private identity. The armor or mask is designed to protect the inmate from revealing vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and other qualities that might undermine a hypermasculine identity (D. Karp, 2010, p.66). One must learn the inmate code or suffer the consequences. As Deena Rymhs (2008) indicates, “In prison you must quickly learn how to slip and slide, as to survive
the game of prison” (p.24). Sabo, Kupers, and London describe this “game” and the “masks” required to succeed with it as follows:

Suffer in silence. Never admit you are afraid.... Do not snitch.... do not do anything that will make other prisoners think you are gay, effeminate, or a sissy. Act hard.... Do not help the authorities in any way. Do not trust anyone. Always be ready to fight, especially when your manhood is challenged.... One way to avoid a fight is to look as though you are willing to fight. As a result, prisoners lift weights compulsively, adopt the meanest stare they can muster, and keep their fears and their pain carefully hidden beneath a well-rehearsed tough-guy posture. (2001, pp10-11)

As noted in the previous section, specific cultural programs, Elder Services, spiritual ceremonies, consultations with Aboriginal staff, and other cultural healing programs encourage participants to take off the hypermasculine armor in order to find culturally appropriate, pro-social demonstrations of masculinity. According to Woolner (2009):

Restorying engages in many of these same initiatives by engendering spaces in which Aboriginal peoples can reclaim their voices and begin to put together pieces of a fragmented, broken and silenced past, and in doing so to transform stories of victimhood into stories of resiliency—to heal without relying upon the corrosive characteristics of hyper masculinity. (section Accounting for Narrative in Peacebuilding, para. 2)

This is relevant because people may need time to revisit and share their past traumas. Individuals sometimes bury their deepest emotions/secrets, and it can take time to speak about them. The fear of people’s traumatic experiences can become diminished as they are shared repeatedly. It was evident that the participants were able to share more freely with each other and to reveal deeper emotions during successive circles. During each of our circles the feather was passed and
each person was given an opportunity to speak. While I recommended areas for reflection each session, participants could pass if they wished, and they could speak on any topic that suited them, for as long as they wanted. An objective of the restorying circles was for participants to recognize that there were others dealing with similar difficulties and they were not alone with their issues.

Participating in the restorying circles could potentially change the attitudes that perpetuate the myth that ‘I belong in prison.’ Uncovering some of the core issues that influenced these participants’ paths to involvement with the criminal justice system could create conditions in which participants might walk a different, healing journey. Sharing stories can bring repressed trauma into the light and allow the renewal to begin. Restorying within a community with others with similar backgrounds and with the support of culturally knowledgeable Elders can facilitate not only awareness but also the rebuilding of identities. Indigenous scholar Russell Bishop (1999) speaks of the importance of a variety of community members telling their own stories and states that “story telling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the ‘diversities of truth’ within which the storyteller rather than I retains control” (as cited in Wesley-Esquimaux C. & Calliou B., 2010, p.26). According to Meseyton (2005), the healing journey typically involves: identifying areas of change, telling one’s story with space for a new Indigenous identity to emerge, analyzing the trauma and links to unhealthy behavior, and creating a new vision of self where individual healing is part of community healing (p.212).

At the outset, it was hypothesized that this research project might clearly demonstrate the restorying process as the participants’ stories changed from the initial instances of sharing to the final circles. I anticipated that participants would highlight their evolving perceptions of past experiences and work to reshape their identities throughout the process. Such dramatic changes
were not necessarily evident in a close examination of each participant’s individual story; nonetheless, the participants’ continued attendance and increased willingness to share over time served as indicators that the restorying circles were being perceived by the participants as valuable—even if a comparative analysis of initial stories with later stories would not reveal a substantive metamorphosis. One potential reason for this failure of the hypothesis is that at the time of our initial circle all of the participants could be described as being on their healing journeys, even as their stories revealed their being at different stages and on unique trajectories. Another reason may be that it just takes much longer (weeks, months, or even years) to witness changes. Some participants could even be said to have already begun the restorying process while others were at earlier stages of self-awareness.

Participant D reflected on the all-consuming nature of the difficulties he had encumbered in the past, thinking through his own capacity to make change. He stated:

Maybe I’ve got too many problems and I couldn’t stop. And I was angry at myself for not listening to my parents. It is hard to find what my problem is. I didn’t hurt because I was too young. I’ve been holding that in a long time, I haven’t told anyone that. But sometimes I was hiding and crying about that. I did that a lot, hiding and crying… So many years I’d been like that, I don’t care. And it was hard to find people to talk, only when I’m drunk, and then I start talking. My past, it was not good because I was drunk sometimes, and I lie a lot. I was lying all the time. So many years I was doing that. I’m getting happier; I’m getting more open, more honest. I didn’t kill any people, I was taking programs, but I wasn’t listening but I didn’t take it seriously. I didn’t have any problem like that but today I’m happy now. I’m going to do this more and more
circles), getting more interested, more talking, more open (about his feelings), honest so… I want to feel better now.

Even as he acknowledged the overwhelming nature of influences beyond his control—“I couldn’t stop”—and he recognized the difficulty of unearthing struggles within the self—“It is hard to find what is my problem is”—he registers by the end of his remarks his dedication to change: “I’m going to do this more and more, getting more interested, more talk, more open, honest so… I want to feel better now.” The active nature of this final statement is crucial, identifying what the participant is “going to” do and mobilizing the agency he retains to be more “open” and “honest.” Participant D acknowledges that many hurts were kept inside and dulled by drugs or alcohol. This often kept him from seeing the results of his own behavior on those around him. It seemed that he repeated these stories in subsequent circles, but restorying often involves multiple retellings before change can be solidified (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009, pg. 48-49).

It is crucial to note that the stories sharing process allowed the participants to explore and reflect with others who had similar experiences growing up and being incarcerated. Although these stories do not necessarily indicate that each participants’ beliefs about himself have transformed, I feel that by hearing each other’s stories and the visions that they have for a positive future, all of the participants had the opportunity to build personal hope. The circles offered Participant D an opportunity to listen to and learn from the stories of others and to begin to face his own history. From working with Indigenous people involved in the justice system over many years, I have witnessed this phenomenon repeatedly. Given its time constraints, this restorying project could not demonstrate substantive personal life change, but it did allow for the witnessing of stories shared. As we shared experiences, although significant changes were not
noted, the participants’ stories did reflect changing perceptions and attitudes from one session to the next. Participant D’s reiteration of the same stories multiple times but with slight variations concurs with Tousignant’s thesis that restorying often requires multiple retellings to allow individuals to create new understandings of their identities. As participant D goes on to share, he desires to move forward in a healthy way. A follow up with participants would be helpful to determine if this in fact occurred.

Some worry that participants could re-victimize themselves by reflecting and revisiting the negative issues in the past. Perhaps they are taking a step in the wrong direction (being stuck in the past) and not moving forward in their healing journey. Sometimes it is even the reactions of the listeners that end up locking those sharing their stories into a victim mentality. Canada’s history of colonization and dealing with the “Indian problem” through avenues of cultural genocide and assimilation has silenced and taken power away from Indigenous people, especially those who have suffered at residential school or been placed into foster homes or adopted through the Child Welfare system. These atrocities have negatively impacted future generations of Indigenous children through intergenerational trauma. Recently the Truth and Reconciliation forums have publicly shared the shameful practices of the residential school system and the Indian Act, which has served to suppress, oppress and victimize Aboriginal people in Canada. The media has shaped Canadian’s views of Indigenous people as inferior and reinforced stereotypes such as that of “the drunken Indian” incapable of holding a job or creating a healthy family and community. However, Indigenous individuals often do realize that our feelings of inferiority and incapability have been created and imposed by the colonial powers and that we have a richer cultural history than we have been provided with by Canadian society. It was crucial throughout the restorying process to ensure that the men engaged with their histories
in ways that didn’t just rehearse the negative stories that colonialism has invented about Indigenous peoples. Rather than being a liberating experience, such disclosures have the capacity to reinforce shame and entrench negative identities. As such, the restorying process was repeatedly affirmed to be strengths based, as evidenced by Participant A’s resiliency. Participant A had begun sharing his story with various groups and Indigenous communities prior to the advent of the restorying circles. As such, he might be considered well into the restorying process. For example, he shared with the group:

I have a strong will, I came to realize. Rarely did I complain about treatment or conditions, which surrounded us. I endured much that would have broken, I guess, many. I recall telling some of my early life experiences, up to the time of incarceration to my unit, while I was at the Northern Treatment Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, and upon completion of this narration, my counselor’s first remark was ‘I don’t know why you didn’t hang yourself.’ What kind of response was that?! Up to then, I thought my experience was normal, because for me it was, it was real and I had lived it.

Participant A demonstrated to the rest of the community the importance of engaging with difficult past experiences through story, and here he models a restorying principle of identifying strengths within the self that might not be acknowledged by others (even within the context of personal hardship and trauma). He notes that he had “endured” what would have “broken… many.” With this particular story, he also demonstrated the importance of a supportive and culturally aware audience for the safe sharing of personal history. All participants struggled, suffered, endured and demonstrated the true meaning of resilience by surviving their own past traumatic events within often dysfunctional families and throughout lengthy incarcerations at various provincial and federal prisons. They brought this strength to our circles, but they also
brought their compassion and support. When participant C shared about how his feelings towards his dad changed from white to grey to black, as mentioned on page 31, that disillusionment colored his perceptions, isolating him further from his dad and maybe others. However, when he saw himself similarly using violence in relationships, he may have been able to understand the connections between the historical disempowerment of Indigenous peoples and his own and his father’s recourse to violence. He may even been able to begin to forgive his dad and himself. This potential revelation may not have been possible without the support and guidance of the other participants within the restorying circle. Even though these participants are or were “hardened criminals,” they still had the ability to show acts of kindness, understanding and love to their family/community members and to one another within the restorying circles. We heard glimpses of positivity and happiness throughout each participant’s stories. Early on during the restorying circle project, if the participants noticed another participant struggle to share past traumatic events, words of support and encouragement appeared which perhaps assisted the participants by assuring them that they were not alone. The participants could feel their peers pain and sorrow, but more importantly they could hear the hope and aspiration. This was evidenced by the participants’ words of support, which gave each other courage to remember, to share, to better understand and to live with their past experiences in increasingly healthy ways. Participant A’s story above about the Northern Treatment Centre in Sault Ste. Marie illuminates the kind of toxic storytelling environment that the restorying circles were designed to avoid, and it drove home the necessity of reciprocal care within the community of storytellers.

The restorying process is envisioned not only to create safe spaces for the sharing of personal stories, but also to open up opportunities for reflection, and for revisiting and revising stories within a caring community in which others listen without judgment or surprise. In such an
environment, the men are encouraged to recognize that they are not solely responsible for the negative experiences that have befallen them and that they do carry the potential for growth and change. They are also encouraged to glean pride from their perseverance and survival, and further to acknowledge, reflect upon, and renew the strengths and positive attributes to be found within themselves. It is important to realize that participants’ problems were not simply eliminated once they identified them within their stories; however, their personal and collective recognition of their capacity to face those problems over the long term proved inspiring.

As participant A remarked:

I did not like myself for years, I tattooed my body to make myself less attractive to the world I was in. It didn’t have the effect I looked for. I abused my mind and soul with drugs to forget, but the memories are just as alive today as if I lived them yesterday. But with proper nourishment, they do not hurt as much and some cases, they do not hurt at all even though they scarred me for decades; the healing is slow and does not come over night. Flashbacks and triggers happened over a few years ago, especially about the sexual abuse. For more than a year, I was triggered by smells, sounds, and sights, and I would break down completely out of nowhere. I’m fortunate that I have a loving and caring partner who helped me through these difficult periods.

Participant A registered the ongoing manifestations of his traumatic past and the “slow” nature of the healing process; he admits that despite all of his culturally informed healing work, harsh “memories” can be “just as alive today as if [he] lived them yesterday.” Yet he asserts bravely that “with proper nourishment” positive change is possible.

Listening to other participants’ stories aided some of the men in their own restorying processes. This was evidenced repeatedly as participants referred to each other’s narratives when
sharing their own stories. Making these connections may have allowed them insight into their
own experiences and created opportunities to share long buried memories. For example,
Participant C referenced another’s story of putting a pillow over his head to help drown out the
sounds of violence in the home:

I saw a lot of violence when I was a child, I didn’t like it. Especially when it was towards
my mother, I saw my father hitting my mother for the first time as a young boy, I wanted
to grab something and try to defend her but there was nothing for me to grab because I
was a young boy and I didn’t know what to do. All I could do was run for cover for
myself, and when you were talking about the pillow over your head, that brought back a
lot of memories because that’s what I used to do as a child.

In our final session, he shared along similar lines:

But from what I remember about my childhood growing up, I used to hide whenever I’d
hear the adults partying, because eventually they’d be fighting. I’d always put the pillow
over my head and just scream or block it all out because I didn’t want to hear the
violence, the drinking and stuff. I find myself still doing that today just to block out
certain things and just to fall asleep. It may be a negative thing from the past, but it’s also
a positive thing I find because it helps me fall asleep at night and whenever I can’t calm
down in my own thoughts sometimes.

Like Participant A above, here Participant C acknowledges the return of traumatic memories
unbidden in a way that many listeners might perceive as debilitating; he states, after all, that “it
may be a negative thing.” Yet he highlights in his narrative of the incident the agency he retains
and therefore his power over the return of his past. He reclaims the act of placing a pillow over
his head as something other than ongoing victimization: “it’s also a positive thing because it
helps me fall asleep at night.” In an earlier session Participant C had shared that he couldn’t remember his early years, but connecting with the story shared by another triggered memories he thought he did not possess. Facing the violence and the fear allowed for an interpretation of his actions and responses throughout his life.

Participant C was also extremely forthright about his institutionalization and his perpetuation of learned violent behaviors within and beyond the household. He stated:

Then I started getting stuck in the federal system. I didn’t realize how fast my life was changing. Being stuck in the federal system and the next thing you know, time is going on, it’s like where’d my 20s go, where’d my 30s go, I lost it all. Like I explained before, I never had a job until I was 32 years old. I never made an honest living until then. It’s the same thing with relationships; they were always just short, limited. They were always filled with drugs and alcohol, which always led to violence. I guess I’ve always told myself that there were things in my life that I would never want to see done to, well, when I’ve seen my father do that to a woman and I’ve done that, you know, I’ve been charged with domestic violence, and I asked an Elder about this before and well it’s things that you see when you’re young is what you learn right? I didn’t want to turn out to be that way, but eventually I ended up getting into trouble like that.

Like the stories of other members of the group, Participant C’s stories revealed how the pain, abuse, and violence of family members and others impacted his own childhood and how he continued to live with pain and anger and even perpetuated that violence upon others, thus highlighting the nature of intergenerational trauma.

Although there was little evidence of participants changing their stories in significant ways throughout these sessions, there was meaningful participation by all involved and powerful
words were gifted to the circle with sensitivity and received gratefully by its members. Some of the participants appeared to have already done a good deal of restorying work, and multiple members expressed a desire to continue doing restorying work beyond the purview of this project to help themselves and others. Participant A shared how he has been using his experiences to share with, listen to, and support others within the Aboriginal community:

Now that I’m a little older, I know I have a responsibility to help the youth through their experiences. I can share my story with them and hope they can learn something. I can empathize with them and how they feel—the loneliness, despair, and the reasons for using drugs or alcohol. I will not judge them; I can listen and will listen. I may not have solutions much of the time, but we share common problems. I can only tell them how I worked through them. I have a wonderful and loving partner; she is the world to me.

Participant C indicated to the group that he recognized that he had become a man he didn’t want to be, but more importantly that he finally has realized that he can live a different story:

Today I choose not to use drugs or alcohol because of the way I felt, that’s not me; I don’t like feeling that way. Today I like to be the person that people look at me in a good way, instead of that bad negative way. I don’t want to be known as the person stuck in the system all my life. Drugs and alcohol were quite the bad experience for me, I’ve overdosed a couple of times, and I thank my blessings every day that I came back. My mother is always telling me there’s a reason for you to come back here, it’s not your time yet. You got to change. And that’s what I do every day, I try to be the better person that I can be.

The restorying circles were designed to support individuals to share their personal stories in a safe environment without shame. Healing can often be aided by the opportunity to share one’s
life story with calmness when previously it was interrupted by chaos and negative emotions. To that end these circles created a safe space for listening and sharing painful stories in a supportive environment. The courage, generosity, vulnerability, and care of these men, in their interactions with each other in the circle, generated opportunities for them all to affirm identities beyond those imposed upon them by colonial history and by the hypermasculinity conditioned within the prison—opportunities to strengthen their eagle wings, to soar above the negative life experiences, and to envision positive ways and culturally aware means of living moving forward.

Throughout the restorying circles the presence of Aboriginal Elders and/or advisors facilitated a focus on healing and growth. An Elder highlighted that although painful memories were shared, the air could be cleared through a smudge, prayer, and ceremony. The focus of the restorying circles was not on the pain, suffering, abuse, addictions, or experiences within prison, but rather on remembering the child within who had been isolated and forgotten: To allow each participant to catch glimpses of themselves and what they could still become in the future. For these participants who had long struggled in isolation, the restorying circles allowed for a space to learn to connect with themselves and others.
CHAPTER 5
RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout this restorying circle project, the participants discussed the benefits of sharing their personal stories with other Aboriginal participants involved with the criminal justice system (CJS) in a culturally sensitive environment. As such, this project demonstrates the continued need for culturally supportive practices for Aboriginal people involved with the CJS, both during incarceration and especially after release; the need for such resources is particularly acute in urban centers. The cultural and spiritual connections that may have been initiated through cultural programming and working with Elders and Aboriginal staff within prison need to continue on the outside. Although this was a small research study, the views of the participants may well be representative of other Aboriginal people involved with the CJS, who would benefit from the spiritual connections and cultural support offered by similar restorying circle projects. The protocols established in these restorying circles could well be used as a template allowing participants to revisit past life experiences with an intent to heal, restore, and redirect in a positive, self-transformative direction. Furthermore, the provision of a safe, culturally appropriate space to meet may well be integral to fostering the development of a supportive and reciprocally accountable community for this marginalized group. There are many Aboriginal organizations throughout urban centers in Canada that offer cultural programs, Elder services, and welcoming spaces that could adopt this restorying circle project into their activities, with the particular goal of serving the healing needs of Aboriginal people whose lives have been embroiled in the CJS.

Many of the participants suffered adverse effects of colonialism such as racism and discrimination, which are common amongst Aboriginal people within the CJS. Rather than
feeling blame, shame, guilt, or isolation, the participants in cultural ceremonies like the restorying circles are encouraged to realize that their experiences are all too common. Through sharing and listening to personal stories, the participants begin to develop hope and see their survival and resilience as strength. They come to recognize that they are not defined by what they have been told or by their prison labels, but by the gifts they have to offer, as is illustrated by the eagle story shared in Chapter 3. However, upon analyzing the transcripts, I was surprised by how seldom the participants contextualize their experiences within a colonial framework or view their incarceration within a broader history of Indigenous dispossession, assimilation, and containment in Canada. The written history of Canada shares how explorers from Europe (mainly French and English) “discovered” this country for the purpose of claiming its resources for their home countries. They found Indigenous peoples already here, but appropriated the land and resources through violence, disease, government policies (including the Indian Act), laws, and treaties. These histories speak of how the country was colonized, “civilized,” and settled, but ignore the stories of the people who were already living on the land, how they were treated by the explorers and settlers, and how they were continually dispossessed in ways that include the repeatedly compromised treaties. This colonial framework has been violently reinforced through practices such as residential schooling, the removal of Indigenous people to reserves, and the overrepresentation of Aboriginals in the criminal justice system. The colonial framework naturalizes these acts of dispossession and genocide by perpetuating in multiple ways the belief that Indigenous people are inferior and ignorant, and therefore criminal and irredeemable. A component of intergenerational trauma is the internalization of these beliefs by Indigenous peoples themselves, as well as the frequent personal and community exposure to prejudice and discrimination. There were no direct questions regarding this colonial framework and how it
related to the participants lives within the restorying circles. However, upon listening to the participants’ stories, there is a direct correlation between their past negative treatment by their family members and the historical discriminatory and assimilation policies of the colonial framework. You can clearly see how and why these participants and other Indigenous people are perfect candidates for the criminal justice system. Poverty, limited education, unavailable employment, high rates of substance abuse, the epidemic of Indigenous suicide, and high rates of crime are all connected to the past and current treatment of Indigenous people by the settler colonial nation state in Canada. Yet, as our discussions in the circles betray, many Indigenous people involved in the criminal justice system do not realize that the harsh treatment they incurred and circumstances in which they lived were products of the colonial framework. Understandably, they were more focused on survival, on their own personal circumstance, and on struggling to find out who they are as an individual. As such, one recommendation would be that future restorying circles contain some reflection on and/or instruction related to settler colonialism and its relationship to the epidemic of Indigenous incarceration.

Prior to beginning the restorying circle project, I had participated in many talking and healing circles within Federal prisons, Aboriginal communities, and organizations. The reality is that there are limited cultural and spiritual services available for Aboriginal people released from the prison system. Aboriginal men and women who have been incarcerated often have many deep scars to heal from in terms of their histories after they have been released from custody. I decided to have these restorying circles to determine their feasibility and value relating to helping these participants restory and heal. In addition, prior to this project, I worked with Elizabeth Fry Society to develop a talking circle, which currently continues and benefits both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, which informed my goal of developing these restorying
circles. The restorying circles conducted for this project illustrate how a culturally sensitive, homosocial environment populated by those with similar experiences can create conditions of safety in which formerly incarcerated Aboriginal men can share, reflect, and grow. However, work still needs to be done to assess how restorying circles with diversely gendered participants might foster healing in other ways. The tentative findings thus far indicate that restorying circles are likely beneficial to healing and to helping Aboriginal people avoid re-entrenchment in the CJS.

The participants in this project demonstrate in their actions and words that Aboriginal people involved in the CJS have the ability to survive and lead productive lives. Each participant shared stories of positivity and demonstrated resiliency in giving voice to his experiences. Perhaps future research could examine in longitudinal studies the benefits of restorying circles across a larger base of participants. A comparison of the effectiveness of different approaches within restorying circles and of different prompts for reflection would also be valuable. More support for those who have left prison to re-enter society should be encouraged through focus on funding, resources and provisions for cultural and spiritual programming.

Finally, many of the participants in the restorying circles proved passionate about their desire to give back to their communities by speaking to youth and directing them on a good path. These participants could be positive role models to youth—role models that were missing in most of their own lives—possibly preventing many in the next generation from becoming involved with the CJS. Finding avenues for service to the community could provide new stories for these Aboriginal men to create, share, and live. Sharing the life stories and experiences of these participants, which reflect in striking ways the experiences of many within the Indigenous inmate population, with Indigenous youth to help the next generation avoid getting involved with
the criminal justice system in the first place. The participants in this restorying circle project could act as guest speakers in Indigenous classrooms. They could even employ the restorying circle model as a teaching tool to assist Indigenous youth who often struggle to open up and share their stories; similarly, the Medicine Wheel Tipi could be employed as a prompt for further reflection with Indigenous youth to facilitate the restorying process. In these ways, the participants in the restorying circle project could act as role models for Indigenous youth within their communities. As was made clear as the men shared their stories throughout the circles, the absence of positive role models in their own lives had increased their isolation and made them more susceptible to criminality; now they desire to prevent such isolation for those who have come after them.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This restorying project proved an inspiring validation of the power of storytelling and community to further hope and healing for the participants. The project was initiated with an original hypothesis that the restorying process would highlight how participants’ stories changed over the course of the circles, showing a movement from a sharing of negative beginnings to sharing more positive aspirations. However, as has been discussed in previous chapters, this was not realized in the project. Although many of the participants highlighted stories of trauma, abuse, and isolation, interwoven they shared moments of hope where they cared for siblings and found strength in their isolation right from the very beginning of the restorying process. That we did not see dramatic evidence of restorying change, however, does not diminish the value of the project, but rather leads us to consider the complex nature of identity, restorying, and the healing journey. My analysis of the transcribed circles focuses on issues of isolation, loneliness, and substance abuse, as well as the forging of identities to survive imprisonment, as major components of each participant’s story. It became evident in our discussions that restorying is a long-term process. In the words of Participant A, “the memories are just as alive today as if I lived them yesterday. But with proper nourishment, they do not hurt as much….even though they scarred me for decades; the healing is slow and does not come over night.” According to the participants, sharing the pain and buried memories in many cases diminished some of the corrosive impact of past trauma and created space for hope and healing to grow.

All participants mentioned connecting in some way with Indigenous culture within the prison system and that this was a factor in their healing journeys. Many Indigenous men have not been presented with cultural and spiritual teachings until their involvement in the prison system,
as a result of the legislated suppression of Indigenous ways of knowing throughout the centuries of settler colonialism. Some of the men grew up largely in non-Indigenous foster homes, and some grew up in homes where those that practiced Indigenous spirituality were also negative influences in other ways. As such, most of the men were unaware of many of their own cultural practices before entering prison. Unfortunately in prison, the hope and healing offered by cultural programs is often negated by the challenges faced by the men when they return to the cell block and need to put back on the hypermasculine exterior required to survive within the institution. Those teachings and spiritual and cultural connections that the men have just experienced get suffocated by the toxic prison environment. However, the valuable element about the reconnection and introduction to one’s culture is that it begins a process for the men of answering crucial questions regarding their identities and how the teachings might assist with rediscovering and restorying who they are as Indigenous people.

For three of the four participants, this cultural and spiritual connection while imprisoned ultimately sparked the beginnings of their personal reflection and the desire to retell and restory their own stories. It was during these moments that the participants reported starting to ponder and question their negative past experiences. When finally released from prison, a major priority for most of these participants was having spirituality and cultural activities as part of their lives on the outside. Spiritual ceremonies and cultural activities are necessary in order to keep the participants at balance spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically and to keep them connected to their Indigenous beliefs and values. Prior to this awakening, all of the men had abused substances in order to endure the hardships in their lives (or at least to escape those hardships for a limited time). Recognizing the difference between using substances to escape and using ceremonies and spirituality to face their lives is a major difference maker for these men: it
is a matter of being released in community or back in prison. It is much easier for the participants to chose the life they have know best, which involves substance abuse and criminality, than to strive to learn and participate in their cultures. Yet, as they get older, they realize that this life has led them to incarceration. The participants’ priority now is to seek out spiritual ceremonies and cultural activities, in order for them to live in the community and to grow in health and strength.

Most mentioned that this is supporting them in leading a pro-social and law-abiding lifestyle. As Participant C states, “I try to follow and stay on a good path, to live a good life, and smudging every morning helps me. It’s how I begin my day, with a prayer. Whereas in the past, I didn’t bother, I didn’t care. Whereas today I do care.” Outside of the prison, however, there may be few opportunities for these men to connect with culture and to receive the support offered through programs such as this restorying project, particularly in an urban setting like Kingston. Ex-offenders are often limited as well in terms of where they can reside so they may not be allowed to travel to communities or healing places to receive this culturally specific support. These restorying circles in this community provided much-needed opportunities for these participants to further develop the spiritual knowledge they had discovered inside the prison system in order to pursue further healing.

All participants in the study experienced similar life paths, which contributed to a spirit of openness in the circles as there was a mutual understanding and respect for one another. This allowed the participants to be vulnerable and open about sharing their past experiences, which led in many cases to discovery and rich discussion of personal challenges. Being with a group of participants who had suffered similar difficult and traumatic experiences as children, who had also been incarcerated, and who were now trying to lead pro-social lives, allowed the men to provide possible alternative solutions for each other’s personal problems. For example,
Participant A has been a motivational speaker to youth groups in northern Aboriginal communities. Participant A stated:

And I’m bound to teach others through the stories. I’m invited up to James Bay to tell my story. I’ve never pulled the 14 hours up there, the 14 hours back. Talk to the youth up there. I know about the gang life in jail. I know what jail does to people. I know how backwards it is. And if they can stay out of it, that’s a good thing. If one person stays out as a result of hearing what I have to say, it’s a good thing. But if no one stays out of it, I can say that you can survive it, you can still learn good things in there.

These participants have often been told what to do or how to fix their problems by workers who represent the authorities. In order to maintain their identities, they have often resisted this guidance. To have their peers provide them guidance and direction may open new pathways for addressing past experiences and to work in the area of positive futures. It is this process of sharing, reflection, and healing that allowed for each individual to retell, reflect, revise, and restory as was evident in the last few sessions of the research project. Participant A described:

I took the risk and said I want to take this week and I’m going to say what’s in my heart and what’s in my mind. It’s a risk, yeah. Because a lot of the time I felt that no one else had been through the same crap as me. But I learned there are others like me. But each time I told what happened to me, it got a little easier, it didn’t hurt so much. And that’s where I learned I can do that today…

The restorying project may not have demonstrated that there was a dramatic shift in terms of initial and final sharing circles, but the participants indeed demonstrated increased openness and support.
The restorying circles have allowed some of these men, perhaps for the first time, to uncover past demons and share these with others in a spiritual and cultural environment leading to opportunities for healing. Participant C stated, “Coming to the circles helps me. As everybody shared, and I shared, it helps me reflect on where I’ve been in life. I know that I’m not the only person who had a lot of problems in life.” In the space of the circles, you could not only hear but feel the participants become more open, vulnerable, and honest, which suggests some form of transformation. Participant B supports this assessment, indicating, “Overall, I didn’t mind coming here. I enjoyed the ride, I enjoyed the ride leaving, I enjoyed the talk.” Previously, this participant was against attending and participating in any spiritual ceremonies for a number of years because of people’s disrespect towards one another. Participant B stated, “I’ve seen too often people doing that and then just walk away with meanness in their heart for that person. I have for years stayed away from ceremonies, I’ve stayed away from smudging, I’ve stayed away from a lot of things when it gets into a group gathering.” However, he became welcoming of the restorying circles and opened up and was forthright about sharing of his own stories. As well, the sharing of more difficult personal experiences over time within the restorying circles was an indicator of potentially transformative practice.

The restorying circles provided an opportunity for the participants to share experiences implicated in their involvement within the criminal justice system and to reflect together on how to break free of this system. It also gave them a sense of community, creating inspiration and pride as the men recognized their worth within the circle and their importance to the research that would potentially impact others down the road. The restorying circles also demonstrated how negative past experiences (of family dysfunction, alcohol/drug abuse, violence, limited education, negative role modeling, loneliness, isolation, and criminal involvement) had propelled
these participants towards involvement with the criminal justice system. All participants shared how isolation acted as a shield against the violence and substance abuse that was often taking place within their family environments as children. The act of isolation in the beginning for many of these participants was out of necessity and self-preservation against the violence of their family members, who are suppose to love you and provide a sense of belonging. However, through the process of self-isolation, the person no longer has others to provide support, to nurture them, and to offer guidance on life directions. What eventually happens is that this isolation seeps into this person’s identity and begins to fester in a negative manner by speaking negative thoughts: like ‘I’m not worthy of friends,’ ‘I don’t deserve a family,’ and ‘I don’t need support and love.’ Feelings like these often lead to negative behavior such as drug/alcohol abuse, committing crime and possibly suicide. Ironically, the main purpose of the shield of isolation was initially to protect the child from violence often informed by substance abuse; however, these very same social factors later become manifest in the person’s adolescent and adult lives as they commit acts of violence towards others and themselves, mostly under the influence of substances. Isolation, loneliness, and despair are all words that describe the participants’ lives growing up as young people; these same words also describe the feelings of many who attempt suicide. So many young people—especially Indigenous youth—feel alone and that nobody loves them and that life is not fair, leading to thoughts of suicide. These young people have often been forced by society and family dysfunction into isolation and they use isolation as a shield for their own protection; however, as time goes on, this shield increases their senses of abandonment, cutting them off from their families and communities. Cut off from a circle of love and support, many are left with only alcohol and drugs to numb their pain.
This isolation continued to be part of these participants’ lives as they sought escape in substance abuse as young adults and was exacerbated even further when they became incarcerated. Upon release, some participants came to realize that isolation and loneliness were no longer necessary and that seeking out cultural events and social gatherings was a better and healthier option. This change in their behavior from isolation to community could be considered part of their restorying; the men were now allowing influences beyond past negative experiences to shape their choices.

Reading the highlights of each participant’s story allows us to understand how his life experiences influenced his eventual involvement with the criminal justice system. This is not to say the participants were inevitably doomed to become offenders, but rather to recognize the commonalities among their life stories that rendered them more vulnerable to adverse involvement with the law. Hopefully, their examples may also encourage others in similarly vulnerable positions to reshape, revise, and restory their stories to enable them to avoid pathways toward criminal involvement. The stories shared within this dissertation may also encourage others to create spaces to facilitate sharing difficult experiences, the untold memories which may continue to limit and define them.

The stories shared in these restorying circles allowed each participant to think about his past personal story. The hope is that this process will continue to benefit these participants in the future; however, it is uncertain whether the six sessions of this project were long enough to impact the participants’ future journeys in a substantive way. The themes and topics discussed in the circles covered the cycle of life from birth through childhood and adolescence to adulthood. However, the question remains of whether discussing other critical topics and issues would be worthwhile. This study begs the questions: are there ongoing spiritual and cultural supports, as
well as opportunities for building connections available to these participants and others with similar backgrounds and challenges now that our circles have concluded? Is there an ideal length of time for such gatherings or should there be ongoing opportunities for restorying? One of the valuable aspects of this project was that the participants were committed and faithfully attended the circles. This helped to build a cohesive group and to increase trust and vulnerability within the circles. Perhaps if a different format were used this aspect of connection would be lost and the impact for each participant would be less significant. In other words, if the circles were ongoing in perpetuity, participants might not attend regularly and the spirit of community might be compromised.

**Final Words, Future Possibilities**

Shame, blame, anger, and hopelessness were evident at various points throughout the participants’ sharing of their stories. These negative emotions, along with lack of role models, boredom, and loneliness may have contributed to their drug addictions and their engagement in criminal behaviors. These restorying circles allowed the participants to share their difficult experiences in a healthy environment supported by others who empathized and provided alternative perspectives through their own stories. The restorying circles also provided opportunities for the participants to remember and share positive experiences of their pasts. The reflection of positive moments led participants to think of their many strengths and to be hopeful for the future. This enabled the men to restory their situation with positive self-messaging, such as: I am not alone, people do care for and love me, there are positive role models, I want to be a better father, son, family member, and person. All of these messages were reinforced by the Elders and other participants.
The restorying circles provided several sharing opportunities for the participants to take their time and think about what they would discuss. Each restorying circle enabled the participants to take their time to think about and then share phases of their lives from childhood to adolescence to adulthood to reflections on the future. There was one circle per week and at the end of each circle, the participants were advised what the discussion for the next week would be. This provided the participants opportunity to think about their past stories and experiences, and decide in their own manner how to share their personal past for the next week. This progressive structure perhaps encouraged participants to revise and restory their own stories to make them relevant to the research project as well as to consider what to share and what to keep from others in the circle.

At the final restorying circle, the participants were asked if they had anything to add. They provided the following closing comments:

**Participant A:**

Because a lot of the time I felt that no one else had been through the same crap as me.

But I learned there are others like me. But each time I told what happened to me, it got a little easier, it didn’t hurt so much. And were it not for storytelling, talking to people, that’s what we do every day of our lives, we tell stories. I just know that I lived that story. And I’m here today because of that story, because of my story. If one person stays out as a result of hearing what I have to say, it’s a good thing. Sharing. Grateful to be here to hear the stories. And I just remind myself every day that I’ve got to be good to myself, be happy with myself, to love myself. Try to make someone smile today. If I do that, I’ve succeeded in what I want to do. Meegwetch.
Participant B:

So overall, I understand the reason for the groups, I understand why they’re put together and they get the circles going because guys need it. Maybe I need it in a way at times, get me thinking again about things. Maybe get me talking about things I don’t talk about enough. It’s good to come someplace where you can share your childhood, you can share your story, share ideals. But most of all, it’s good just to come at times. Meegwetch

Participant C:

Coming to the circles helps me stay balanced I guess. I try to follow and stay on a good path, to live a good life, and smudging every morning helps me. It’s how I begin my day, with a prayer. Whereas in the past, I didn’t bother, I didn’t care. That’s how I just keep living my good life, that’s what I try to do every day. I don’t want to go back to where I was before. Coming in circles like this helps me a lot. I’m very thankful to you guys for sharing your stories, I’m very thankful for that. I learned a lot.

Participant D:

I am happy, today I am feeling more open and I want more. I’m thinking about one-on-one talk, I’m sick and tired of hiding it. I want to feel better and more honest. I like this program because I got to learn more, it’s important, I’m going forward to a better life, I keep working on it. Keep talking, I want more and more of the program.

Stories shared within these restorying circles demonstrated how the participants’ past experiences informed their eventual incarceration. Many researchers have demonstrated that factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, not attending school, unemployment, and drug and alcohol abuse are common among those who have been involved in criminal activity and incarcerated. While there is also research relating to reducing recidivism, resilience, and
overcoming such negative factors (Howell, 2008, Tousignant, M., & Sioui, 2009), we seldom hear the narratives of currently released Aboriginal offenders who are rebuilding their lives despite traumatic histories and many years of imprisonment. The participants in my restorying circle project may be considered to be resilient and deemed survivors as they have endured and overcome their past trauma related to the substance abuse, violence, isolation and unhealthy family environment. These Aboriginal participants need to continue focusing on their strength of resilience and survival and keep directing this energy towards their own healing. The stories shared within the restorying circles told harsh truths and honored the resilience of the participants, who are restorying balance in their lives and are reshaping their understandings of themselves in order to enable them to live their lives differently. The participants’ stories forced others to look at their own lives to ask, ‘Do I have the same resilience to overcome my own personal struggles? Or must I continue allowing past trauma to affect my life?’ So many times these participants were bent to the limit but they did not break, showing true resiliency. By seeing the resiliency in themselves through their stories and having that resiliency reflected back to them by other men in the group, these Aboriginal men had their weaponry of resilience affirmed and enhanced—ready for struggles yet to come.

Listening to these participants share their experiences within a culturally sensitive community of support and find ways to discover hope and healing was inspiring for all involved in the circles. My hope is that these stories will also encourage other Aboriginal people to revisit their histories and restory their stories in ways that will foster their senses of self-worth and help them avoid the clutches of the criminal justice system.
REFERENCES


Rudin, J. N.D. *Aboriginal Peoples and the Criminal Justice System. P.1-73.*


Restorying the Lives of Aboriginal People


Appendix B
Appendix C

The medicine wheel has EAST/SOUTH/WEST/NORTH. Below are the Key Words and Phrases found on the Medicine wheel tipi model to assist the participants with their story sharing.

EAST: Childhood and Emotional

Key words - unhealthy, poverty (hunger), lack of parenting and role models, lack of education, family violence/violence, boredom, isolation, unhealthy relationships, substance abuse, residential school, child welfare system (foster home, group home), cultural disconnection, lack of identity, broken language.

Phrases - felt dirty and awful, not fitting in, left alone, beaten up, lost of family members, placed pillow over head to smother out all the violence and screaming, rocked on the couch for hours to calm the nerves, don’t know how to love or hug my kids, felt like no one loved me, I did not want to live, got bullied, called racist names.

SOUTH: Adolescence and Mental

Key words - negative peers, suicidal thoughts, unkind words, lack of trust, tough on outside, weak on inside, lack of emotions/feelings.

Phrases - better chance of being sent to prison than graduating high school, when I see my own blood feel like I am releasing the pain from my body, won’t do that again I promise, I am stupid and worthless, no sense to care about my future as no one cares about me, I never got a break in life always in jail, left that place (prison) felt like a robot with no feelings or emotions, didn’t know anything about my culture or teachings, felt loss and no idea who I was.

WEST: Adulthood and Physical

Key words - past mistakes, change of heart, disrespect towards self and others.

Phrases - I know I need help just don’t know how to ask?, I have learned my mistakes I have a change of heart, need to be there for my kids, I treat people like they treat me most times not pretty, lose/lose situation, suffer in silence…don’t trust anyone, always be ready to fight, I didn’t use to like myself, scars are self inflicted, held me captive for too long, held me prisoner want to be a better person, no tools to deal with relationships in a positive way, no constructive ways to express emotions, use to love drugs/alcohol, now love sweats, addicted to spirituality.

NORTH: Elder Years and Spiritual

Phrases - when things get tough pray it is so easy yet so hard, spiritual ceremonies are powerful tools for healing, elders are good at storytelling (re-story), Elders are oral teachers, when you talk to Elders they do not write anything down they listen, prison staff make people scared to open up afraid to say something wrong as it gets written down, offer teachings to creator, mother earth, seven grandfather teachings.
Appendix D

**Letter of Information**

“The Restorying Circle Project”

This research is being conducted by Michael Gauthier, Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

**What is this study about?** The restorying circle project invites participants to revisit their pasts and “restory their own stories” as part of a healing journey. The project is for Aboriginal people impacted by the criminal justice system (CJS)—a population with access to few culturally relevant resources in the service of healing and empowerment.

The main objective of the restorying circle project is to build healthier individuals and communities by providing a safe space for the sharing of personal struggles and experiences. In a safe, supportive, and culturally aware environment facilitated by a respected Elder, participants will be encouraged to discuss their experiences prior to and including encounters with the criminal justice system and to focus in their stories on their own strengths. Participants will share knowledge and skills with the objective of enhancing their lives.

The study will involve recording orally or in writing the stories of those members of the restorying circles who agree to participate in the study. You do **not** have to participate in the study to take part in the restorying circles. Your participation is voluntary, and you can opt in or out of the study at any time. Participants agreeing to take part in the study will be asked to provide their personal stories at the beginning and at the end of the restorying circle project.

**Who I am**

I am a Cree man from Northern Ontario who grew up in a negative family environment and was exposed to violence, alcoholism, poverty and abuse, which in turn informed my own troubles with the law. After spending time reflecting, revising and restorying my own life history, I was able to rise above the challenges associated with intergenerational trauma. I have been working as an Aboriginal liaison for Corrections for XX years.

**Details of the restorying circles**

The restorying circle project will include cultural components and opportunities for Indigenous storytelling practices. The study will invite your participation in eight to ten restorying circles (1-2 hours duration). An Aboriginal Elder will also be part of this sharing circle to offer wisdom, guidance and counseling, and an Aboriginal Research Assistant (ARA) will be present to oversee the consent process.

There are some psychological and social risks associated with this study. If you experience any psychological or social distress, the Elder will be made available to offer counselling and healing during this study. In addition, the researcher will provide referrals to other non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal organizations to assist with support and counselling.
Is my participation voluntary? Yes. It would be appreciated if you would participate in sharing your personal story. You should not feel obliged to share parts of your story that make you feel uncomfortable. You may also withdraw at any time from the study by verbally notifying either the Aboriginal Research Assistant and/or the Aboriginal researcher, and/or refrain from sharing your story. You may also withdraw any information already provided and be reassured that your withdrawal from this study will not negatively impact your participation in the circles themselves.

What will happen to my responses? The Researcher will keep your responses confidential to the extent possible. Only the Principal researcher, his thesis supervisor, Aboriginal Elder, ARA and transcriber will have access to this data. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Your personal information or identifying features will not be shared in any way or any forum. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

Will I be compensated for my participation? Yes, there will be refreshments, drinks and donuts provided at each meeting; as well, there will be a gift card (20 dollars) provided to those who participate in at least five or more restorying circles.

What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to the Aboriginal researcher at gauthier_michael@hotmail.com or the thesis supervisor, Dr. Sam McKegney at sam.mckegney@queensu.ca, 613-533-6000, ext. 74388. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair. GREB@queensu.ca.

Again, thank you.

Michael Gauthier
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

“The Restorying Circle Project”

Name (please print clearly): ________________________________

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “The Restorying Healing Circle Project”. I understand that this means that I will be asked to participate in 10 restorying circles, including an introductory and a closing circle.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time.

4. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain my confidentiality to the extent possible.

5. I understand that only the Principal Investigator, the Spiritual Advisor, and the transcriber will have access to the original data produced in this study.

6. I understand also that some of the data may be published in professional journals or presented at academic conferences and other public venues, but that any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality.

7. I understand that if I am interested in a copy of the findings, I can receive one by contacting the Principal Investigator.

8. Any questions about study participation may be directed to the Principal Investigator, Michael Gauthier, gauthiermij@csc-scc.gc.ca or 613-449-4169. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

I agree to be tape recorded in the introductory and closing circle:

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________