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## A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Two Non-Aboriginal Counsellors Working with Aboriginal People Enquête narrative sur les expériences vécues par deux conseillers non autochtones travaillant auprès de populations autochtones

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### ABSTRACT

In this narrative inquiry we explored the experiences of two non-Aboriginal counsellors who worked with Aboriginal clients in Canada. Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology that allows researchers to attend to experience over time, place, and social contexts. With a call to develop a better understanding of the health issues facing Aboriginal peoples, counsellors need to have a strong understanding of the changing social conditions and focus beyond existing care paradigms. In order to provide culturally relevant care, non-Aboriginal counsellors need to engage in advocacy, outreach, community-based interventions, and consultations with indigenous practitioners. We highlight the need for both culture-informed and social justice perspectives to place counselling practice with Aboriginal peoples in the context of culture, history, and sociopolitical realities.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette enquête narrative, nous avons étudié les expériences de deux conseillers non autochtones qui ont travaillé avec des clients autochtones au Canada. L'enquête narrative est une méthodologie relationnelle qui permet aux chercheurs de suivre l'expérience dans le temps, dans l'espace, et dans les contextes sociaux. En réponse à l'importance de développer une meilleure compréhension des problèmes de santé que doivent surmonter les peuples autochtones, les conseillers doivent se doter d'une solide compréhension des conditions sociales changeantes et viser des démarches au-delà des paradigmes de soins existants. Pour être en mesure d'offrir des soins adaptés à la culture, les conseillers non autochtones doivent s'impliquer dans la promotion et la défense des droits, la sensibilisation, les interventions communautaires, et la concertation avec les praticiens autochtones. Nous soulignons l'importance d'adopter des perspectives axées sur la compréhension de la culture et sur la justice sociale afin d'enraciner la pratique du counseling auprès des Autochtones dans le contexte des réalités culturelles, historiques, et sociopolitiques.

Aboriginal people in Canada face greater health disparities and barriers of access to care than the non-Aboriginal population. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) finished its six-year inquiry to “reveal to Canadians the complex truth about the history and the ongoing legacy of the church-run

residential schools” and “guide and inspire a process of truth and healing, leading toward reconciliation” (TRC, 2015, p. 27). All of the 94 calls for action are significant and require national, provincial, territorial, and local efforts to engage in meaningful education, practices, and long-standing relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. In particular, the TRC’s final report in 2015 called for action in the area of mental health and the need for cultural competency training for all healthcare professionals. In this article, we inquire into the experiences of 2 non-Aboriginal counsellors who work with Aboriginal clients, to better understand their experiences of working within the Aboriginal culture and how multicultural practices and social justice issues are experienced and applied.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As a result of colonialism and government policies aimed at assimilation, Aboriginal people in Canada have suffered from devastating effects of historical and cultural genocide, as well as intergenerational trauma. In Canada, Aboriginal people experience a disproportionately higher amount of mental health issues when compared to other groups (Allan & Smylie, 2015). In addition, many Aboriginal people view current mental health services as “inaccessible and culturally insensitive,” especially those that are provided through contemporary western-based service delivery methods (Nuttgens & Campbell, 2010). For example, France, Rodriguez, and Hett (2004) found that Aboriginal clients were twice as likely as non-Aboriginals not to return after their first counselling session in a mainstream setting. Barlow et al. (2008), as well as Allan and Smylie (2015), posited this attrition is a result of deep-seated historical and ongoing power differences and mistrust toward non-Aboriginal health care professionals and experiences of racism within the Canadian health care system. Aboriginal clients are reluctant to engage in counselling practices that are reminiscent of historical power relationships and do not centralize Aboriginal worldviews and cultural practices. Despite this recognition of the barriers to access and delivery of mental health services with Aboriginal clients, there is a dearth of literature in Canada on cultural competencies and culturally safe practices for non-Aboriginal counsellors who work with Aboriginal clients. France et al. (2004) highlighted the importance of understanding the historical, social, and political aspects of the lives of Aboriginal people as they relate to and have been influenced by mainstream Canadian culture. That is, the mental health of Aboriginal people cannot be separated from the sociopolitical contexts of their lives.

Aboriginal individuals are part of the multicultural mosaic of Canada, and they are unique in their histories and associated sociopolitical realities. There is also diversity amongst the different nations across Canada, both in culture and in the histories of the regions they are located in. Indigenous psychology recognizes these complexities and articulates how these are reflected in notions of health, wellness, and well-being. Therefore, the issues that face Aboriginal people in Canada are different from those of any other ethnic or racial group, and all aspects of well-

being are fused with these multiple and intricate aspects, which makes application of traditional counselling practices a challenge. Essentially, counselling training as it stands now does not have a solid foundation in indigenous psychology that would make counsellors effective with the majority of Aboriginal clients. Like other minorities, Aboriginal clients who seek mainstream counselling services face the prospect of dealing with a Eurocentric counselling paradigm that starts with a worldview and knowledge base that stands as a barrier to effective counselling services (France et al., 2004, p. 1).

A historical and sociopolitical understanding of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is necessary for cultivating a shared worldview in counselling (Blue, Darou, & Ruano, 2002; France et al., 2004; Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009; McCormick, 2009; Nuttgens & Campbell, 2010). For example, knowledge of the Indian Act,<sup>1</sup> Indian Residential Schools (IRS),<sup>2</sup> and the “60s scoop”<sup>3</sup> would help non-Aboriginal counsellors understand the deep-seated injustices experienced at the hands of the Canadian government and why Aboriginal people often feel alienated from Canadian (mental) health providers and institutions. Furthermore, this knowledge will illuminate the existing resilience of Aboriginal peoples.

Nuttgens and Campbell (2010) offered a sociopolitical and historical rationale for attending to key cultural differences when working with Aboriginal clients. Their approach is grounded in three domains of multicultural competence: self-awareness, knowledge of the other, and therapeutic practice. They provided a comprehensive overview of important multicultural concepts such as ethnocentrism, racism, and white privilege, as well as a historical view of the “remnant effects of colonialism born of assimilative government policies” (p. 119).

When counselling Aboriginal people, France and colleagues (2004) argued that “the lack of understanding of the historical, political, and social aspects of oppression and how it disrupts counselling practice [with Aboriginal clients] has been one reason why counselling has not been as effective as it could be” (p. 2). As such, incorporating a social justice perspective by attending to stories of oppression and subjugation (Blue & Darou, 2005) is vital when working with Aboriginal peoples. Nuttgens and Campbell (2010) argued that “mental illness is often entwined with the effects of poverty and racism and attributable to historical and current social injustices levied against Canada’s Aboriginal people” (p. 124). Counselling techniques need to include attention to changing social conditions and focus beyond traditional paradigms of mental health care. Culturally relevant therapy is needed to address issues of poverty, unemployment, racism, and injustice (Nuttgens & Campbell, 2010). Culturally relevant therapy would also highlight and incorporate the resilience of the Aboriginal peoples in the face of these issues.

In addition to social justice, McCormick (1996, 2009) articulated that effective counselling with Aboriginal peoples cannot take place without knowledge and respect for an Aboriginal worldview and value system. According to Blue et al. (2002), even though a wide range of counselling models exists, counsellors must be mindful not to impose unhelpful or even harmful Eurocentric tech-

niques on Aboriginal clients and their communities. They argued that practices should “be based on deep respect, be beneficial to the community, and embrace spirituality” (p. 19). Non-Aboriginal counsellors need to be flexible and adaptive in their counselling techniques. They also need to be committed to understanding the historical and cultural characteristics of their potential clients, develop competencies for working with nonverbal communication (comfortable with silence), have tolerance for ambiguity, and cultivate a deep understanding of their own values and biases.

### *Multicultural Counselling*

To understand multicultural counselling, it was important to examine my<sup>4</sup> (i.e., first author’s) history and position in relation to this. During my graduate studies, I took a qualitative research course that awakened me to narrative inquiry. I realized that my position on my professional knowledge landscape was largely shaped by my past life experiences. I awakened to the question of “Who was I as a person?” As I engaged in the writing and telling of my stories, I began my narrative inquiry. The following is an excerpt from my narrative beginnings that made visible some of the understandings I bring to multicultural counselling and interest in understanding counselling practice with Aboriginal people.

born on the Prairies

spending time in Aboriginal communities  
my father taught school

moving back and forth  
to return to my earlier childhood landscapes

when i was 4-years-old  
my father taught me that  
*“people were like popsicles  
and came in all different flavors,  
but were all equally as good.”*

i was not privy to the societal inequalities or oppression  
my sweet popsicle world was not a reality

in 7th grade i befriended a Mi’kmaq girl  
i was made fun of

when I was 16  
i travelled to spectacular and amazing places  
I, a white, privileged middle-class, ego-centric, selfish, self-centered,  
individually driven, defiant, greedy North American teen was  
radically challenged and redefined

i changed  
i aspired to be a cog in the machinery

i became a mother  
i was cognizant of my Mexican husband's heritage  
i witnessed remarks about "race mixing"

Beginning to situate my own understanding first helped to identify the focus for this study and shaped subsequent engagements with participants. While much has been written on multicultural counselling and theory, there are few studies inquiring into the multicultural competence of non-Aboriginal Canadian counsellors working with Aboriginal clients. Arthur and Januszkowski (2001) noted that, although Canada's population was becoming more diverse, only one third of counsellors who had been in practice for more than 10 years had taken (at least) one course in multicultural counselling at that time. While most counsellor educator programs have since incorporated some form of multicultural competency training, few have a specific course or program with emphasis on Aboriginal mental health.

The fundamental tenets of multicultural competency are the development of cultural self-awareness, knowledge, and skills for working with diverse clients (Cheatham et al., 2002). While these competencies are critical for all counselling relationships, the aforementioned discussion on the historical, social, and cultural experiences of Aboriginal people in Canada highlight unique aspects to working with Aboriginal clients that are not fully addressed in the multicultural counselling literature. For example, how does a non-Aboriginal counsellor recognize and address counselling practices that are discriminatory and oppressive to Aboriginal clients? Jun (2010), a multicultural counsellor, argued that when counsellors are not aware of their own beliefs, values, and biases, they are not aware of how they might be affecting their client. This unawareness can result in marginalization, discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, and engaging in racist, heterosexist, ableist, and/or classist oppression. These can negatively affect the client's physical, emotional, and psychological welfare.

Non-Aboriginal counsellors living and practicing in Canada likely need guidance to reflect on their own experience and internalized biases as a result of living in a country with a long history of inequality in relation to Aboriginal peoples. Multicultural counselling requires skills for multidimensional thinking, tolerance for ambiguity, and assigning equal importance to others' cultural values, beliefs, and respect for the ways of being and traditions of others. As such, non-Aboriginal counsellors will likely need an understanding of Aboriginal approaches to healing (e.g., see McCormick, 2009). Finally, Jun (2010) pointed out that multicultural counsellors not only should understand and examine a client's race and culture, but they also need to emphasize the intersection of race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and physical ability and disability. Moodley's (2007) argument for a more holistic and critical perspective on multicultural counselling, in which practitioners understand clients from their sociocultural historical contexts, attend to indigenous culture/healing practices, and acknowledge clients' multiple identities and truths, also raises the limitations of current multicultural counselling practices in relation to the needs of Aboriginal clients.

We are interested in the experiences of non-Aboriginal counsellors working with Aboriginal clients. We inquired into the experiences of 2 counsellors to gain insights into the cultural competencies, perspectives, and approaches to counselling practice they had accumulated over years of working closely with Aboriginal clients and within Aboriginal communities. By shedding light on these counsellors' experiences, we reflect on what our learning means for counselling practice in Canada.

#### METHOD

Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology that foregrounds experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodology has been used by several Indigenous scholars and has been described as congruent with Indigenous approaches (Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2014; Young, 2005). Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring experiences and as a source of important knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry that provides a way for people to share and make meaning of their experiences. Experiences of participants are explored within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of time, context, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Caine (2013) illuminated that "amidst these relationships, participants tell and live through stories that speak of, and to, their experiences of living" (p. 167). They posited that the relationship with participants requires being attentive to ethical tensions, obligations, and responsibilities throughout the inquiry process. This attention to relational ethics is at the heart of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The process of narrative inquiry is composed of engaging with participants in the ongoing relational inquiry, space, or field. This is done by listening to individuals tell their stories, and by creating field texts (including field notes, transcripts of conversations, journals and photographs composed or co-composed by researchers and participants), as well as writing both interim (co-composed individual accounts of experience) and final research texts (includes an analysis across participants' accounts) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Field texts are shaped into interim texts, which are shared and negotiated with participants before being composed into final research texts for public audiences.

Participants were recruited through consultation with educators involved in teaching and supporting counsellors working with culturally diverse clients. Criteria for participation in this study included (a) non-Aboriginal counsellors must have worked with aboriginal clients for at least a 6-month time period, and (b) counsellors must have a graduate degree in psychology and be registered as a psychologist. We were interested in counselling psychologists because of their explicit commitment to multiculturalism. Participants also needed to be willing to participate in at least three informal research conversations and review the co-composed narrative accounts. Conversations with participants occurred in places

of their choosing and, in addition to a signed informed consent form, ongoing dialogue and collaboration informed the study. Ongoing negotiations with participants about the nature of the conversations as well as during the writing of the interim research text ensured ongoing consent. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Board. Research conversations were recorded and transcribed. In-depth research conversations about experiences, autobiographical writing, and photographs (used primarily to elicit the telling of experiences) were used to gather counsellors' narratives in relation to cross-cultural counselling. Detailed field notes reflective of the first author's experiences also formed part of the field texts and inquiry.

Analysis included listening to the recorded conversations multiple times, as well as reading and re-reading field texts. The focus of the analysis was on identifying resonant threads across the narrative accounts; these were threads that resonated or reverberated across the accounts. It is important to note that depth of engagement and the relational co-composition of interim research texts is most significant in narrative inquiry, rather than the number of participants. We worked closely with two participants, Bob and Liz. Bob's narrative account was co-composed in a dramatization or screenplay format, to reflect his animated nature and personality. Found poetry was the method used to bring Liz's voice to the forefront, whereby we used "only the words of the participant to create a poetic rendition of a story or phenomenon" (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 232). Through conversations with Liz about how best to reflect her experiences, found poetry was chosen to evocatively portray her lived experiences and to "evoke emotional responses" (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 233). Both participants felt that the way in which their experiences were represented was meaningful to them. To ensure confidentiality, participants were given the opportunity to use an alias and have their identifying information changed.

#### THE LIVES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

We share parts of the narrative accounts negotiated with participants.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the study, I engaged in intensive autobiographical inquiry in order to understand who I am and am becoming in relation to participants and the phenomena under study (Clandinin, 2013). This process allowed me to shape my research puzzle; here the word "puzzle" is used to reflect that narrative inquirers often do not come with specific questions (Clandinin, 2013). The following is an excerpt from my narrative beginnings entitled *Coming to My Research Puzzle*.

i spent the next year submerged in my studies  
 multicultural counselling  
 therapeutic relationship  
 trust, empathetic listening  
 circumstances counted and recounted

in the midst  
 finding feminist and multicultural models  
 to explore my white, female, heterosexual, fully able, middle class upbringing

i questioned my role  
*how **would I** not perpetuate the white, male,  
 post colonial, Euro-ethno-centric values*

bumping up against assessment training  
 against formalistic and reductionist patterns  
 mandatory coursework

i wanted to shift ethnocentric ways of doing  
 how were others working across difference?  
 how did non-aboriginal counsellors work with aboriginal clients?

i have struggled with tensions regarding my place in this work  
 how could i conduct my inquiry in a respectful and honorable way?

Making visible my own narrative beginnings shaped my engagement with Bob and Liz.

### *Bob*

Bob, who is 46 years of age, is a psychologist who recently opened his own private practice. He also works a day and a half a week as a counsellor at an urban education centre for at-risk youth where over 90% of his clients are Aboriginal. He is one of three school counsellors who work with youth who struggle with truancy, stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Bob was first introduced as a possible research participant by another participant. Our first meeting took place at a downtown café, and the conversation over coffee was relaxed and informal; it felt like we were old friends. Both of our conversations took place at the same café and each lasted over two and a half hours. During our conversations, Bob recalled his “redneck” roots and how these views changed with his exposure to Aboriginal culture as an adult working within an Aboriginal community. I wondered where these preconceived notions originated and how Bob dealt with the tensions that shaped his past stories. I too was curious about how his past experiences and beliefs had been re-storied on his personal and professional landscapes.

### *Liz*

When I first saw Liz, I immediately recognized her from a seminar I had attended at the university. Her presentation at the time had changed the course of my studies and my research. Liz, who was 59 years old when we engaged in conversations, had worked with Aboriginal people for more than 30 years and was currently travelling across Canada working with the TRC. Conversations with Liz came easily; she was talkative, engaging, and very easy-going. The most



challenging part of working with Liz was trying to find time to meet. With the TRC in full effect, she was constantly being called to travel across Canada. It was almost 11 months after our first e-mail correspondence that we met for our first conversation. Liz had requested somewhere private and suggested that we meet at her house. Our conversations took place in Liz's private study, and each lasted almost three hours. Liz spoke of the importance of past work experiences, and how this, rather than formal education, had prepared her for frontline work. Liz spoke of how the work is intense, highly charged, and incredibly activating. The work for Liz also carries a lot of vicarious trauma without a lot of support. When asked about her support systems, Liz shared that she had a group of Elders, one in particular, with whom she could talk.

#### FINDINGS

We identified resonant threads that wove over time, social context, and place through each individual's narrative (Clandinin, 2013). For this article we focus on three key narrative threads.

##### *Resonant Thread: The Importance of Early Childhood in Shaping Stories to Live By*

*Stories to live by* is a narrative inquiry term for identity. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualized stories to live by to show the interconnectedness of knowledge, context, and identity. This concept of identity speaks to the stories that people live and tell of whom they are and are becoming. "Stories of identity highlights the multiplicity of our lives composed, lived out and told in different plotlines, over time, in different relationships and on different landscapes" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 53). In this way, we are able to understand identity as intricately interwoven with the social context of people's lives.

Early stories to live by were questioned and re-storied by Bob through exposure to Aboriginal culture while working and living in an Aboriginal community. His childhood assumptions and stereotypes were challenged by his experiences. He said,

I was born and raised in a small town where I just adopted hook, line, and sinker whatever stereotype was said about Aboriginal people ... I had little to no early experience of Aboriginal people whatsoever right through Grade 12. It is funny when I think of my childhood, the first thing that comes to mind is exposure. Whatever piece of misinformation was being spread was never questioned. My early impression of Aboriginal people was based on stereotypes and assumptions that they were drunks, not capable and, I hate to say it, dangerous.

Bob traced the development of his stereotypes to a combination of peers and family.

I have an uncle who's completely racist, and biased. My grandfather was the same way. They were completely misinformed and had little to no exposure to

Aboriginal culture. I remember my peers having little respect for Aboriginal people and assuming there was a level of truth to the stereotypes surrounding Aboriginal culture. I just assumed there was a level of truth to it. Ironically and thankfully, becoming connected and exposed to Aboriginal people and their culture is something which I'm eternally grateful for. It's one of my favorite parts of the psychology part of my life. (Bob)

For Bob, his first "real exposure" to Aboriginal people occurred when he moved from a small town to work on a Northern Reservation. He recalls,

I did not know what to expect ... I thought it could be rough and slightly dangerous and all I had were these stereotypes floating in my head with little exposure. BUT it was a fantastic experience for me. The breakdown of all my past misinformation started happening. (Bob)

Bob articulated that his experience of living and working in a Northern Aboriginal community completely challenged and changed his perspective. Even today his exposure to Aboriginal people grows daily as he continues to work with kids at the education centre, and over time "for a small town white guy I realize that I had everything wrong."

Unlike Bob, Liz grew up being exposed to Aboriginal culture:

I'm always asked,  
 "Who are your people?"  
 It makes me stop & think  
 Connections. Family: Uncle.  
 Aunties not related by blood.  
 Gaps. (Liz)

Liz shared stories of her childhood and stories linked to Aboriginal family members and friends. She spoke of self-reflection and how during her Master's program she began to realize the influence people had on her life. Liz shared stories of her early work doing "fly-ins" to remote Northern Aboriginal communities. Liz became aware of how her past experiences had shaped her and how these connections influenced her life and work with Aboriginal communities. When asked how she moved between the spaces of personal life and work, she responded:

I'd come home when my kids were little,  
 and touch everything in my house.  
 This is where I am ...  
 Learning to keep track of who you are,  
 Where you are ...  
 I've become a part of many lives,  
 They have become part of mine,  
 But it's not my life. (Liz)

Within their stories to live by, the notions of life and work became intertwined for both Bob and Liz. Both of them made visible how significant their early childhood experiences have been in shaping their professional identity. Liz also spoke of the importance of making a commitment to work in Aboriginal communities. She said it is a long-term commitment: “You become part of the community, and it’s a very invested way of working.” Liz said that she has worked with four generations from one family over the past 30 years.

Acceptance.  
Commitment.  
Persistence.  
Trust.  
Intention.  
Healing.  
Once embedded in a community,  
You become a helpful person,  
Not a white person,  
But a helpful person. (Liz)

Bob spoke of “having a revelation” after signing a contract to work in a community for one year. He stated that this commitment showed he “wasn’t there just to make a buck.” He said,

[O]nce I committed to working there for one year it was mind-blowing ... they literally took me into the centre of everything and protected me. It was wonderful. My coworkers and I started hanging out and that is when the real cultural exposure started. (Bob)

As I listened to Liz, I wondered how do you find your way as a counsellor/therapist around some of those things? How do you work through this? This is not taught in school.

Liz responded:

Ask questions,  
Never make assumptions,  
Every community is different,  
Culture, and customs are different.  
How children are taught,  
And how spiritual beliefs are passed down  
Differ in each community.  
  
We have to be aware of not knowing,  
This is the best way to enter.  
Witness.  
Become aware of what you carry. (Liz)

*Resonant Thread: Humility and Respect for Spirituality*

Liz spoke of being open to working with whatever people brought with them, and felt this is what positively influenced her relationships with her clients. Liz spoke of the importance of acknowledging the healing impact of spirituality when working in Aboriginal communities. Liz noted that counsellors working with this population have to engage in ceremony alongside their clients and the communities with whom they work. She spoke of being willing to understand that counsellors have less healing ability (or ability to transform things) while working within western methodologies than when working within a spiritual tradition or structure. To Liz, this stance required deep humility:

Always be open minded,  
Understand the need for spiritual tradition & culture,  
Learn from traditional healers,  
Respect the Elders,  
Traditional practice can be sustaining.  
Healing ...  
Necessary for reconciliation. (Liz)

Like Liz, Bob spoke of the centrality of spirituality for both his clients and eventually himself. Bob noted, "I was raised Catholic, and became an atheist at one point in my life but not anymore. The idea of a spirit world seems to me the most legit theory for me." He said that his spiritual beliefs have been challenged and redefined by his work with Aboriginal people. Bob said, "I've heard so many stories about paranormal experiences, as well as consulted with Elders about spirit medicine in different situations, that there seems to be more evidence supporting the spirit world than there is for most others." Bob shared, "You need to be open-minded, and open to selfreflection to do this work ... Working in this realm has encouraged me to learn more about Aboriginal spirituality and culture, as well as share my experiences."

Taking a not-knowing stance is also part of humility. Liz also spoke of the importance of "being persistent, asking questions, not acting like a know-it-all, and never making assumptions" as the best way to work together with Aboriginal clients. Liz notes:

Sometimes you are stupid,  
You just don't get things.  
My sense of humor saved me.  
I've been asked,  
Are you sure you're not Aboriginal?  
You are funny.  
I have a big laugh,  
people can relate.  
I'm not scary,  
I'm not judgemental ...

Sometimes it is best to remain quiet,  
 Wait.  
 Something will happen,  
 and then you can respond. (Liz)

Bob shared,

One of the greatest friggins' teachings that anyone has ever passed down to me (and there is a handful of them) is "I don't know" ... no ego, getting comfortable with not knowing the answers and being able to tell the kids, the staff, whomever, that you don't know but you are open to figuring it out, and being educated. I'm not the expert, every kid's unique and I just ask questions and try to figure out what is going on and what the factors are. ... I tend to reflect a lot, it helps me keep open-minded, honest, and open. Always be ready to be corrected, know you are not the expert, and always have humility ... Oh and keeping a sense of humour about things is also really important! (Bob)

When asked whether Bob thought his university education in counselling psychology adequately prepared him to work cross-culturally with Aboriginal clients, he replied,

It's funny ... when I think about this I don't think I was prepared. I kinda just brushed through grad school just trying to get everything done. All I needed was one cross-cultural counselling class in order to graduate, which is pretty sad considering that immigrants are the fastest growing population in the city. They're going to be a significant portion of any counsellor's caseload potentially ... First Nations and Métis are the fastest growing populations in this city ... and already the largest populations of their kind in Western Canada. Odds are pretty high that cross-cultural training will be useful for the practitioner! At least having some understanding of different cultures, even if you do not work with them directly, like for referrals, would be incredibly helpful! (Bob)

Liz said self-awareness and reflection was what grounded and helped maintain humility for her during difficult work. When asked "How do you step back yet remain present?" Liz responded with a Buddhist saying: "Of strong back, open heart." She said she tries to maintain this position all the time, in a flexible kind of way.

### *Resonant Thread: Being Called to the Work*

Neither participant entered the field planning to work specifically with Aboriginal people, and both described being pulled or called to the work through a variety of experiences. Bob had taken up employment in a northern community to gain experience in the field and ended up making a year-long commitment to living and working within the community. His work at the urban education centre began with a (denied) research request and ended with a job working with urban street youth. He shared:

I embrace the idea that I don't know everything, I'm not the expert. I try to encourage my clients to fill me in on what they are going through, what's it like, and how they see it. (Bob)

Liz went back to school to do a Master's degree later in life. She had initially been trained as a journalist, and while working as a court reporter was privy to the inequitable treatment Aboriginal people experienced in the justice system. This inequity fueled her desire to change her career. Unlike Bob, Liz's program did not include cross-cultural training at all:

I went back to school,  
and did my Master's.  
I worked with traumatized folk,  
Child welfare work.  
Mostly with children who were sexually abused,  
Many were Aboriginal.  
I did 5 years of fly-in to Aboriginal communities,  
It really prepared me in a way no other experience could.  
No multicultural training.  
No Aboriginal models.  
We lacked awareness.  
We were not taught,  
and had develop our own understanding.  
Historical trauma did not exist.  
At the time,  
I wish I knew about residential schools.  
It was:  
Frontline work ...  
on the spot ...  
in the moment ...  
intense. (Liz)

Liz's counsellor education program in the late 1980s did not include Aboriginal models of mental health or cross-cultural education. Liz said that when she came into the field, they were not taught about trauma, and counsellors had to develop their own understanding. Although she was never formally trained in dream work, Liz did a lot of training in Erickson-based hypnosis. When working with clients, she would use whatever resources they brought, and she viewed the unconscious as a resource, rather than just an internal state. Liz shared that her clients would tell her "incredible things" because they believed she had an understanding of spiritual culture. Her clients also believed she had an understanding of their culture, although at that time she did not. Liz had the ability to manage this misunderstanding without taking advantage of her clients, but this may not always be the case with non-Aboriginal counsellors.

Liz spoke of the importance of past work experiences, and says this was what prepared her for work directly with people and the work she is doing now, rather than formal education. She said it was the hands-on experience that taught her how to work therapeutically with clients on the spot and in the moment. We wonder about the implications of formal training not being available and counsellors, like Liz, rely primarily on their experiences to learn. When asked about anger or backlash from being non-Aboriginal during the Truth and Reconciliation process, Liz responded:

Being asked:  
 “Why can’t white people leave us alone to heal?”

Calmly responding,  
 It’s not just your healing,  
 It’s all of ours ...

The process is about everybody. (Liz)

Through the learning from her clients and their communities and reflection on the historical and sociopolitical context of Canada and its Aboriginal peoples, Liz believes that working alongside Aboriginal communities is also part of a reconciliation process for all.

#### DISCUSSION

Three key narrative threads that resonated across Bob’s and Liz’s accounts are (a) the importance of early childhood in shaping stories to live by, (b) humility and respect for spirituality, and (c) being called to the work. “Stories to live by,” as conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a narrative term to understand the interconnectedness of knowledge, context, and identity. It allows us to speak of the stories that each of us lives out and tells of who we are and who we are becoming. Stories to live by highlight the multiplicity of our lives—lives composed, lived out, and told around multiple plotlines, over time, in different relationships, and on different landscapes (Clandinin, 2013, p. 53). Bob’s and Liz’s experiences are embedded within their life histories and they specifically speak to the transformative aspect of their work with Aboriginal clients. Through engagement and involvement in an Aboriginal community, Bob’s stories to live by morphed, shifted, and changed over time. His identification as a *premier redneck* was challenged and redefined as a coworker and ally. This shift occurred when he was taken outside of his comfort zone, placed in a challenging situation, and forced to re-examine his preconceived notions and stereotypes. Bob’s identity was redefined through his “reflection on issues of race, ethnicity, oppression, power, and privilege in his life.” His identity was also significantly shifted by an “embracing of spirituality” as central to his personhood. For Liz, it is important that a counsellor working with people from diverse populations engage in self-reflective practice

in relation to their history, life contexts, and work experiences while receiving guidance from knowledgeable community mentors such as Elders in Aboriginal communities.

Self-awareness, a critical component of multicultural competency, requires examination of stories to live by and how these have been shaped by early childhood experiences; it involves critical reflection upon race, ethnicity, oppression, and power as well as maintaining an ongoing awareness of how positions of power and privilege influence others. Through education and experience, awareness, and critical reflection, counsellors' stories to live by are shaped, challenged, and redefined over time.

Counsellors are expected to engage in self-reflective practice in order to cultivate cultural self-awareness. This self-awareness entails "being cognizant of one's attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding race, ethnicity, and culture, along with one's awareness of the sociopolitical relevance of cultural group membership in terms of issues of cultural privilege, discrimination, and oppression" (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007, p. 24). This is integral in providing culturally relevant service to diverse populations. However, often little is said about the changes that take place in counsellors who engage in regular self-reflective practice and work in cross-cultural contexts. Both Bob and Liz speak to how engaging Aboriginal peoples impacted and influenced their own identities. The combination of working with clients and guidance from Aboriginal colleagues and Elders, *plus* their willingness to reflect on their experiences in relation to their own sociocultural positions, was critical for these changes.

Bob's reflective practice continued throughout his doctoral studies and while working in an urban youth education centre. Although he took a single mandatory multicultural counselling course, Bob's self-reflection, awareness, and examination of his position of power and privilege occurred outside the classroom when working directly with Aboriginal clients and colleagues.

Although Liz did not have multicultural training as part of her counselling program, her reflective practice and self-awareness seemed to have been cultivated in her youth and (re)examined in her early career experiences. Exposure to inequities and racism as a court reporter challenged her and fuelled her desire to work with marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Working with remote Aboriginal communities, and working with children, encouraged and perpetuated constant self-reflection and awareness of her identity as both a counsellor and a mother, as well as a Caucasian woman working with Aboriginal peoples. Liz also spoke of the impact that the TRC had in re-examining her relationship with Aboriginal family members, as well as redefining her identity as "becoming a helpful person" into "an open and flexible person," holding Buddhist tenets of "strong back, open heart." Therefore, both Bob's and Liz's experiences bring to bear the need for ongoing self-reflection so as to challenge and expand personal beliefs and perceptions in relation to Aboriginal culture, healing systems, history, and contemporary issues. Through engagements with the communities they worked in, both Bob and Liz were exposed to community challenges as



well as strengths, resources, and resilience, which ultimately contributed to their own transformation.

Culturally relevant therapy is needed to address issues of poverty, unemployment, racism, and injustice (Nuttgens & Campbell, 2010). For Liz and Bob, this meant dropping many of the western-based conceptualizations of health and well-being and learning from cultural providers, Elders, and the traditional healing systems preferred by their clients. A key component to this was developing humility often expressed as openness, honesty, and being comfortable with not knowing. For Bob, it was important to get “comfortable with not knowing the answers and being able to tell the kids, the staff, whomever, that you don’t know but you are open to figuring it out, and being educated.” Bob spoke of humility and embracing the idea that

I don’t know everything, I’m not the expert. I try to encourage my clients to fill me in on what they are going through, what’s it like, and how they see it ... Always be ready to be corrected, know you are not the expert, and always have humility. (Bob)

He shared the importance for him of learning about his clients and being able to ask others for help if needed. He argued that collaboration with community members, healers, Elders, and other professionals was integral to providing culturally competent and effective services to diverse clients.

Liz also spoke at length on humility and the importance of “being persistent, asking questions, not acting like a know-it-all, and never making assumptions” as the best way to work together with clients. She acknowledged the importance of respecting Elders and learning from traditional healers. Liz acknowledged that collaboration with others was important and that this sometimes necessitated expansion of professional activities beyond individual counselling, such as facilitating the utilization of indigenous healing methods, assessing community services, and creating community-level interventions.

In order to provide effective and culturally relevant services, both Bob and Liz understood that at times they were required to step outside their traditional counselling roles involving direct intervention. The origins of counselling psychology include deep attention to social justice activities, yet as a discipline we have focused more on individual remediation and less on prevention, outreach, and advocacy (Vera & Speight, 2007). Both Bob and Liz played various roles: advocate, outreach worker, consultant, and therapist. Serving diverse populations includes collaborating with others and incorporating an infusion of multicultural competencies with social justice that encourage counsellors “to act as teacher, advocate, organizational consultant, social activist, and other roles designed to impact the systems of oppression that precipitate client distress and ill health” (Collins & Arthur, 2007, p. 41). Both Liz and Bob add to this by highlighting the importance of an attitude of humility when engaging in all of these roles while working with Aboriginal clients.

### *Recommendations*

Both Bob's and Liz's experiences working with Aboriginal clients highlights that it is timely and relevant to examine issues of multicultural practice and social justice in the Canadian counselling profession. Their work speaks to the unique aspects of working with Aboriginal communities as non-Aboriginal practitioners. In 2015, the TRC finished its six-year inquiry into the impact of the Indian residential school system on Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Drawing upon statements from over 6,750 former students, members of their families, and other individuals who wished to share their knowledge of the residential school system and its legacy, the report included 94 calls to action to the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments. Specific calls to action relating to the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples of Canada that are relevant to counsellor training, practice, and research include a call

- for people who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients;
- for all levels of government to provide cultural competency training for all health-care professionals. (TRC, 2015)

The call for action states that non-Aboriginal practitioners (including counsellors) must develop a better understanding of the health issues facing Canada's Aboriginal peoples, including the legacy of residential schools, in order to be more effective. While Bob and Liz gained this understanding through direct and prolonged engagement with members of the Aboriginal community, both could also have been prepared while still in training. Counsellor education programs should include courses dealing with Aboriginal health issues (including the history and legacy of residential schools), and Indigenous teachings and practices. The report also states that nursing and medical training programs need to include skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism. From Bob and Liz's experiences, we see that a critical component of application of these recommendations is both theoretical knowledge of history and direct experience with Aboriginal clients and communities. Both Liz and Bob found that applied experiences with Aboriginal clients, combined with self-reflection, were critical to their work with this population. They also spoke to the importance of having guidance in this process that is provided by indigenous mentors.

### *Study Limitations*

No one truth or final story is provided by narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Narrative inquiry allows for an in-depth, intimate study of individuals' experience over time and in the context of place, temporality, and sociality. It is

not meant to produce generalizable findings. Bob's and Liz's experiences are not representative of all non-Aboriginal counsellors working with Aboriginal clients.

#### CONCLUSION

It is timely and relevant to examine issues of multicultural practice and social justice action in the Canadian counselling profession. As a result of colonialism and government policies aimed at assimilation, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have suffered from devastating effects of historical and cultural genocide, as well as intergenerational trauma. In this article, we show that it is important to understand non-Aboriginal counselling experiences across time, place, and diverse social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These experiences, embedded within life histories of people, raise questions about counsellor education and support. In order to provide effective and culturally relevant services with Aboriginal clients, non-Aboriginal counsellors not only need to develop self-awareness, knowledge, and skills for working with diverse clients, they also must attain knowledge of Aboriginal approaches to healing and understanding, and of the resilience and strength of Aboriginal individuals and communities in the face of historical as well as contemporary injustices in Canada.

#### Notes

- 1 The Indian Act, created in 1876, continues to mandate and institutionalize the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada by the federal government.
- 2 Over the span of 100 years, more than 100,000 Aboriginal children were forced from their homes and "subjected to an institutional regime that fiercely denigrated and suppressed their heritage" (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 9). Indian residential schools were created in the 1870s by the federal government and run by churches in most Canadian provinces and territories. They were created to "assimilate and educate" aboriginal children into Canadian society. More than 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in residential schools. The children were forbidden to speak their languages or to practice their cultural and spiritual traditions, and were punished for doing so. Many were subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Regan, 2010).
- 3 Beginning in the 1960s (and lasting for almost three decades), large numbers of Aboriginal children were taken from their families and communities and placed in foster care or adopted into non-Aboriginal families. Aboriginal parents were viewed as "incapable of educating their children with proper European values," and in the 1960s, the federal government handed over Aboriginal health, welfare, and education to the provincial government. Social workers opted to place Aboriginal children in long-term foster care or adoption into non-Aboriginal families. Kirmayer and colleagues (2009) pointed out that in the 1970s, one in four "status Indians" could expect to be separated from his or her parents.
- 4 "My" and "I" in these accounts refers to Amanda Bowden, the first author, who engaged directly in conversation with participants.
- 5 "My," "me," and "I" in these accounts refers to Amanda Bowden, the first author, who engaged directly in conversation with participants.

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