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## Indigenous Geographies: Research as Reconciliation

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# Indigenous Geographies: Research as Reconciliation

## Abstract

Employing a reflexive and co-constructed narrative analysis, this article explores our experiences as a non-Indigenous doctoral student and a First Nations research assistant working together within the context of a community-based participatory Indigenous geography research project. Our findings revealed that within the research process there were experiences of conflict, and opportunities to reflect upon our identity and create meaningful relationships. While these experiences contributed to an improved research process, at a broader level, we suggest that they also represented our personal stories of reconciliation. In this article, we share these stories, specifically as they relate to reconciliatory processes of re-education and cultural regeneration. We conclude by proposing several policy recommendations to support research as a pathway to reconciliation in Canada.

## Keywords

reconciliation, Indigenous geography, reflexive methods, Aboriginal

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## Indigenous Geographies: Research as Reconciliation

According to Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huysse (2003), reconciliation is a process that seeks truth, justice, forgiveness, and healing. It is about co-existing, cooperating, and sharing with the goal of a better life for all. It is about building relationships that are grounded in respect and understanding, with the hope of moving “from a divided past to a shared future” (p. 12). Yet, reconciliation is a complex concept, and there is little agreement regarding how to define or go about it. Bloomfield (2006) asks, for example: Is reconciliation an end goal to be achieved, or is it a process? Is it a national, societal, or political responsibility? Does it occur at the individual, psychological, or theological level? He suggests that perhaps it encompass all of these things, although different facets require different “approaches, mechanisms and contexts” (p. 4). In this regard, he differentiates between two approaches<sup>1</sup> to reconciliation: *structural*, which focuses on the pragmatic requirements of politics and building adequate working relations from the top levels of political structures downward, and *cultural*, which happens at an individual or small group level. Cultural approaches to reconciliation are often interpersonal and operate from the grassroots level, requiring an emotional interaction between people or groups that is a “fuller and deeper process [than structural reconciliation] . . . which may indeed lead to a meaningful end-state of a wholly reconciled and harmonious relationship” between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous peoples (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 28). In this article, we share our experiences as a non-Indigenous doctoral student and First Nations research assistant working together within the context of an Indigenous geography community-based participatory research project with urban First Nations men. Employing a reflexive approach to conducting research as well as narrative analysis, we discuss how research provided a space for us to participate in cultural processes of reconciliation. We conclude by suggesting several structural processes that might support the reconciliatory potential of research in Canada.

In the Canadian context, the word reconciliation is most closely associated with the legacy of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. Indian Residential Schools were created by the government in partnership with a variety of churches “for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. v). In the 1980s, survivors of the IRS system started to speak publicly about their experiences, which led to the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history. The resulting Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) provided compensation to students who attended Canada’s 139 residential schools and residences. The agreement also called for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), whose 5-year mandate sought to inform Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools through documenting the experiences of those affected by and involved with them, including survivors, families, communities, the churches, former school employees, the government, and other Canadians. In June of 2015, the TRC publicly released a summary of its findings, which included 94 recommendations that sought not only to address the legacy of the residential school system, but also to broadly improve the lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Bloomfield noted that while the two approaches are distinct in their methods, they are complementary and their interaction is vital.

Aboriginal Peoples, and improve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation of Canada, 2015a).

Within the scholarship pertaining to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, the words of Indigenous scholar and activist Leanne Simpson resonated with us most. While Simpson (2011) supported the broad approach to reconciliation as discussed by the TRC, she cautioned that a focus on residential schools alone permits Canadians to assume that “the historical ‘wrong’ has now been ‘righted,’” effectively discounting “the broader set of relationships that generated policies, legislation and practices aimed at assimilation and political genocide” (p. 22). While she acknowledged that participation in processes of reconciliation related to residential schools may indeed bring about positive change, she also asked people to proceed critically and to be aware of the need for a much broader and long-term approach to remedying relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. She affirmed that if reconciliation is to be meaningful for Indigenous Peoples, then it must be grounded in cultural regeneration and political resurgence while requiring Canada to “engage in a decolonization project and a re-education project that would enable its government and its citizens to engage with Indigenous Peoples in a just and honourable way in the future” (p. 23).

Globally, discussions and research in Indigenous geographies regarding the relationship between research and reconciliation are receiving increasing attention (see Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt, 2012; Howitt & Jackson, 1998). In the Canadian context, however, there is a notable lack of focus on this topic. One exception is Castleden, Daley, Sloan Morgan, and Sylvestre’s (2013) digital storytelling project, which explored the “geography of ignorance” among graduate students enrolled in a course titled “Indigenous Perspectives on Resource and Environmental Management” at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The course required students to participate in a weeklong community-based field school, which allowed them to interact with and learn from Indigenous Peoples. By “bringing them out from behind books and lecture halls” to engage with Indigenous peoples and spaces, the authors suggested that the students were able to overcome “colonial attitudes and racist mentalities” (p. 488). While the authors concluded that their findings demonstrated the transformative power of community-based research and digital storytelling to unsettle non-Indigenous students, we suggest that the field school was, in addition, able to provide a space wherein students could participate in reconciliation by re-educating themselves about Indigenous Peoples, knowledge, culture, and history. While we acknowledge that such spaces are relatively common in Indigenous geographical research in Canada, we do suggest that few participants have written about their experiences.

### **Indigenous Geographies and Reflexive Methods**

For many Indigenous Peoples and communities, research has historically been a significant “source of distress” (Cochran & Marshall, 2008, p. 23). Often functioning as an extension of colonial control over cultures, lands, and resources, research has traditionally prioritized Western worldviews while positioning Indigenous Peoples as passive participants and/or problems to be solved (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Geography, as a discipline, has most certainly been complicit in this unequal relationship (Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt, 2014; Howitt & Jackson, 1998; Louis, 2007; Shaw, Herman, & Dobbs, 2006). In this regard, Shaw et al. (2006) have claimed, “geography is not politically neutral, and the projects of imperialism/colonialism are far from re-dressed” (p. 267). In response to

such concerns both within the discipline and beyond, there is a growing recognition of the need to engage in Indigenous research in a good way, using decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies that prioritize both Indigenous control over research and Indigenous ways of knowing (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Within Indigenous geographies, scholars are increasingly seeking out ways to employ decolonizing and Indigenous approaches to research with the hope of contributing to more “just and relevant research” (Coombes et al., 2014, p. 845). One example of these efforts is scholars’ growing embrace of reflexive methods (Coombes et al., 2014; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015). Informed by social constructionism and widely embraced within feminist scholarship (England, 1994; Kobayashi, 2003), reflexive methods are congruent with decolonizing and Indigenous inquiry through both their recognition of the politics of representation and their highly experiential and relational nature (Kovach, 2009). Finlay (2002) has defined reflexive approaches as:

Thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of “what I know and how I know it,” to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge. (p. 532)

Proponents of reflexive methods contend that they allow the researcher to locate herself or himself within the context of her or his research and to consider how her or his location and privilege shape the resulting knowledge construction. In this regard, reflexive methods have the potential to enhance the research process through improved insight and self-discovery (England, 1994; Finlay, 2002; Fook, 1999; Kovach, 2009). Yet at the same time, critics of this method caution that reflexivity runs the risk of being self-indulgent and narcissistic if not done with the intent of applying one’s knowledge to a greater good (Aveling, 2013; England, 1994; Kobayashi, 2003; Pillow, 2003). If it is not “tied to a larger agenda,” preferably one that is “meant to change the world” (Kobayashi, 2003, p. 348), then reflexive methods run the risk of becoming nothing more than navel gazing. Sharing her growing dis-ease with reflexive practices, Kobayashi (2003) has asked: “Why the heck should I care about how a privileged, White graduate student felt when she went out into the world to discover oppression and marginalization?” (p. 348). Smith (2013) added that, while such reflexive works are not without merit in terms of their ability to contribute to understanding “how the logics of domination that structure the world also contribute to who we are as subjects,” they must also “occur concurrently with social and political transformation” if they are to be truly meaningful (p. 264). We must therefore endeavor to proceed carefully and think critically about what and why we choose to share.

While reflexive methods are increasingly employed within Indigenous geographies as means to explore the challenges associated with doing Indigenous research, such as insider and outside standpoints or navigating institutional constraints, (see for example de Leeuw, Cameron, & Greenwood, 2012; Fisher, 2015; Hodge & Lester, 2006), few have employed them to share their experiences of research as a potential pathway to reconciliation.

## **Methodology**

### **Positionality**

Consistent with the reflexive methods discussed above, “a fundamental principle of Indigenous research methodology is the necessity for the researcher to locate himself or herself” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 97). Although some criticize this practice as self-indulgent, especially for non-Indigenous researchers (Aveling, 2013), we feel it is important for our readers to understand who we are and how we became involved with this research project. We believe that doing this provides a more meaningful background to our findings.

### **Cindy**

Cindy is a non-Indigenous doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at Western University in London, Ontario. She grew up in London, and still lives there with her husband and 8-year-old son. Her decision to pursue her doctorate was rooted after hearing Justice Murray Sinclair speak in 2010 about the IRS system and the legacy of physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional abuse experienced by so many of the children who attended. As a mother listening to the stories of the survivors of these schools, she felt both heartbreak and anger. She remembers questioning how she, as an educated woman, knew so very little about Indigenous culture and history. The experience started her on a journey of wanting to learn as much as she could about Indigenous Peoples and culture; eventually, she made the decision to return to school and pursue a doctorate in Indigenous health geography. At the time of writing this article, she was in the final year of her program.

### **Erik**

Erik is Cree from Beaver Lake in Northeastern Alberta. He grew up in Toronto, Ontario and has lived in London, Ontario since 2013. Erik was hired to work with Cindy to co-conduct interviews as part of her research. His decision to work alongside Cindy stems from his interest in returning to academia after being away for 5 years. He holds a B.Sc. in Medical Anthropology (Hons.) from the University of Toronto. After completing this degree, Erik dedicated himself to learning from Elders and traditional healers, which led him to work for an Aboriginal health centre in London. During this time, he noted differences in the ways that allopathic doctors and traditional healers approached their practices. This prompted Erik to consider the need for more First Nations allopathic doctors who are both familiar with and practice traditional medicine. Erik realized that, to fulfill his purpose as a helper to the people, it was necessary for him to re-enter the academic world, become a physician trained in Western medicine, and incorporate traditional Indigenous medicine as a central component of his future practice. At the time of writing this article, Erik was in the final year of a university post-degree module, and has applied to medical school.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This article is situated within the context of Cindy’s doctoral work, a community-based participatory health research project with urban First Nations men. Erik was hired as a research assistant (RA) to facilitate all of the interviews with First Nations men. The rationale for this decision was that the

participants would likely feel more comfortable sharing their stories with someone from their own community, and that Erik would be better equipped to pick up on language, references, and nuances that might otherwise be overlooked by Cindy. Throughout the research process, we (Erik and Cindy) met frequently to address any issues or concerns that arose during the data collection phase of the project. During these meetings, we had many conversations about our personal experiences—both challenging and rewarding. Ultimately, we became good friends, and we would sometimes reflect upon this relationship, noting our belief that it contributed to both an improved research process and personal growth for both of us. It was during one of these conversations that Cindy suggested it might be interesting write a paper together that shared our experiences, and that perhaps it would resonate with others involved or seeking to be involved in Indigenous research, especially those working within cross-cultural contexts.

In terms of proposing an approach to collect, analyze, and share our stories, we collaboratively decided that Cindy should put the project together. Our rationale was twofold: first, this paper would ultimately become part of her dissertation, and, as such, she should take on the bulk of the responsibility in order to fulfill the requirements of her program. Second, in addition to his contract as a research assistant with this project, Erik already had a full-time job and was a full-time student. We recognized that with such responsibility, he would have significantly less time than Cindy to contribute to the project. However, we both fully committed to ensuring that our thoughts and voices were accurately and authentically represented.

We employed reflexive and co-constructed narratives to collect and analyze our experiences. As a family of approaches to data collection within the human sciences, narratives embrace a storied form whereby “events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (Riessman, 2005, p. 1). Per this method, co-constructed narratives are those that “illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of being friends, family, and/or intimate partners” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 7). Recognizing that this approach fits well with Indigenous research paradigms that value storytelling as a means of knowledge creation (Kovach, 2009; McIvor, 2010; Wilson, 2008), we agreed it would be an appropriate way to collect our experiences.

To create our narratives, we responded to three broad questions:

1. What unexpected challenges have you encountered within the research process?
2. What unexpected benefits have you experienced?
3. What would you have done differently and what advice would you give to others?

We agreed that these questions would allow enough opportunity for both of us to share our personal experiences without feeling either constrained by the questions or overly guided towards our answers. When we began writing our narratives, we were approximately halfway through the data collection process. We individually completed our reflections over a period of approximately six weeks.

We employed a thematic approach to analyze our narratives. Thematic analysis places “emphasis is on the content of the text, ‘what’ is said more than ‘how’ it is said, the ‘told’ rather than the ‘telling’” (Riessman, 2005, p. 2). Cindy took the lead organizing our narratives into 12 themes, and subsequently grouped them into broad categories based on similarity and overlap. We met to review the narratives and themes to ensure that we were on the same page regarding our terminology and the meanings behind our language. Upon completing the data collection process, we revisited our narratives and themes. While we made some additions to the narratives, we felt that these additions only strengthened the existing broad categories that we had identified in our preliminary analysis: conflict, relationships, and identity.

## **Results**

The three broad categories that emerged from our co-constructed narrative analysis were conflict, relationships, and identity. We define each as follows:

- “Conflict” refers to experiences that evoked thoughts and feelings of unease, confusion, or discomfort during the research process.
- “Relationships” refers to experiences related to both our relationship and relationships with others involved in the research process.
- “Identity” refers to experiences that related to our senses of self, our ways of knowing, and our personal growth.

Below, we present collaboratively chosen excerpts from our narratives as examples of each category. We made edits where necessary to ensure clarity.

### **Conflict**

In both of our narratives, conflict arose as we struggled to position ourselves within the research project. In Cindy’s narratives, she discusses her feelings of conflict that arose from surrendering full control of the data collection process. She shared that she feared criticism from people within the academy for either not collecting the data entirely on her own, or not getting it done in a timely fashion. This struggle caused her to reflect upon her own ways of knowing and her assumptions about how to approach research with First Nations peoples and communities, realizing that such assumptions can conflict with the expectations of an academic institution which values solitary, timely graduate work. As a result, she was forced to both continuously reconsider her approach to the research process and to appreciate the value of Erik’s knowledge and intuition with regard to doing research with Indigenous communities, specifically with regard to the importance of building and maintaining good relationships within the First Nations community. She noted:

I have been thinking about working with Erik and how that means I need to “surrender control” in parts of my research. He has been amazing in networking, assisting with finding participants, and providing his own reflections on the interviews. Yet I feel conflicted by the need to “protect” or “own” the research, like I need to be clear about whose research this [is] and how it



gets done. I feel like this is in part a result of my own personality, and in part to fend off criticism that I am not actually the one doing my research. Unfortunately, I feel like this also results in me making Erik feel like I don't trust his perspective as a First Nations man or approve of his work, when in fact, the complete opposite is true. The balance of respecting cultural protocols, being mindful of providing opportunities for Erik to gain skills and experience, and getting the research done is sometimes difficult for me, and I am left feeling vulnerable . . . As an example of this, I reflect on a time when Erik and I attended a local event at an Aboriginal organization. Erik knew about the event through his work and suggested I should attend with him as it may be an opportunity to recruit participants. He mentioned he knew a staff member associated with the event who might be able to assist us as well. At the event itself, I recall waiting for what seemed like forever for Erik to introduce me to his colleague. It seemed to me that it would be an easy conversation that we could have quickly. Yet as the night went on it became clear to me that Erik was navigating that relationship with great care. It simply wasn't a case of showing up, immediately introducing me and requesting assistance with recruiting participants. It had to happen within the context of their relationship. Hours into the event, Erik introduced me to his colleague and we spoke briefly. I remember thinking that this person had the potential to be a key contact for helping us with recruitment as his job allowed him to connect with young First Nation men every day. I was excited about the prospect and encouraged Erik to continue follow up. At the same time, I sensed trepidation on his part. I talked to Erik about this, whether or not we should continue to pursue his assistance with recruitment. After a few conversations we decided it was best to leave it alone—Erik feared that by pushing too hard we might alienate his colleague completely. I had to put my trust in Erik to read the situation and be at peace with it.

In Erik's writing, he revealed the conflict he experienced as the result of being involved in an academic research project as a First Nations man, which, as noted above, is something that has historically been a source of discomfort within Indigenous communities. Specifically, he noted that he was unprepared for how participating in the research process would change his image among his peers and within his community. This forced him to question whether such research was something with which he truly wanted to be involved:

There were times in this project where I questioned my involvement. These moments were highly reflective, and had to do with self-image and who I wanted to be in the London community. Before being affiliated with the project, amongst my peers I was known as a cultural teacher, a volleyball player, a recruiter, and (most simply put) a Cree guy from Toronto. I noticed that the further we went into this research and in putting myself more into the role of researcher, this perception in the community changed. I felt that my peers saw less of the other things I was involved with (ceremony, traditional teachings, etc.), and more to do with research. That word, "research," has an inherent negativity in the eye of many who identify as First Nations, as it may bring up a history of colonial abuse in both an academic and governmental sense (Smith, 2012). I've seen firsthand how some community members view "researchers" in the community, and those community members have chosen to share their thoughts and emotions with me—usually nothing overly positive to say, unless they are coming from an Indigenous background . . . there were times where I felt, "why am I doing this if it's making me feel like someone I'm not?" . . . This idea of "who am I and what am I doing?" has been a daily

theme in wearing the researcher hat. Cindy has been a great colleague, and more importantly a great friend, throughout this entire process—in way of understanding and allowing me to open up to her and express my innermost feeling about what it is that we're doing. I feel that this relationship is exactly what has been missing in most of the Indigenous community research that currently exists, and it's something that needs to be better understood shared moving forward.

## **Identity**

Within our narratives, we both recognized that the data collection process provided an opportunity for us to grow and to learn. Cindy reflected upon how the process forced her to question her own way of knowing and seeing the world, both within and beyond the confines of the research project. She shared that the experience allowed for ongoing self-reflection, and ultimately helped her to find her place as a non-Indigenous person doing research with a First Nations community:

I think for me the research process has been about enlightenment. I was brought up in a Western education system and I didn't really ever think to question it. It has opened my mind to the fact that there are other ways of knowing and seeing the world, and that these ways are no less valid than Western ways of knowing . . . Erik and I meet frequently to discuss the research, yet often our meetings seem rise to another level where we have discussions about Indigenous history, culture, and ways of knowing far beyond the immediate context of the research . . . I feel that these discussions have really helped me in my struggle to position myself within my research. Since starting my Ph.D., I have had a really difficult time finding my place as a non-Indigenous person working with Indigenous Peoples. By this I mean I seemed to dwell on the difference too much, questioning what right I have to be involved in helping to create knowledge for a community I am not a part of. Our discussions really helped me navigate this struggle as I moved towards being OK with the fact that we all have a responsibility in Indigenous research, and remembering it's not so much about who you are as about what is your intent.

Erik shared how the research process allowed him to find himself as an urban First Nations man through connecting with others who have shared similar experiences. These social connections allowed him to experience personal growth and to navigate two different ways of knowing and seeing the world. He commented that the experiences of doing research, both good and bad, ultimately contributed to his understanding of where he wants to go with his life:

Personally, my lifelong struggle with identity has come to an amazing point through this project. In having those intimate and emotional conversations with participants, it's more evident than ever that I am not the only one who has struggled with identity and growing up in an urban context. This wasn't the case when I was younger, as I felt like I had no one to relate to with this struggle. And when I did choose to put myself out there and express my Indigenous identity, I was put down. This project has given me context as to why this happens to our young men, and how some of them have chosen to work with this identity struggle. This kind of context has been invaluable to my personal growth . . . For me, the struggles about identity that I have been going through over the course of this project have truly led me towards knowing what I want to be my personal legend. What I want to do, and how I want to do it. It's allowed me to realize my

passion for research and contributing authentic context to real experiences at the community level, in order to better inform community programming. But more importantly for me, I wouldn't change this process because it's shown me what I want to do—how I want to help. I'm going back to school next year to take some courses, and will be going to medical school in the next 2 to 3 years. I want to continue on with research, but feel that my true calling has less to do with navigating academic institutions and more to do with helping people with their health and wellness in a Westernized sense (i.e., getting my M.D.), as well as in ceremony (i.e., Sun Dance, sweats, ceremony, balance, etc.). I know that this is what I want to do now, and am going to go through the process of going back to school full time in order to complete my goal. Had the process of this project unfolded differently, I'm not sure I could have come to the same realization.

## Relationships

The relationships made within the research process became overwhelmingly important to both of us. Cindy shared that the development of relationships with others involved in the research process was rewarding to her both personally and academically, and has only enhanced the research process:

An unexpected benefit I have encountered in the research process is the development of relationships with the people involved and how this has contributed to my own learning both academically and personally. I have become friends with many of the people I have met through the research process and expect that these friendships will continue long after it is over. This is also true with Erik. He has become what I believe will be a lifelong friend to myself and to my family, and I am thankful for this. In addition, I was surprised by how much I have come to feel connected to the participants in our research study. Some I know personally and others I have only read their words, but in all cases I have developed a personal sense of responsibility to them that I was unprepared for. I think constantly about how I will ultimately be responsible for sharing their thoughts and feelings and it weighs heavily on me at times, especially with regard to those participants who I have never met or will have the chance to interact with in person. Overall, I have to say that these relationships I have made have become very meaningful to me, and I feel like each person I have met has taught me something both academically and personally. I know that by opening myself up to these relationships I will be questioned with regard to how they will ultimately affect my research, but I have to say that I think they only serve to enhance the process. For example, going into this research project I sometimes felt intimidated by my non-Indigeneity. By this, I mean that I found myself at times afraid to ask for clarification or to question something out of fear of saying something culturally inappropriate. I feel that the relationships I have made have opened the door for me to feel more comfortable speaking up, and to be more critical. By building relationships with the people involved in the research process, they have come to know me and my values and intentions, and I have come to know them in the same way. I believe this understanding has provided a foundation for us to work together in a respectful and honest way.

For Erik, the research process provided an opportunity to create relationships on many levels as well. Within his narrative, he discussed not only the importance of our relationship (in terms of navigating the

research process), but also the relationships he formed with some of the research participants, as well as their participation in a men's drum circle:

Another example of this would be the men's drumming group that I helped create and am a member of, known as the Purple Spirit. Through the research, I identified a need for more male-oriented ways for Indigenous men to connect to culture and belonging in the city. It just so happened that I had the right network of men in my life that we were able to create and establish a big drum group out of Western University. We have some members that occasionally join us from Fanshawe College as well—which is a great way of bridging and showing community solidarity regardless of which academic institution you attend. The group is all about providing a place to learn more about drumming—as the drum is great medicine in providing a connection to spirit, identity, and other members of your community (I'm realizing this more than ever since being part of this group). To date, we've been playing together for 8 weeks now and have performed at two pow wows, and three community events. We have currently have two parts to our group. As mentioned, many of the men who attend Western come from Haudenosaunee nations, and will be more involved with water drum and shaker songs. Being reflexive of that, we've opened up the group to those men who choose to sing only these songs exclusively. It's amazing to see the power of these songs, and it would be a shame to not allow for this in our group. We share so much good energy, laughs, insight, and wisdom when we meet. And importantly, we learn about the diversity of Indigenous culture when we meet and exchange teachings.

### **Discussion**

This article began as an attempt to explore and share our experiences<sup>2</sup> doing research together within the context of a community-based participatory research project. Our findings revealed that, for both of us, the research process created experiences of conflict, reflection upon our identities, and the creation of meaningful relationships. These experiences contributed to a more meaningful research process as we built trust in each other and our community partners, as well as in the project's participants. On a broader level, however, these experiences represented our personal stories of reconciliation.

Our discussion is presented in three parts. First, we use our own voices to describe how our research experiences contributed to the reconciliatory processes of re-education and cultural regeneration, and how the relationships we made were foundational to these processes. Second, we propose that there is a need, moving forward, for researchers to better share their stories, and for all Indigenous research in Canada to prioritize reconciliation and the relationships that support it. Finally, we conclude our discussion by offering policy recommendations to achieve these goals.

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<sup>2</sup> We recognize that for Cindy these themes are consistently presented within the confines of the research process, whereas Erik more often related his experiences to the contexts of his community life and personal life. We suggest that this difference may be due to the fact that, as a First Nations man, Erik possesses a more Indigenous and relational way of knowing, not to mention his insider status within the community with which we were working. It may also be a result of the fact that, as a full-time student, Cindy is more immersed in the research project and thus focused on her experiences within it.

### Cindy: Reconciliation as Re-Education

For Cindy, the reconciliatory possibilities of research have related to her re-education. Brought up in a middle class family in London, Ontario, and schooled within a Western education system, Cindy's early knowledge of Indigenous Peoples was limited to school field trips to Ska-Nah-Doht<sup>3</sup> and textbook accounts of peoples who seemed locked in history. She never sought out opportunities to learn more, nor was she given any reason to do so. Her doctoral program afforded her the privilege and opportunity to learn about Indigenous knowledge and culture, and the impact of both historical and ongoing processes of colonization. She noted that she thinks of this process of re-education as “decolonizing her mind”<sup>4</sup>:

My story is one that I think is actually reflective of many Canadians who never had an opportunity or reason to think critically about colonization and the oppression of Indigenous Peoples. I know this because I hear it when I talk to people in my life about what I am studying. So much of our understanding of Indigenous Peoples is based upon racist stereotypes perpetuated by the media and what limited accounts we found in our textbooks as kids. I did a community presentation once about what I had learned about residential schools, and I was shocked by how many of my friends told me after that they didn't know about them. And many of these people have higher education—people like me who I think should know better. I ask myself: Why don't we know better?

While she believed that her coursework and reading contributed to her re-education, she credited the people she has met and the relationships she has made through doing research as the most important parts of her learning:

Early on in my research, I started hanging out at the local Aboriginal Health Access Centre and attending teachings and ceremony. One of the healers sort of took me under her wing, and to this day she is still my teacher. She has been so patient and kind. It's the same with Erik—we have so many conversations about Indigenous worldviews and culture. In some ways, it's like we are figuring it out together. I feel like our relationship has provided us with a safe space where we can talk about these things. I have no doubt it has resulted in me being a better researcher, but more importantly, I think it has made me a better person.

At the same time, she recognized that this re-education has not always been a smooth process. She reflected that she was initially hyperaware of her non-Indigeneity, and that this sometimes made her afraid to ask questions or say the wrong thing out of fear of offending someone:

I was helping with a summer camp for kids at the Aboriginal Health Access Centre that was part of another research project. All of the kids and counselors were First Nations. There were times

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<sup>3</sup> Ska-Nah-Doht is a recreation of a Haudenosaunee longhouse village that existed 1,000 years ago. The museum, located in the Longwoods Resource Centre in Mount Brydges, Ontario, offers interactive exhibits relating to First Nations culture and displays artifacts from the Centre's archaeological collection.

<sup>4</sup> We borrow this term from Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1994) book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

when stuff was happening—like the kids were goofing around and chasing a snake, and I thought I should step in and say something before it got hurt, but I felt like I didn't have the right to because I wasn't "part of the community." This focus on the differences between us took me a while to get over, and I admit I still struggle with it at times.

In this regard, Cindy believed that one of the most important parts of her re-education was the realization that her job as a researcher and a non-Indigenous person is not to "help," as she believed when she started this journey. Rather, it is to shut up and listen, to learn, to be open to other ways of knowing, to be humble, and to bring her knowledge and expertise to the table in order for everyone (Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples) to work together towards shared goals and understanding. At the same time, she has learned that being humble does not mean being complacent or not speaking up when she does not understand or agree with something. She is learning to be comfortable with the fact that she is going to make mistakes, and that she will learn from them. Indeed, she noted that being surrounded by people with whom she has fostered respectful relationships has made this much easier.

However, with these relationships comes responsibility, and she noted that she feels a tremendous responsibility to the people she has met through the research project—her academic colleagues, community partners, the research participants, and, of course, Erik. This can feel overwhelming at times, and she questioned if she is doing enough:

Sometimes I'll hear derogatory comments about Indigenous Peoples from others—for example like how they just need to "get over" the whole residential school thing. I do my best to try and explain the greater context about what I have learned with the hope that they will understand and want to learn more too. There have been times when such conversations have turned to heated arguments, and times when I find myself questioning my own logic or struggling to find the words to justify my thoughts. The truth is, I am still learning and figuring it out too. It can be frustrating and emotionally upsetting and I always feel like I am not doing enough.

Cindy noted that she has learned not to lose sight of the little things that she does beyond her doctoral research. These might include conversations with friends and colleagues that contribute to re-education, how she decides to vote, the organizations and causes she decides to support with her time and money, what she posts on social media, or simply reading children's books that accurately portray Indigenous Peoples to her son, and taking him to teachings and ceremonies so that he will learn what she never did.

The other day I was sitting at the table and my son brought me a picture he drew of colonization. I had tried to explain the concept to him the day before—have you ever tried to explain colonization to an 8 year old? It's not easy. Anyway—I can't remember exactly what it looked like, but it made me happy to know that he is learning this stuff. I know they [children] do learn more in school about Indigenous history and culture now than I ever did when I was a kid, but I think it needs to be more than that. At the end of the day, he doesn't have to agree with my thoughts and ideas, but I do want him to have opportunities to learn and build relationships like I have through the research. I guess in the grand scheme of the broad level political and

structural changes that reconciliation requires all of this doesn't seem like much, but I think it's equally important.

### **Erik: Reconciliation as Re-Education and Cultural Regeneration**

For Erik, the research process contributed to his re-education by providing a way to better understand himself—both culturally, as an Indigenous person, and academically, within the context of an academic institution, as well as in society broadly. Specifically, it validated his experience as an urban First Nations man. Through participating in our research, Erik was able to share his experience, find validation in that experience, and ultimately become more aware and proud of his identity. In terms of cultural regeneration, the research process helped Erik to redefine his understanding of what it means to be Indigenous. Specifically, by considering the historical realities his family had faced that were out of his control, the research process led to a more positive embrace of his urban experience.

I used to have confidence in the idea that I could simply “fit in” in a city like Toronto where I grew up. When people asked me where I was from, I could say simply say Toronto, and no one really cared elsewhere. This was not the case once I reached university, and inquired into the services and supports available at First Nations House at the University of Toronto. Because I did not know my identity, language, or culture growing up, this contributed heavily to my lack of a sense of belonging when interacting with other Indigenous students at the university. Because there were no other Indigenous students at my elementary and high school growing up, being able to interact with other Indigenous students was a new (even intimidating) experience for me. I found it difficult to identify with other Indigenous students, and as a result, felt shame in the fact that I did not know how to belong. Even as an adolescent, I was very familiar with the shame that came from growing up Indigenous as a post-residential school era family. As I grew older, and more people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) would ask me where I was from, I never really knew how to answer them. I started to question my own Indigeneity—and unfortunately, I chose to not validate my experience as an Indigenous person at the time. I felt that because I did not grow up on reserve, speak my language, or know my teachings, that I was “less Native” than others who did grow up with those experiences and knowledge. What I did not realize, in fact, was that this way of growing up (i.e., in an urban center, rather than on reserve) has become more of a common and normal experience . . . Now, the majority of Indigenous people are growing up in urban centers, often with parents and grandparents who were residential school survivors that have a detachment from their language, culture, and identity as a result. Most of the things around my cultural identity were never taught to me, as my parents favored that it would be best for me to just grow up “mainstream.” This way of growing up had unfortunately led to an intrinsic struggle I would inherently have trying to navigate my identity throughout my life, not knowing where my ancestors come from, and my familial story as to why I grew up how and where I did.

Erik's participation in the research process also contributed to his journey of connecting with his cultural identity by virtue of the opportunity to talk to the urban First Nations men that were part of the study. After hearing their stories and about their experiences growing up in cities, he realized that his experience was common, which was not what he had originally believed. It was through identifying with

others who had had similar experiences that Erik was able to have confidence in his experience and no longer feel the shame that came from not knowing that his experience was common. Indeed, having an outlet to share these stories was an important part of his healing, which he had never had an opportunity to experience before. Since the research process, he has been able to heal and to grow from historical trauma and shame. This was an unintended but highly beneficial outcome of the research process for him.

The most important aspect to my re-education was the ability to have confidence in my experience, and to validate its worth as an Indigenous person. In hindsight, the shame that came from others' opinions about my Indigeneity had only limited my growth and understanding of my identity, my purpose, and myself. But, the moment I gave myself permission to accept my experience as valid and Indigenous, I no longer feel the shame that has only held me back for most of my lifetime. The relationships that I fostered with other urban First Nations men in my community through the research process have given me a network of others to share stories and past experiences with. The ability to laugh, cry, or be angry about a common experience has been one of the most influential components to my healing, as it has created a safe space to process and grow from. For example, a group of men from the project (myself included) is now singing together as a traditional men's big drum group. There was a time where each of us felt that we did not belong around a big drum singing traditional songs, but we now know that that way of thinking was never warranted, but was only instilled in us through colonial ways of thinking and lateral violence. The drum has also created a safe space for each of us to share stories, teachings, and good energy with all people. Interacting with other people has become an important part to the healing process as sharing those stories and realities with others helps each of us better understand ourselves, as well being an opportunity for others who may have similar experiences to know that they are not alone.

While our experiences of reconciliation played out in different ways, what was common to both of our narratives was the importance of relationships. This is perhaps not surprising given that relationships are considered a key component of reconciliation (Bloomfield et al., 2003; Bloomfield, 2006; Lederach, 1997). Even the TRC has described reconciliation as "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. 16). For us, embracing a community-based participatory research approach<sup>5</sup> created a space for these relationships to develop. However, we were both unprepared for just how much these relationships would contribute to our re-education and cultural regeneration. Reconciliation was not one of our research objectives, but it proved to be a most important outcome for us. It provided us with opportunities to learn, heal, and validate Indigenous ways of knowing in ways that have forever changed us.

As alluded to earlier, we do not mean to suggest that such relationships and experiences of reconciliation are not already happening in Indigenous research and within Indigenous geographies—we have no doubt that they are. Rather, what we suggest is that researchers need to better share their stories so that

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in depth review of community-based participatory research in Indigenous research, see Tobias, Richmond, and Luginaah (2013) and Castleden, Morgan, and Lamb (2012).



they may inspire and guide others to be active participants in reconciliation—especially those who are new to Indigenous research. Reflexive methods, such as the one used in this article, offer a means to do this work. At the same time, however, we are keenly aware of the criticisms of reflexive methods; we must also do the hard work of applying what we have learned in ways that dismantle colonial privilege and support Indigenous resurgence. As researchers, we have a responsibility to acknowledge the untold truths of Indigenous history in Canada, and can no longer remain complacent in a system that has only benefitted Western ways of knowing.

### **Research as Reconciliation: Policy Recommendations**

To support research as reconciliation, we propose that it needs to become a prioritized and funded objective in Indigenous research in Canada. We suggest that the Tri-Council (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada [NSERC], and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC]) funding agencies could facilitate this practice by including reconciliation as a priority stream in the funding application process. For example, researchers could be required to explain how they plan to address one or more of the TRC's recommendations as either theoretical or methodological objectives. Tri-Council funding agencies could prioritize projects that embrace decolonizing and Indigenous methods that promote relationship building, particularly within disciplines that do not traditionally adopt such approaches or engage in research with Indigenous communities. Extra merit could also be awarded to research housed in institutions that have demonstrated a commitment to fostering a culture of reconciliation and building relationships with Indigenous communities (through the provision of Indigenous strategic plans or formal responses to the TRC's recommendations, for example). Such policies represent a bold decolonizing project, one that will require government, funding agencies, institutions, researchers, and even Indigenous communities to rethink how they understand and participate in research. We also acknowledge that these suggestions run the risk of becoming boxes to check on an application, since they are open to the interpretation of a reader. As Stiegman and Castleden (2015) have pointed out in the context of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, there exists a danger that such guidelines would look good "on paper," but lack the institutional support and resources necessary to ensure that they are being done in a good way. However, despite such challenges, we propose that there is much room for conversations about how researchers can do more to support reconciliation in Canada through both their research and their relationships.

### **Conclusion**

This article contributes to scholarship within Indigenous geographies that employs reflexive methods, and it explores the potential of research to contribute to processes of reconciliation. We hope that this literature continues to grow and to embrace the diverse voices of everyone involved in Indigenous research, whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous, researchers, community partners, or project participants.

Given that the TRC has recently released 94 calls to action to advance the process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada, we suggest that now is the time for everyone involved in Indigenous research (both within geography and beyond) to step up and consider how they

may better contribute through their work and research. In closing, we leave you with a quote from the final report of the TRC:

Together, Canadians must do more than just *talk* about reconciliation; we must learn how to *practise* reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and workplaces. To do so constructively, Canadians must remain committed to the ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 126)

We believe that every person, organization, community, and institution involved in Indigenous research in Canada has a responsibility to support the *practice* of reconciliation. It should be a prioritized and funded objective, not a choice. We challenge everyone, across all academic disciplines, who is involved in Indigenous research in Canada to support this call. Much like our experiences discussed in this article, this will require that researchers be open to conflict, to reflecting upon their identities, and perhaps most importantly, to building meaningful relationships.

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