BREAKING *Free*
BREAKING *Through*

OFIFC
Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

MARCH 2015

ONTARIO NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

BREAKING *Free*
BREAKING *Through*

an arts-based research project to examine violence against Aboriginal women

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres and the Ontario Native Women's Association would like to thank the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care for your contribution of resources to sustain this valuable research project.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the women in the five communities that took part in this research and the many community members who gave their time and resources to help make this project successful in Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Fort Francis, Ottawa, and Timmins. We value your strength, courage and resilience; this valuable research could not have done this without your participation.

Thank you to the following individuals who contributed significantly to the project:

Sylvia Maracle, OFIFC

Magda Smolewski, OFIFC

Stephanie Williams, OFIFC

Jessica Hill, OFIFC

Katherine Minich, OFIFC

Samantha Kinoshameg, OFIFC

Shauna Shiels, OFIFC

Pamela Tabobondung-Washington, OFIFC

Scott Sunday, OFIFC

Erin Corston, ONWA

Betty Kennedy, ONWA

Kezia Picard, ONWA

Lana Ray, ONWA

Karli Brotchie, ONWA

Heather Cameron, ONWA

Serenity Perry, ONWA

Jordis Duke, ONWA

Lyla Kinoshameg, Elder

Valerey Lavergne, Expressive Arts Therapist

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is well known that Indigenous women in Ontario experience higher rates of violence than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) and the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) have known this for decades and have worked together as allies in the movement to end violence against Indigenous Women and Girls. This research project flows from the partnership between OFIFC and ONWA. Our two organizations joined together to follow-up from ONWA's Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence research undertaken in the 1980s. The Breaking Free research was ground-breaking in that it not only highlighted the alarmingly high rates of family violence experienced by Indigenous women but was conducted with Indigenous women's voices at the centre of the research process.

The Breaking Free, Breaking Through research, designed by the OFIFC and ONWA, sought to again examine violence and listen to Indigenous women's voices in order to better understand the circumstances and experiences of Indigenous women's lives. The Breaking Free, Breaking Through project was conceptualized to identify protective factors in place which lead women to "break free" from violent situations. Through the combination of culturally-appropriate research methodologies and culturally relevant arts-based therapy, the Breaking Free, Breaking Through research team was able to conduct this research in a unique way. Indigenous women participants and the OFIFC and ONWA researchers together participated in arts-therapy sessions which occurred in five communities throughout Ontario. This permitted a subverting of the hierarchy of mainstream researcher-participant relationships.

At the beginning of the research process, it was hypothesized that Indigenous women would identify particular strategies or concrete moments which led them to break away from family violence. What this project identified instead was a spirit of resilience among Indigenous women. Our findings highlight the strength of Indigenous women and the important roles they have in their families and communities. Our findings also highlight the importance of creating spaces where Indigenous women can build relationships, practice their culture(s) and share experiences. We found that breaking through violence does not happen as a specific moment, but is a pattern that shifts and changes shape. Resilience does not occur when risk and protective factors even themselves out – there is no one linear continuum of resilience. Indigenous women's resilience occurs in the patterns of shared experiences. Indigenous women's resilience is always about relationships to others: people, things, cultures, communities, and histories. Indigenous women's resilience is "in the doing", in practicing culture; women's relationships are what make up their resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous women in Ontario experience significantly higher rates of violence in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Indigenous communities, organizations and agencies recognize that the root causes of violence against Aboriginal women lie "in the interconnections between race, culture, class and gender, which have routinely marginalized so many Indigenous women beyond any reasonable expectation of security of life and person" (Hunter, 2005). For decades, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), a provincial Aboriginal organization representing the collective interests of 29 Friendship Centres that provide services to urban, First Nation, Métis and Inuit people in urban centres throughout Ontario and the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA), a provincial Indigenous women's organization whose mandate is to empower and support all Aboriginal women and their families have been close partners and leaders in the movement to end violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

In the late 1980s, ONWA initiated a study, the *Aboriginal Family Violence Project,* to examine family violence. The research objectives of the project were to assess the landscape of Indigenous family violence in Ontario, including incidence and the availability of adequate services. The Aboriginal Family Violence Project, which resulted in the 1989 report *Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence* focused on the needs of Indigenous women in violent situations with a particular focus on women's ability to access services and supports as well as developing creative solutions for breaking the cycle of family violence within Indigenous communities.

As an Indigenous women's organization, ONWA had known for years that Indigenous women in Canada experience family violence at disproportionately high rates, but the report finally exposed publicly the extent of the violence that Indigenous women experience. Through surveys, the research found that 8 out 10 Indigenous women will experience violence at some point in their lives (ONWA, 1989). Decades after the release of *Breaking Free*, the Government of Canada's own statistics continue to show that Indigenous women are more likely to experience domestic violence and violence from strangers than are non-Indigenous women (RCMP, 2014).

Breaking Free was the first report to highlight the prevalence and kinds of violence faced by Indigenous women in Ontario. It was also the first report to use Indigenous women's voices to articulate the problem of family violence within their communities. The study noted the alarmingly high numbers of incidents of violence within Indigenous communities, which could erroneously suggest that violence was a common aspect of the Indigenous experience. The rates, prevalence, and pervasiveness of family violence presented by the *Breaking Free* report remain an issue for Indigenous women and communities.

Breaking Free was a milestone in understanding violence towards Indigenous women. Twenty five years have lapsed since this first study and no comprehensive studies have since been done that place Indigenous women's voices and experiences at the centre of the research. Given the service experience of the OFIFC in various areas, including healing, wellness, health, justice and cultural programming, and ONWA's developing service infrastructure, it is clear that the issues related to violence against Aboriginal women and girls are as troubling today as they were twenty five years ago. There is a gap in research and it is time to return to Indigenous women and ask them what, if anything, has changed.

As a follow-up to the original *Breaking Free* report, the *Breaking Free Breaking Through* project, initiated and designed by the OFIFC and ONWA, has set out to understand protective factors for women experiencing violence and what prompts these women to break free from violence. We know that women will attempt to leave abusive relationships multiple times, however, this has not been explored and examined within an explicitly Indigenous context. This research looks at what types of conditions must be in place for Indigenous women to not only leave abusive and violent relationships, but to not return. To better understand how women breakthrough violence, we returned to the original intent of *Breaking Free*, directly asking Indigenous women in five communities (Fort Frances, Hamilton, Ottawa, Timmins and Thunder Bay) and giving them space to self-voice their particular experiences with violence.

Our approach throughout the *Breaking Free, Breaking Through* project was unique in that we coupled culturally-appropriate and culturally-relevant arts based research with art therapies, creating a safe research space where the women involved could share their experiences and simultaneously be supported by other Indigenous women. We acknowledged that most Indigenous approaches to research reflect a recognition that meaningful research must be grounded in respectful relationships amongst all people involved. Through the arts-based methodology that we employed, the women engaged in the project could immediately benefit from their participation in the creative process and grow from their relationships with other women.

The Breaking Free, Breaking Through project facilitated the sharing of Indigenous women's experiences and sought to embed Indigenous women as agents within the research process itself. When community members direct the research process, it moves research away from academically defined structures into a framework that is accessible to community members. The *Breaking Free, Breaking Through* project recognizes that Indigenous women who have experienced violence *are the experts in their own experiences* and, as such, their knowledge must form the basis of any interpretation and recommendations to assist Indigenous women to break through from their violent experiences.

The members of the research team were also research participants, explicitly acknowledging that our position as researchers is not divorced from our experiences within our own communities and, therefore, we cannot be objective or impartial observers. We sought to transform the authorship and ownership of research processes by actively subverting the relationship between the researcher-subject and the participant-object. In doing so, the OFIFC and ONWA have generated research data that more accurately represent the lived experiences of Indigenous women than could conventional approaches, which view researchers and participants as having divergent roles.

We hypothesized that women would speak about the barriers they overcame in order to leave and heal from abusive relationships. We thought we would hear women relay poignant stories of concrete moments in breaking away from violence. Ultimately, though, this study became a testament to Indigenous women's resilience.

We anticipate that results of this research will alter dominant perceptions of Indigenous women. We also expect that the results will be disseminated provincially and nationally to contribute to the discourse of ending violence against Indigenous women and girls. Participants in the expressive art therapy sessions have asked that their poetry and artworks be shared to add dimension and a visual context for their stories. Through sharing their stories and artistic creations, the women involved in the project are empowered and enabled to continue strengthening their spirit of resilience.

CONTEXT

For the last few decades, Indigenous communities, Indigenous leaders, Indigenous institutions, organizations and agencies in Canada have been working passionately to end violence against Indigenous women and girls. In Ontario, Indigenous women experience significantly higher rates of violence in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts. *The Breaking Free, Breaking Through* research study is the next step in understanding violence against Indigenous women, supporting our women and ultimately ending all violence.

Following the publication of the original *Breaking Free* report, Indigenous communities worked together on the Aboriginal Family Healing Joint Steering Committee and developed *For Generations to Come: The Time is Now*, a Strategy for Aboriginal Family Healing, released in September 1993. In response to this Strategy, the government of Ontario funded the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy (AHWS) in 1994. Both the OFIFC and ONWA, as leaders in the movement to end violence against Indigenous women, have been active partners in the Aboriginal Family Healing Joint Steering Committee and integral to the design and development of AHWS.

The development of the Healing Strategy was based on consultations with over 6,000 Indigenous people across 250 communities in Ontario. Throughout these consultations the Indigenous community came to define family violence collectively as:

> consequent to colonization, forced assimilation and cultural genocide. It is the learned, negative, cumulative multi-generational actions, values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviourial patterns practiced by one or more people that weaken or destroy the harmony and well-being of an Aboriginal individual, family, extended family, community or nationhood (Aboriginal Family Healing Joint Steering Committee, 1993, p.22).

The objectives of AHWS are to address family violence in Indigenous communities and to improve Indigenous health. AHWS is funded by five provincial ministries: the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Ontario Women's Directorate. All AHWS programs and services are designed and delivered by Indigenous community organizations, agencies, and service providers.

In March 2007, the OFIFC, ONWA, and the Ontario Women's Directorate held a Summit to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women. This initial summit was fundamental to the development of the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women* released in September 2007, which was endorsed by the government of Ontario as a guiding document shortly thereafter. In response to pressure to act upon the recommendations in the *Strategic Framework,* the province, in partnership with Indigenous organizations, established the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Violence Against Aboriginal Women in 2010. Membership of the JWG is comprised of ten provincial ministries and the following Indigenous organizations, all of whom have adopted the Strategic Framework either in whole or in principle: OFIFC, ONWA, the Metis Nation of Ontario (MNO), the Independent First Nations (IFN), and the Chiefs of Ontario (COO).

Indigenous women are approximately 3.5 times more likely to experience some form of spousal violence than non-Indigenous women;

- Indigenous women (54%) are more likely than non-Indigenous women (37%) to report the most severe forms of spousal violence, such as being beaten, choked, threatened with a gun or knife, or sexually assaulted;
- Emotional abuse by male partners, a major risk factor for spousal violence, is also more frequent for Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women;
- Approximately 75% of survivors of sexual assault in Indigenous communities are young women under 18 years of age;
- Approximately 50% of these girls are under the age of 14 and approximately 25% are under the age of 7;
- Canadian Indigenous women between the ages of 25 and 44 are five times more likely than all other Canadian women in the same age group to die as a result of violence, and;
- Between 1997 and 2013, the murder rate for non-Indigenous women was 0.9/100,000. The murder rate for Indigenous women during this same time period was 5.8/100,000 - almost 7 times higher than that of non-Indigenous women (Brennan, 2011).

Indigenous women are also too often the victims of racialized, sexualized violence, a fact highlighted by the Native Women's Association of Canada's (NWAC) *Sisters in Spirit* initiative that brought attention to the alarmingly high numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. Sexual assaults account for more than one-third of violent incidents involving Indigenous victims, at a rate of 70 incidents per 1000 Indigenous people versus 23 incidents per 1000 non-Indigenous people. Indigenous women and girls can be particularly vulnerable to other forms of sexual violence, including human trafficking (Oxman-Martinez et. al, 2005; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006; Farley et. al, 2005).

In Ontario, the prevalence of violence against Indigenous women is even higher than that of the national average with a shocking disparity in the level of violence experienced by First Nations, Métis and Inuit women when compared to non-Indigenous women. Statistics clearly indicate that Indigenous women are significantly over-represented as victims of assault, sexual assault, spousal abuse and homicide (Perreault, 2011). First Nations, Métis and Inuit women are three and a half times more likely to experience spousal violence than non-Indigenous women. The rate of spousal homicide for Indigenous women is eight times greater than that of non-Indigenous women. In some northern Indigenous communities in Ontario it is estimated that 75 to 90 percent of women experience violence (ONWA, 1989).

Throughout their histories, Indigenous women have been organizing within their families, communities, and nations to end violence. Indigenous women continue to mobilize around missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, human trafficking, family violence, racism, and environmental exploitation. However, a significant change over time is the self-voicing of Indigenous women within political, public, and activist circles. In addition to the grassroots movements, there have been formalized movements to end violence against Indigenous women that have started to shift and change the landscape of violence against Indigenous women, most notably the Amnesty International's *Stolen Sisters* report (*2004)* on which Bev Jacobs, a Mohawk lawyer and grandmother from Six Nations, was the lead researcher, the national movement *Sisters in Spirit* (SIS), and the establishment of the Joint Working Group on Violence Against Aboriginal Women in Ontario.

The *Stolen Sisters* report was a human rights response to discrimination and violence against Indigenous women in Canada, while the goal of *Sisters in Spirit* was to conduct research and raise awareness about the alarmingly high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The first phase of the SIS initiative, beginning in 2005, gathered statistical information on violence against Indigenous women. The research team had developed a sophisticated database that included more than 200 variables and proved that

there were more than 582 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. Throughout this research process, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Government of Canada, and countless other organizations disputed these findings and suggested that the numbers were not nearly as high

In 2013, Maryanne Pearce, compiled statistics from all policing jurisdictions[1] as a part of her PhD dissertation which focused on the rates of missing and murdered women in Canada. Her research found that there were more than 824 missing and murdered Indigenous women and over 1734 cases of missing and murdered women across Canada where ethnicity is unknown. Following the public distribution of Pearce's PhD dissertation in May 2014, the RCMP released a report with findings that 1,181 Indigenous women have been murdered or gone missing between 1980 and 2013. Of those 1,181 Indigenous women, 1,017 had been murdered, a shocking number which confirms the inordinately disproportionate violence to which Indigenous women are subjected. Whereas self-identified Indigenous women make up 4.3% of Canada's total female population, 16% of Canada's female homicide victims are Indigenous (RCMP, 2014).

The consequences of the brutal intrusion and relentless dispossession of ongoing colonization are continually felt by Indigenous peoples across Canada. Despite this, many Indigenous communities and organizations thrive, empowered by generational knowledge, strong spiritual foundations and the ethos of resilience that permeates traditional stories told and re-told. The work done by Indigenous organizations that confidently act to end violence against Indigenous women and girls is also the testament to this spirit of resilience.

Academics such as Andrea Smith, Emma LaRocque, Joyce Green, and many others, discuss the interconnection of colonization and violence against Indigenous women, which we fully recognize and acknowledge in this research. However, the unique experiences of many marginalized women, including Indigenous women, have not been sufficiently included within mainstream academic or activist discussions. The *Breaking Free, Breaking Through* project seeks to give voice to Indigenous women's unique experiences and resilience, by approaching all research from a distinctly Indigenous perspective. Through this project, the inherent and demonstrated strength and resilience of Indigenous women are acknowledged, built upon and held up as an example.

By examining the specific stories shared by the participants of this study, our aim was not to misrepresent the diversity and complexity of Indigenous women's experiences of violence, but to uncover patterns of resilience that can be replicated as wise practices within Indigenous communities and organizations to both prevent violence, and ensure that Indigenous women who experience violence are supported in the best ways possible. Our focus remains on Indigenous women who survive through their own strengths and resilience, and our contention both from the outset of the project and throughout this analysis is that *every* Indigenous woman is both strong and resilient. Our weaving together of Indigenous women's stories will start to ground a particular understanding of resilience within Indigenous ways of knowing, and foster an understanding of resilience that more accurately reflects the complex, relational, and collective ways in which Indigenous women experience, and enact, their own resilience.

1 See Pearce, 2013.

APPROACH TO RESEARCH

From the outset, our project was designed to be collaborative and community driven. The research project began at the request of Indigenous communities associated with the OFIFC and ONWA. As such, it has been carried out as an equal partnership between the two organizations. In the communities where research took place, our local affiliates also developed new collaborative relationships. While the OFIFC and ONWA frequently work together as regional organizations, the *Breaking Through* research project was a new opportunity for us to continue to indigenize our own processes and relationships. Through its collaborative design, the project was an opportunity to explore how all aspects of the research process, from researcher/participant relationships, community practices and knowledge dissemination are indigenized. OFIFC and ONWA are actively indigenizing our collaboration, transforming community-based research practices that were not suited to Indigenous researchers or communities, and adapting them to ensure that they are consistent with our own particular practices and ways of knowing.

The genesis of western academic research focusing on Indigenous communities is rooted firmly in colonial relationships in which researchers seek to know Indigenous cultures and practices from the outside. That type of research has sought to order and classify, and hence control, Indigenous peoples. Presently, the relationship

between academic researchers and Indigenous communities is still fraught with inherently unequal power relations. Given the dominance of this colonial research structure, when the OFIFC and ONWA partnered to carry out research in and with the communities, it was with a clear goal of resisting unequal research relationships. This goal was never more important than when addressing our specific research question of uncovering how Indigenous women break through their violent experiences. As the OFIFC and ONWA work together with the communities, we are reconstructing ways to break free from the presiding narrative of academic research practices, which aim to render Indigenous knowledge and practice manageable and readable within western European and Canadian systems of thought.

In 2012, the OFIFC developed and published the USAI Research Framework, named after four principles which inform all of the OFIFC's research activities: utility, self-voicing, access and inter-relationality. This new approach to research is premised on four principles of Indigenous ethics, as defined by the OFIFC:

> *Utility:* research inquiry is practical, relevant, and directly benefiting communities;
>
> *Self-voicing:* research, knowledge, and practice are authored by communities, which are fully recognized as knowledge holders and knowledge creators;
>
> *Access:* research fully recognizes all local knowledge, practice, and experience in all their cultural manifestations as accessible by all research authors and knowledge holders; and,
>
> *Inter-relationality*: research is historically-situated, geo-politically positioned, relational, and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is generated (OFIFC, 2012).

This research framework speaks directly to the need to transform Indigenous research and ensure that it is fully driven by Indigenous communities; to further empower Indigenous peoples' research capacity; and increase their social and economic efficacy via direct action that comes from community-driven research. Any study grounded in the USAI Research Framework, with this project included, needs to reflect the strengths and assets of Indigenous communities, while being practical, directly benefiting Indigenous people and fully acknowledging authorship and validity of their knowledge and practice.

Our insistence on community-driven research is firmly situated within Indigenous understandings of knowledge and practice as inherently collective and collaborative processes. As relationships developed between the OFIFC, ONWA and the communities participating in this study, we also sought to blur the boundaries in the relationship between the researcher as subject and the participant as object. Blurring the boundaries between subject and object in a research relationship challenges unequal power relations and, in doing so, denaturalizes the western assumption of objective, unbiased knowledge. As the history of research in Indigenous communities has shown, the fiction of the unbiased researcher is exposed through countless research results that continue to perpetuate colonial stereotypes of Indigenous women by focusing on 'solving' problems rather than on women's strength and resilience.

METHODOLOGY: ARTS BASED RESEARCH AND THERAPY

The three objectives in designing the research methodology for this project were (1) creating a safe environment, (2) giving back to the community, and (3) fostering Indigenous women's empowerment. Arts based research/therapy was chosen as it provides a flexible sharing space with innovative, safe research environments. As a research methodology, the use of art and creative processes allows Indigenous women to gain something tangible from their involvement in the project, by not only sharing their stories, but by documenting them through concrete aesthetic practices. The use of an arts-based methodology was also integral to embedding the Indigenous value of reciprocity within the research process, as through the creation of art, Indigenous women who have experienced violence not only participated in gathering research data, but quite literally *created* their own meanings and demonstrated their own resilience.

Arts based research is essentially the systematic use of the artistic process, including painting, poetry, dance, singing, composing, including an examination of the impact of the creative process, and the reflections on that process. Arts based research has included drawing, painting and sculpture (see Guillemin, 2004; Guillemin and Westall, 2009; Furman, 2007), photography and film (see Frith and Harcourt 2007; Parr, 2007), dance and theatre (see Bagley, 2008; Cancienne and Bagley, 2009) and music (see Aldridge, 2009; Daykin, 2009). In recent years arts-based research has gained recognition as a legitimate and useful methodological approach. Arts based methods are growing in popularity and validity as researchers discover how these methods aid in tapping into a larger range of creative intelligence, one that has the potential to generate important information, often more accurate, original and authentic than what can be garnered from most conventional research methods.

The distance that is created between artist and artwork may also aid in meaningful dialogue. People may find it easier to engage with a piece of art, to ask questions *of the art*, than of the artist herself. Additionally, the distance created between the artist, and their subsequent artwork allows time to reflect and consider responses to questions in greater detail than would be afforded in an oral communication.

Arts based methods offer unique opportunity to enter and understand another's life and world. The use of images helps capture the often difficult to express emotions linked to trauma. Visual representations can help give emotions breadth and depth to challenging emotions. Additionally, images help to see someone else's point of view and it is recognized that images may be more accessible than the written word, for both participants as well as viewers. It is a particularly suitable method for participants who may have literacy difficulties, or for groups with differing levels of reading comprehension. Further, this method provided an immediate benefit. Unlike other research projects where recommendations or outcomes often take weeks, if not months to implement, the therapeutic benefit of this project was immediate.

An arts-based method aligns with Indigenous peoples' relationship to art, in which creative arts, culture, and healing are closely linked (Archibald and Dewar, 2010). The creative arts are interconnected with Indigenous humanistic value system and perspectives (Herring, 1997). In Indigenous cultures, creative expression is woven into everyday life; through art, symbols and rituals, important teachings are passed from generation to generation. Traditionally Indigenous perspectives of art differ from western conceptualizations, which generally apply the term to objects or expressions with aesthetic appeal or 'high' cultural stature. For Indigenous peoples, art is regarded as an integral aspect of life and not as a separate realm of aesthetic

production. By incorporating art into this research project, we sought to further establish Indigenous values in our research methods.

We chose this approach also because it is consistent with Indigenous values of reciprocity, collaboration, and creation. In 1996 the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* documented the distinct and unique importance of art to Indigenous peoples, associating numerous creative practices directly to the spirit of individual and collective identity, tenacity, resilience and overall wellness. There are many unique Indigenous groups and communities in Canada, and it is improper to make wide sweeping generalizations regarding the favoured communication style. However, Ferrara (2004) found through her research as a therapist in northern Quebec that Cree people perceived a power hierarchy between client and therapist during therapy, which does not mesh with Cree society. Using the creative arts as a communication tool allows for the breakdown of the division between therapist and client.

We coupled arts based research with arts therapy to provide women with an opportunity to share their stories, participate in creative processes, and learn new skills to address the impacts of violence. Arts therapy is an established therapy, used in a variety of settings, including the field of neuroscience, for a variety of rehabilitative purposes (Hass-Cohen, 2008). Arts based therapy has been used for decades to further individuals' healing processes, and assist in dealing with trauma and loss (Hanevik et al., 2013). The artistic expression provides the potential for a new perspective for interpretation and learning on an emotional level. In this project, the artistic process allowed women to create a new reality and an opportunity to recreate one's self and one's experience through artistic expression. Arts therapy afforded women a new way to communicate thoughts and experiences that may be difficult, or in some cases impossible, to express in words (Liebmann, 1998). For the detailed description of the research sessions, see Appendix 1.

It is also important to note that the art created by Indigenous women in five research sites was not interpreted in any way, which is to say that no resources were devoted to determining the significance of, for example, the use of predominately dark colours, as a symbol of Christian imagery or scenes of nature. Rather, women told their own story in their own words, describing their intentions. This is to say that the art is not the data; rather, it is the process, the reflection and the women's responses that comprise the stories we tell here.

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

The creation of art was the catalyst by which Indigenous women in this study expressed emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The arts-based methods created a space for reflection, helping women narrate their experiences, while their artistic representations evoked reflection, awareness and analysis. The space in which the women came together was a safe, trusting and non-judgmental space. The women were assured that the space was filled with mutual support. As well as bringing culturally relevant practices into the sessions an Elder participated in all sessions was there for support and to perform opening and closing ceremonies.

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

We gave back to the community not only through therapeutic, rehabilitative benefits which contribute to effective strategies to deal with the emotional impacts of domestic violence, but also through the physical, tangible art that the women produced; they have a physical reminder of the process and progress. The creative process also encouraged engagement and examination of the personal meanings and experiences related to violence and breaking through moments in women's lives. The evaluations filled out by women in each community consistently showed that Indigenous women viewed their aesthetic creations as a means of sharing their voice and their stories with other women in their own communities and communities across the province. The session evaluations overwhelmingly indicated that it was precisely the safe spaces, accessible arts practices, and sense of community that allowed women to share both their joyful and traumatic stories in ways that were able to give them a voice both individually and collectively. For more details on the evaluation process, see Appendix 2.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

This methodology was especially good at facilitating the empowerment of Indigenous women. True to Indigenous participatory research methods, the women in the study were both participants and researchers. The participants guided the research through the collection and analysis of data. Power was deliberately shared between the research team and the participants. The art-based process was a tool that left more power for self-analysis and self-definition at the hands of the participants. Using arts-based methods to actively document their strengths and resilience in confronting violence, research participants directed the specific process of research in each community to meet their own individual and local needs.

POSITIONING THE RESEARCHERS

While women created masks, paintings, poems, and illustrated timelines of their lives, the research team's role was not to interpret their aesthetic creations, but only weave together the words, stories and narratives that the women shared. Unlike research projects that are strictly circumscribed by academic notions of objectivity, the researchers purposefully inserted themselves into the research process, recognizing that we are part of the knowledges and experiences co-produced through this research process.

While Indigenous women who participated in this study were explicitly defined as the experts and source of knowledge, the research team – which was comprised of staff from the OFIFC and ONWA, as well as a respected Elder – consciously decided to participate in our *own* expressive arts therapy session. Prior to data coding and analysis, the expressive arts therapist led the research team through an arts-based session similar to those she had led in five research communities. Throughout this session, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the all-female research team shared their own experiences of violence, abuse, and intergenerational trauma. By sharing our own narratives and creatively expressing our own experiences through aesthetic practices, the research team has literally positioned itself as *participants* of the research project. By including ourselves as research participants, the research team explicitly acknowledges that our position on a research team is not divorced from our experiences within our own communities and, therefore, we cannot be objective or impartial observers.

STORIES GO IN CIRCLES

"Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen"
(Tafoya, 1995, pg.12)

This section is an exploration of the women's narratives. By listening to women's stories and how they respond to violence in their lives and to what fosters their resilience, we have elected not to present findings, analyze data, and summarize our conclusions in a linear fashion. Instead, we will be respectful of the story-telling tradition as we believe that Indigenous research is about seeking, finding, and telling our stories. Rather than imposing a linear narrative on the unique and nonetheless interconnected stories that we heard, we are weaving numerous stories together to tell the larger story of Indigenous women's resilience.

The research team is explicitly part of the story that we tell here and we ask the reader to follow the path that we took, opening our hearts and minds to women's narratives. In what follows, it becomes clear that no other method of presenting what we heard would accurately represent the kind of resilience the Indigenous women routinely exhibit.

STORY OF RESILIENCE

I will take knowledge, peace, hope, understanding others' lives and every possible way I can make tomorrow's day brighter than yesterday's.
(Participant, Ottawa)

When we set out to examine Indigenous women's resilience, we began with a few assumptions. Firstly, we assumed that there would be a break through moment when women left violent situations. Secondly, we thought that concrete and identifiable factors contribute to Indigenous women's resilience. Thirdly, we hypothesized that culture has a fundamentally positive impact on women's lives. Throughout the course of our research process some of these assumptions proved to be too linear and too rigid to reflect the complex and interrelated stories that women shared.

As we heard the women's stories, it became clear that we were not hearing of explicitly identifiable break through moments, but rather of a number of different processes and experiences that women went through. We also found that Indigenous women often experience multiple sources of violence and trauma that could precipitate various responses and that, in many cases, simply surviving these experiences would require inordinate strengths. At this point in our research, it became clear that the concept of resilience rather than discrete break through moments was more reflective of Indigenous women's stories and experiences.

All of the women in this study have experienced violence, some are currently experiencing violence, and some have experienced multiple forms of violence throughout their lives. Unfortunately, for Indigenous women, this experience is not unique. As the original *Breaking Free* report found, 80% of Indigenous women in Ontario will experience some form of violence in their lifetime.

In this study, one woman in Ottawa described herself as "pretty ordinary", and proceeded to tell of a harrowing past full of every type of violence and abuse imaginable, child welfare involvement, addiction, and trauma. Lamentably, this story and the stories told by the other women in this study, remind us that these shared experiences are all too common. Experiences of physical, emotional and sexual violence, familial alcoholism, and family breakdown were collectively shared by the women who attended the five sessions across Ontario. Although not explicitly directed to discuss negative events, such as the loss of children to child welfare agencies, alcoholism or family breakdown, the women, not surprisingly given the criteria to participate in the sessions, did disclose violent and traumatic events in their lives. Despite their experiences of violence, trauma, family breakdown, addictions, and involvement with child welfare agencies, the Indigenous women who participated in this study continue to demonstrate significant resilience. Taking a strengths-based approach, we wanted to know: what is it that inspires their resilience?

DOMINANT CONCEPTS OF RESILIENCE

In many ways, resilience is a particularly western concept that the research team challenged throughout the research process, a challenge that was prefigured by the women as they sought to define their strengths and survival on their own terms. In the sessions, women spoke not of being defined by the multitude of violence and traumas they had endured, but rather of their ability to persevere and to define themselves in other ways after violence and trauma. This process of seeing oneself in new ways is important, as David Newhouse suggests:

> Part of the healing journey is to begin to see ourselves differently, to move from seeing ourselves as wounded to seeing ourselves as resilient . . . Seeing ourselves as resilient can be difficult. It is comforting to continue to see ourselves in the old way. (Newhouse, 2006, p. 2)

Despite decades of resilience research, discrepancy remains in how resilience is conceptualized by dominant systems of thought, as western definitions of resilience do not commonly recognize the actions we identified throughout this project as resilient. Unfortunately, most literature on resilience fails to include minorities and distinct cultural, racial and environmental circumstances that affect how individuals experience resilience (Miller, 1999). Moreover, western resilience research fails to account for the impact of colonization and forcible assimilation on the lives of Indigenous women. More and more researchers are questioning the adequacy of the western scientific method to identify resilience in Indigenous populations as Indigenous people respond to situations in ways markedly different than do non-Indigenous people (Grandbois and Sanders, 2009). Because of these elisions, existing resilience literature often does not make space for the particular experiences of Indigenous women and it is against these narrow definitions of resilience that our research is positioned.

The earliest resilience research focused on predicting the resilience of at-risk children as they moved into adulthood and on the internal individual characteristics that promoted resilience. Resilience was seen as a fixed personality trait that an individual either does or does not have. This is a fundamentally limiting way to understand resilience as it does not acknowledge or account for the dynamic interaction of factors that can affect an individual's lived experience. Because Indigenous women in this study have encountered an array of experiences, including violence and oppression, to view their resilience as an internal characteristic would necessarily disregard how Indigenous women and communities continue to come together and support each other. Another major limitation in portraying resilience as a static characteristic is that those not able to thrive in adverse situations are often viewed as responsible for their situation, potentially blaming the victim for her inability to adapt to external stressors (Tarter and Vanyukov, 1999).

Early notions that resilience is a trait or characteristic that an individual either possesses or does not have since been expanded to acknowledge that both internal and external factors can encourage or hinder resilience. Within western literature, where resilience has been often equated with adaptation, resilience is defined as *positive* adaptive response despite or in the face of adversity (Fleming and Ledogar, 2008; Masten and Wright, 1998; Masten, 2001; Yates et. al, 2003). Resilience does not exist without the presence of two factors – adaptive functioning and exposure to risk or adversity (Kim-Cohen, 2007). Luthar (2000) expands on this definition to suggest that in order for an action or behaviour to be deemed resilient, the adversity must be clear and significant.

There is no denying that Indigenous women are exposed to both risk and adversity. Indigenous women, by virtue of being *both Indigenous and women* experience adversity throughout their lives, as they face poverty, racism, overt and covert marginalization, various forms of violence, and multiple attempts at assimilation and eradication. A testament to the resilience of Indigenous women is the very fact that Indigenous communities and individuals are still here as functioning cultural entities despite enduring historic and contemporary violence and oppression.

Fleming and Ledogar's (2008) definition is also problematic as they conclude that the adaptation must be positive. We note the ambiguity of what could be considered positive, as it will differ greatly between groups. Many western cultures have viewed assimilation as a positive adaptation for Indigenous people, while for Indigenous women *resistance* to assimilation is a positive response to processes of colonization, colonialism, and patriarchy. What is considered a successful adaptation will thus necessarily differ in relation to historical and cultural context. For women in this study, there are multiple ways of surviving violent situations, including adaptations that might, on the surface, be considered negative. One woman shared how she used illegal

substances as a coping mechanism to deal with the degradation she felt when she was forced into prostitution by her violent partner. When another women commented on how devastating substance use can be, she remarked, "Heroin? Heroin's not so bad. It's the only reason I'm still here", suggesting that the disassociation brought on by her drug use allowed her to distance herself from her prostitution.

We also looked at the domain specific resilience model, in which resilience could manifest itself in some areas, but not in others (Lalonde, 2006). In some ways, Indigenous women shared stories that demonstrated something similar to domain-specific resilience. For example, we heard from one woman who was working in a professional setting, but had lost custody of her children and was still living with a violent partner. Her thinking was that by maintaining her career she would eventually build up her resources to leave her partner and regain custody of her children. Research by Burack et al. (2007) presents findings from a study of youth in a low-income urban area where they were considered to be resilient due to their high IQ scores and other indicators of academic success. While the students did indeed achieve high academic success, they were also found to be suffering from much higher levels of anxiety and depression. They exhibited resilience in domain specific areas (education), yet displayed a lack of resilience in others. However, we were hesitant to characterize Indigenous women's resilience as only domain specific because it could, again, lead to victim blaming. Hence, this model, although theoretically plausible, also seemed ill-fitted to our exploration.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

In this study, we noted factors that played a pivotal role in helping women recover from their experiences of violence and trauma. These included cultural programming, community involvement, a positive outlook on life, employment, education, role modelling and parenting. We initially labelled them as protective factors and thought that once we understood which protective factors foster the breakthrough moments, which risk factors hinder them, and why they happen at any given time, we would be able to map a path of resilience and design targeted supports that women need, amplifying the power of protective factors, while minimizing the impact of risk.

In the literature, protective factors mentioned most often include: a) individual attributes: high cognitive abilities (high IQ scores, high attentive skills, high executive functioning skills), self-perceptions of competence, self-worth, confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, adaptability, sociability, impulse control, affect and arousal regulation, and having a positive outlook on life; b) community attributes: good schools, connections and involvement in pro-social organizations, neighbourhood quality, quality of social services and health care; c) relationships: parenting quality (including warmth, structure, monitoring and expectations), close relationship with competent adults (including parents, relatives, mentors), connections to pro-social and rule-abiding peers (Scarpino, 2007).

The attributes, or protective factors, that consistently emerged as women shared their stories included completing or continuing their education, maintaining adequate employment, remaining positive in the face of negative experiences, and access to Indigenous community events and resources. One participant explicitly noted that "to get out of this mess I need an education", but more than that secondary and post-secondary education functioned as a pathway to improving access to services and quality of life as well as a means to overcome barriers including poverty and low socio-economic status. Women who were employed often shared how employment provided structure and purpose in their lives as well as much needed financial resources. The importance of income was reinforced by one woman who spoke about how her violent situation impacted her job when she had to leave her community in order to escape violence.

Access to community events and resources within Indigenous controlled spaces, such as Friendship Centres or ONWA programming, was also important to the women who indicated that these programs provided access not only to material resources, but also created friendships, community and a larger support network. It is important that these are Indigenous spaces because the women identified them as spaces where they feel safe. All of the Indigenous women who shared their stories were cognizant of the often extreme barriers they needed to overcome. However, one common trait amongst the women was their positivity in the face of these negative experiences. This positivity often came through most clearly when the women were creating their art. One woman simply painted a tree and noted all of the positives that grew out of negative experiences in her life.

Perhaps the greatest motivator for women's responses to violence was to set a positive example for their children and other family members. The women with children all felt a strong desire to deal with their violence positively and to act as a role model. One woman worried about her children and didn't think that she had shown them a "good way" while another woman described the struggles she had with her own son, who she had recently discovered had become violent with his own female partner. She explained how she had made a great effort in showing her son how a woman feels when she is abused, to instill within him respect for women.

Children also provided significant inspiration for women to heal themselves and many women said that their "children were their life". "I'm doing what I have to do so my son has a smile put on his face" said one woman, while another young woman spoke about her role as a mother and how integral it was to her personal identity, which helped her to persevere when she felt she had no other reason to:

> My three amazing children give me a purpose. I'm not just 'Emily' – I'm Emily, a mom. Emily, a teacher. The only thing that counts is those three kids. I want to do better for my kids. I want to make a better parent out of myself.

An Elder participant followed in the path of her mother, and was violent and an alcoholic, but when she saw what it was doing to her children she sought help at a treatment centre: "what kept me strong is my children, my circle of women, mother, father, and people who have gone on before me." Another woman was pregnant with her second child, and at that point she "put her foot down" in response to her partner's violence. The first time things got physical in front of her newborn she said it was over: "everything I do is for my family. I don't want my kids to grow up without a mother." Women's desire to care for their families was, notably, one of the themes that emerged consistently. Although most participants were mothers, even those who were not had a desire to be strong around the children in their lives.

Emergent from the research process was how community involvement, a positive outlook on life, employment, education, role modelling and parenting seemed to function much as protective factors do in existing resilience research. However, we note that these protective factors, though common themes in Indigenous women's experiences, do not emerge in a causal linear relationship that precipitates resilience. Rather, women's stories of these common protective factors wove back and forth with experiences in their lives that included both escaping violence and having difficulties escaping violence.

As also noted that women's stories were not linear and that there was no linear causation between a protective factor and any subsequent resilient responses.

In our initial analysis, we acknowledged these protective factors in women's lives as facilitating positive outcomes in adapting or responding to adverse situations, but we still couldn't understand the mechanism beyond this facilitation, even though we defined the protective factors more relationally and hence differently from what has typically been described in the relevant literature:

> We are taught to examine a trait or behaviour like resilience by splitting the factors into independent linear cause and effect relationships . . . in the linear view the person owns, or is, the problem. In the relational view, the problem is circumstantial and resides in the relationship between or among factors. The person is not said to have a problem but rather to be out of harmony. Once harmony is restored the problem is gone. In the linear model we are taught to treat the person, and in the relationship model we are taught to treat the balance (Cross, 1998, p. 155).

RISK FACTORS

Following dominant resilience models, risk factors are thought to predispose an individual towards difficulty achieving positive adaptive outcomes. Like protective factors, risk factors include both internal (personal) and external factors. Amongst the noted risk factors are: a) individual attributes – biological risks, which includes difficult pregnancies that increase the probability of developmental problems, learning difficulties, low self-esteem, irritability or a fussy temperament, impulsive and negative persistence; b) community resources and opportunities – low academic achievement, educational problems, poor peer interactions; c) relationships – multiple family disadvantages, impaired parenting, neglectful and abusive home environment, marital conflict, family instability and violence and high exposure to adverse family life events (Scarpino, 2007). Risk factors rarely occur in isolation; rather a multitude of risk factors is commonly present.

The concept of protective and risk factors resonated with us early in the analysis, as there is no denying that Indigenous women are exposed to both risk and adversity. Yet, evaluating resilience in terms of weighing risks against protective factors, both those internal and external to the individual, creates a superficial dichotomy: factors are either good (protective factors) or bad (risks). This view does not take into account the various ways in which risk factors and protective factors present and influence different people's lives. Stouthamer-Loeber, *et al*. (1993) support this recognition and note that few factors function exclusively as risk factors or protective factors and thus are neither wholly good, nor wholly bad. They note that the context in which these factors appear is important as context is necessary to understand the various processes that are initiated when these factors emerge.

Scarpino (2007) points out that resilience, as it is understood to emerge from risk and protective factors, is a linear concept which views it as a single trajectory. Instead, she suggests an exploration of resilience from an Indigenous perspective that incorporates "a continual web of relationships, process and flow that encompasses life from childhood to adulthood and through to Elder status. [This type of application] can demonstrate the positive strengths of Aboriginal women and [can show] that the process of resilience is dependent on Indigenous ways of knowing" (Scarpino, 2007, p.33).

When we were looking at the stories Indigenous women shared in this project, we recognized that there is a vast complexity and intricate interplay between factors anywhere resilience emerges in Indigenous communities. Just as protective factors are not linear, risk and protective factors are not mutually exclusive and following this line of thought, we quickly realized that for Indigenous women in this study, protective factors were also often risk factors. Family relations have been deemed to be protective and generally the women benefited from a strong sense of family, but generations of alcohol, drug and cyclical violence may serve to surround Indigenous women with violence, thus functionally the family relationship also becomes a risk. The cyclical violence that Indigenous women experience also further reinforces our observation that neither protective factors, nor risk factors, exist for Indigenous women with linear causal effects on their lives. Rather, both positive and negative factors are interconnected and continually shifting. An understanding of resilience as a balance between competing protective and risk factors did not accurately reflect the stories that we heard and, for this reason, we began to explore other conceptualizations of resilience.

EXPLORING A CONTINUUM OF RESILIENCE

Moving from a simplistic notion of protective factors, we hypothesized that because of the interconnected and sometimes contradictory ways in which protective and risk factors intersect, resilience for Indigenous women exists along a continuum. As Indigenous women exhibited such diverse responses to their life experiences and engaged in actions that could be considered both positive negative – although nonetheless adaptive – we wanted to explore the notion that resilience exists along a continuum.

Interestingly, during the sessions, not a single woman used the word resilient to describe herself. Instead, women spoke about feeling strong, about uncovering strengths they were not aware they possessed, feeling validated in their experiences and empowered to share their personal histories. When we looked yet deeper into these stories, instead of those neat, precise moments of positive adaptations or breaking through moments that we expected to find, all predictably impacted by linear risk or protective factors, we found an overarching theme in women's narratives of moving or a process that included many breakthrough moments but sometimes also steps back or necessary detours. This process of moving back and forth is how we conceptualized our working notion of a continuum of resilience.

The mainstream research on trauma does include the concept of moving through which is aligned with Elder James Claremont's assertion that adversity must be moved through, and that this experience of learning, regardless of the reasons for this learning, is a gift (Graham, 2001). However, this concept of moving through experiences and existing on a continuum of resilience still did not adequately capture the Indigenous women's stories that we heard because it is still largely linear. Although the movement of resilience may occur both backwards and forwards, this movement does not capture the complexity and interconnectivity shared by women.

When we were thinking of resilience as a continuum, we expected to find a very coherent continuum on which women would "progress" from one moment in time when their resilience would be fragile to the opposite point when it would be strong, with degrees of resilience between the two poles, akin to what Hunter (1999) defined as less optimal resilience and optimal resilience. Less optimal resilience would include survival tactics of violence, high risk behaviours, and social and emotional withdrawal (Hunter, 1999). This distinct form of resilience may or may not lead to positive outcomes; the goal is not to persevere per se, but to endure adversities. An example of survival resilience would be a teenager living in a dangerous area joining a gang for protection. The action may bring negative consequences (increased exposure to violence, for example), but it also provides a protective function. As we felt uneasy about the concept of positive adaptations, categorizing some behaviours as survival resilience seemed to be one way to examine resilience without labelling women's behaviour and responses to violence as either good or bad, positive or negative. When we applied the notion of a continuum of resilience to the stories we heard, we still knew nothing about what fosters Indigenous women's resilience, only that some women in some situations had "less or more" of it.

WEAVING THE STORIES

Throughout the process of weaving together Indigenous women's stories, at the same time referring to the existing literature, it became clear that the two were not mapping directly on to each other. As Indigenous women are the experts in their own experiences, our only option was to listen to their voices and slowly start to change our own thinking in response. And so we did not find any continuum of resilience, any linearity to women's resilience and anything sequential, orderly, or structured about the way they approached extreme

violence and resulting trauma in their lives, nothing that would easily fit the definitions, models and patterns of resilience discussed in the literature we consulted.

At that point, we had to entirely abandon our predictions that we would be able to view all behaviours resulting from adversity as acts of resilience situated along a continuum, with binary poles or even as context-depended resilient responses. We had to find a different way to look at the moving phenomena that kept escaping our attempts to categorize, analyze, and label them. What became apparent to us was the very web of relationships that Scarpino (2007) proposes and which manifested itself to us as an animated, dynamic, and intricate lace-like mesh of responses to violence, which were not linear nor binary, mesmerizing to observe but almost impenetrable to our standard analytic tools. We also did not expect how continually emergent women's responses to trauma would be: surfacing and resurfacing, appearing and reappearing, coming into sight and refiguring themselves again, all in a seemingly boundless process of moving.

Along with existing resilience literature, there is emergent literature on Indigenous notions of resilience that is written by Indigenous scholars, researchers and community members. This literature shifts the discussion of resilience from one that is based in linear western notions into one that makes explicit use of an Indigenous perspective that is wholistic, relational, complex and collective. Scarpino (2007) has completed a literature review on the appropriateness applying non-Indigenous definitions of resilience to Indigenous populations. Just as we heard from the women's stories, Scarpino (2007) found that non-Indigenous definitions are not adequate and instead advocated the use of the Medicine Wheel to explore resilience in Indigenous women in a relational sense and suggested that the more connections a woman has, and the more aware she is of those connections, the more likely she is to be resilient. By creating Indigenous specific definitions of resilience, Indigenous women's resilience is likely to be captured rather than ignored as it has been when using non-Indigenous definitions.

In this study, patterns of resilience emerged in the ways that women told their stories, how they spoke about their experiences, their attention as they shared their stories with each other and the varied practices and actions through which they responded to their situations. From their perspective, experiences of resilience do not and cannot exist in isolation from the complex realities that shape their lives. Resilience is always emplaced within a complex whole of interconnected relationships, communities and contexts. Thus, rather than viewing resilience as either a possession or a linear series of positive adaptations and responses, we assert that Indigenous women's resilience is relational, collective, complex and nonlinear.

By weaving together Indigenous women's stories, we saw their ongoing dedication and commitment to healing, while maintaining their connections to community and continuing to actively learn from their experiences. In existing research there is a hesitancy to view Indigenous women as strong and resilient unless it aligns with dominant ideas of success, such as high monetary achievement and assimilation into and adoption of prevailing cultural and societal norms. We have no such hesitation. Indigenous women are resilient in unique and particular ways that prioritize interconnection and acknowledge complexity.

CULTURE AND RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

My life started to go up when I got in my Indian name. My culture provided me role models and examples of strength.
(Participant, Thunder Bay)

Although we had rejected protective factors as an adequate explanation of resilience, there is one element in Indigenous women's experiences that is particular to them. This element is culture. When we were still exploring protective and risk factors, we thought there must be one mega factor influencing Indigenous women's reactions to adverse life events and we identified this mega factor as culture and cultural reclamation. Women said that "culture made them strong". Women said "culture provides a balance." When exploring the idea of Indigenous culture as one mega protective factor, we were ready to proclaim that, for Indigenous women, all external protective factors must be rooted in culture to contribute to resilience. However, as noted above, we have since abandoned the notion of risk and protective factors because they are largely linear. This means that we were left to conceptualize the impact of culture on Indigenous women's resilience in alternate ways.

Culture and the reclamation of Indigenous identity were consistently described by participants as integral to their healing. The importance of culture to Indigenous women's resilience is that it not only allows women to reclaim their Indigenous identities and develop a positive perspective on their indigeneity, it also provides access to Indigenous ways of knowing that more accurately reflect their experiences. One woman stressed the importance of spiritual ceremony to her resilience. She was incarcerated for a violent crime, but it was there, confined in jail, where she found her strength. As part of her healing, she was able to attend cultural ceremonies, including sweat lodges and counselling by Elders. She explained how this process helped her to "feel free, even when in jail." She said she found an intense sense of belonging while attending these ceremonies, and said that it is there, practicing her culture "where [she] belongs." The importance of culture is also recognized by non-Indigenous researchers as an important variable that influences how people approach, interpret and respond to difficulty (Barber, 2008; Wexler, DiFulvio and Burke, 2009). It is this impact on Indigenous women's responses to their experiences that reveals culture to be so central.

RESILIENCE AND CULTURE

We heard from women over and over again that culture played a vital role in their healing and resilience. This concept is not new to research on resilience; we had already identified culture as a mega protective factor, even though we did not fully understand how this would work. Cultural connection has been found by Newhouse (2006) to be an important component to developing resilience. Grandbois and Sanders' (2009) study on the resilience of Native American Elders concluded that Indigenous resilience is intrinsically linked to an Indigenous worldview. They found that resilience is embedded within Native American cultures, with Indigenous people gaining their strengths and resilience from each other, their families and communities, and that resilience is coming from a legacy of survival passed down through generations. Thus, for Indigenous women, culture is cannot simply be an individual identity, but takes place within a larger context of relationships, histories and communities. Indigenous culture, as it relates to resilience, therefore has an effect on both individuals and communities. This is particularly apparent when resilient communities maintain their

cultures and ways of knowing in opposition to dominant discourses and worldviews. In this instance culture becomes not only resilience, but an act of decolonization and resistance. According to James Clairmont, Elder,

> The translation of resilience is a sacred word meaning resistance, to resist bad thoughts and bad behaviors. We accept what life has to offer us, good or bad, as gifts from the Creator. We try to overcome stressful and difficult periods with a good heart. The gift of adversity is the lesson we learn when we pass through it (Graham, 2001, p. 1).

Although no Indigenous woman used the word resilience in telling her story, the oldest participant in the program said that she found the strength to survive *because of her Indigeneity*. She spoke of her survival as directly related to her Indigenous ancestry, saying that she survives because "surviving is in my blood." This understanding that Indigenous people throughout history are survivors acknowledges that Indigenous women and their families have been resisting colonial interference since its inception.

Undoubtedly, an understanding of resilience from an Indigenous perspective could not occur outside the context of an Indigenous worldview and once again we had to go back to the stories to trace what role culture and cultural connections play in fostering women's resilience so that they, in fact, can "make tomorrow a brighter day" for themselves, their families, and their communities. In Indigenous Australia, people see resilience as:

> The ability to have a connection and belonging to one's land, family and culture; therefore an identity. Resilience allows the pain and suffering caused from adversities to heal. It is having a dreaming, where the past is brought to the present and the present and the past are taken to the future. Resilience is a strong spirit that confronts and conquers racism and oppression strengthening the spirit. It is the ability not just to survive but to thrive in today's dominant culture (Kickett, 2011, p. ii).

Many women shared with us the importance of their cultural practices to ensure their ability to retain strength and resilience within a culture that has historically devalued Indigenous women and their roles. One woman explained how she's trying to get back on her "red path," explaining how this helps her, how she's going to socials and learning how to drum and sing. Her mother, a non-Indigenous woman told her that she always has to embrace being Indigenous, because "we are one of a kind people." Another woman spoke of the comfort and strength she derived from cultural practices; "no matter what we've been through, no matter the mistakes we have made, we can always strengthen ourselves. No matter how weak we feel, we can go to the Sacred Place to renew ourselves. The Creator always has us."

While many women's stories contained concrete references to culture as a source of strength, there was not one single definition of culture. The Indigenous women who participated in this research, because they were held in urban centres, were necessarily women who self-identified as being from varied Indigenous cultural backgrounds including Anishinaabe, Métis, Inuit, Mohawk, Blackfoot and others. The diversity of Indigenous cultures means that there is not one Indigenous culture nor is there any pan-indigeneity. Rather, cultural practices are as varied as the cultures from which they emerged. This means that any positive impacts of culture may not derive from any identifiable and overarching practice; the benefits will, instead, be particular to various Indigenous women and the cultures with which they identify. Nonetheless, many women mentioned that developing stronger skills in their culture provides them with a goal. For different women the specifics of cultural engagement were different; one woman stated that "my ultimate goal is to be focused on learning to speak my language" and one woman simply said "I talk to the spirit."

CULTURE IS IN THE DOING

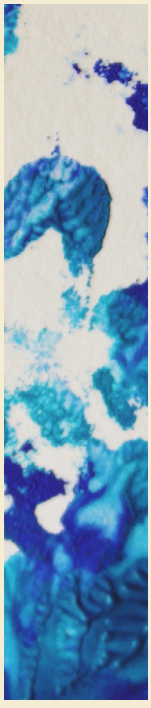
Although there is no one definition of Indigenous culture, understanding culture became an integral part of our research process as so many women referred to specific practices that were of cultural significance as a source of strength, including sweat lodges, burning of medicines, dancing, beading and drumming. While these are cultural practices specific to Indigenous peoples, we sought to uncover the shared relationships between these practices. As we struggled to come up with a definition of culture, we realized that the answer was in the women's words all along. The women themselves were not speaking of culture as single entity or tangible thing, but as a series of practices. Women always used actions or verbs to talk about their interactions with culture. They mentioned *burning* medicines or *dancing* or *speaking* their languages. Thus, cultural practices are always specifically *practices*; culture is therefore in "the doing", it is an action rather than a possession.

The recognition that culture is always *in the doing* rather than an identifiable entity or tangible thing leads to a related and concomitant realization, which is that, because culture is an action that one performs with specific objects, in specific ceremonies or with specific people, culture is also, necessarily, a *relationship*. If culture is a relationship – even if that relationship is with a specific cultural object, the land or intangible spirit – it means that Indigenous cultural practices can never be carried out by an isolated individual. In some ways, this recognition is commonsensical to the extent that cultural transmission requires cultural knowledge to be shared among groups of individuals, but the interconnectivity of cultural practices requires more than this; it requires ongoing and active relationships with objects, ceremonies, people and spirit.

CULTURE AS A RELATIONSHIP

This explicit connection between cultural practices and the relationships needed to carry them out was something that women's stories also demonstrated. Women told us that without relationships and connections to their communities, they felt robbed of their culture and, therefore, robbed of their identities, histories and realities. One woman described not knowing that she was Indigenous: "I never had my heritage until two years ago when I found the Native Centre. I now know that I had a grandfather who was a Chief in the Blackfoot community in Alberta. This is so important especially because I want to raise my granddaughter with her culture. I don't want her to be robbed of her culture." Not knowing the people, ancestors and communities to whom they are related created a sense of profound loss for Indigenous women who had this experience, a loss of cultural knowledge and connection. For women who were regaining their cultural practices and connections, the impacts were equally profound. Another woman shared that: "this year on Aboriginal Day was the first time I burned all four medicines. I felt reborn. I have gained a lot of joy, courage, wisdom and bravery." Thus, it is the *action* of participating in a cultural practice and the *relationships* inherent to those practices that provide Indigenous women with pride, strength and resilience.

The understanding of culture that we eventually arrived at does not pin it down into one overarching theme or one mega protective factor. Instead, we uncovered a concept of culture that is more consistent with an Indigenous understanding of the world and is based on concepts such as wholism, relationality, and *culture as everyday good living*, the latter understood as a balanced, complete and fulfilled reality that people experience when they practice who they are everyday of their lives (USAI Research Framework, 2012, p. 4). Insofar as culture contributes to Indigenous women's resilience, it does so as a practice and action that become part of women's identities and how they respond to their experiences. And, perhaps more importantly, these cultural practices cannot take place in a context that is not relational because cultural practices always require a relationship with another someone or something. As we continued to discuss how to explain the resilience that Indigenous women exhibited in the stories they shared, this notion of relationship started to become key to an understanding of resilience from the perspective of Indigenous women.



OKWIINOWAG:

THEY BAND TOGETHER IN A GROUP; THEY TRAVEL IN A FLOCK

Every extreme position bears the seeds of its own destruction, and in taking the scientific method full course, Western science came full circle to a worldview that has been known for millennia in indigenous cultures. That worldview recognizes that everything exists in dynamic flux--everything vibrates--and everything is in relation to everything else.
(Parry, 2005, p.30)

After months and months of reflection and analysis, the research team was still struggling to define what we have seen and experienced. None of the models we considered could explain the specificity of Indigenous women's experiences. We knew that what we have seen was nonlinear and non-binary. We agreed that it included movement and action, was dynamic, and almost alive, vibrating and full of energy, spirit, and hope. It also included connections and inter-connections, and relationships between women, their families and communities. Insistently, the women in the sessions talked about doing things in various social constellations, but we couldn't see any clear pattern of how their actions would relate to violent and traumatic events. They talked about very specific cultural practices and actions that helped them move through their experiences of violence, but we could not determine the direct relationships between cultural practices and resilience. We saw no causal factors, no apparent determinants of behaviour, and no clear impetus for individual actions. And one day, when the whole research team got together again, quite frustrated with the futility of our exploration, someone mentioned the recent YouTube sensation – a short video that shows a murmuration of starlings. As a much needed distraction from our deliberations, we watched in awe how the birds flocked together, in incredible and powerful formations or intelligent clouds, unpredictably changing shapes from small spheroids to large orbs, from spirals to scrolls, rising and falling, communicating instantly, rapidly and with an incredible ease.

When the clip was over, we looked at each other with a strong conviction. The swirling, shape-shifting formations of starlings we had just seen were an exact visual representation of what we'd been seeing for months in Indigenous women's stories: women coming together in what we came to call 'moments of murmuring', in which they were sharing experiences and communicating so that they could take action. Rather than deal with threats to their individual security and well-being, the safety and security of all Indigenous women were discussed as they came together and positioned themselves within a larger socio-cultural system. Women spoke of actions they took as they came together with other people to face adversity, to protect themselves, their families and communities, and to create change in both their immediate and more remote environments. Just as murmurations of starlings create constant and shifting patterns as they instantaneously relate to each other, the Indigenous women who shared their stories displayed particular shifting and emergent patterns in their responses to violence and trauma.

Biologists say that starlings fly in this manner to increase their safety, acting simultaneously of one mind as they sense danger:

> The secret lies in the same systems that apply to anything on the cusp of a shift, like snow before an avalanche, where the velocity of one bird affects the velocity of the rest. It is called "scale-free

2 Okwiinowag is an Ojibway word.

> correlation" and every shift of the murmuration is called a critical transition. The change in the behavioral state of one animal affects and is affected by that of all other animals in the group, no matter how large the group is (Cavagna et al., 2010, p. 11865).

When a murmuration of starlings shifts its behaviour in response to the behaviour of other starlings in the group, this critical transition causes new patterns to emerge. As we watched the patterns of starlings shift and turn in amazing fluidity and rapidity, it was apparent that the starlings were interacting with each other in complex and nonlinear relationships. Just as starlings exist within complex, nonlinear relationships, the experiences, actions and responses to violence that Indigenous women shared with us were clearly taking place within a series of ongoing, interconnected and complex relationships. Consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous women in the sessions described actions and practices that were inherently connected to their histories, families, and communities.

SHARED EXPERIENCES, SHARED STORIES

Naturally, women are not starlings and the patterns that starlings create cannot explain the complexity of Indigenous women's responses to trauma and their insistence on making their life better for themselves and their families and communities. However, a murmuration of starlings is a beautiful metaphor for Indigenous women's enduring and persistent desire to thrive, despite all the sadness, fear, and terror they have experienced collectively and individually. Indigenous women who shared their stories in this study were beaten, molested, raped and desecrated, but as they shared their stories it is clear that they still dream and laugh, bead and drum, sing and dance. And they always do it in relation to their own and collective histories and practices, with other women, families and their diverse communities.

The patterns that Indigenous women create are still, somehow, akin to starlings' murmurations in the sense that their responses shift and change, ebb and flow and create new patterns as new behaviours emerge. The patterns that emerged from the stories shared by Indigenous women are those that we had erroneously identified at first as protective factors. That is, there emerged patterns to Indigenous women's resilience that were common including: access to education and employment, maintaining a positive attitude, parenting and role modelling, and, of course, relational and interconnected cultural practices.

From their stories, it is clear that women who attended the sessions recognized that they are part of a larger system with internalized roles and defined responsibilities that contribute to the well-being of the larger group. As noted above, most women were concerned about being a good role model as they knew intuitively that a change in the behavioural state of one person within a community affects all others. Everything that women did to break through their violent experiences and how they did it was because of the ways they positioned themselves in relationship to their histories, families, and communities. Every story they told through their art always included relationships: they talked about their parents, partners, friends, children, people who have gone on before them, spirits, land, rivers, and trees. Not one story was focus solely on the "I": the "I" was always an *I-in-relation*. They even introduced themselves to us through the relationships they had and consequent obligations they respected - "I'm not just 'Emily' – I'm Emily, a mom. Emily, a teacher" - meant "I have relationships with my children and my obligation is to show them how to live a good life". They did not build their strength and resilience just for themselves as individuals, but did so in relation to the practices, people and communities that make up their lives. "Gathering strengths", "making a better day" are all collective actions and relational undertakings, always shared as they happen and in *the now*.

As we came to understand Indigenous women's resilience as the emergence of complex, relational and nonlinear patterns, we started talking to people, many people including storytellers, Elders, healers, and knowledge and tradition holders, explaining to them what we had seen, heard, and felt as we thought through the particular ways in which Indigenous women experience and exhibit resilience.

In turn, those knowledge holders told us something very important and when they did, we knew that we came a full circle, back to something that Indigenous people have always known: which is *Okwiinowag*, an Ojibway word meaning "they band together in a group, they travel in a flock". *Okwiinowag* very clearly expresses what Indigenous women's stories in this study say about women's resilience and responses to trauma and violent experiences: these responses occur when women are together, in a collective, and they transform into shifting, moving response patterns in relation to all other people, objects, and practices in that group.

It is out of the scope of this report to discuss the matters of individualism versus communalism in Indigenous cultures, and it is very well covered elsewhere[3]. Instead our task is to understand how relationality, or banding together as a group, which – according to the findings of this study - seem implicit in women's responses to trauma and violence, fosters Indigenous women's resilience. The moments of shared murmurings, or what we would call now *okwiinowag*, for women were the moments of shared experiences and shared actions. Just as the patterns that a murmuration of starlings makes will shift in response to the behaviour or actions of any one individual starling, we saw shifts in Indigenous women's actions and behaviour in response to the social patterns that emerged in research sessions. This occurred in the moments when women were making art and talking about it. Women would group around certain themes and certain experiences, with one starting the narrative and with others instantly joining her in telling a bigger collective story, in which individual experiences were talked about as shared ones, with unexpected strength and energy. Then, and suddenly, they would move to another theme, with individuals in the flock configured differently but with equally powerful collective force. No woman was ever left alone in the sessions, as other women would gather to protect their flock and to respond to each other, knowing, sensing, and feeling that their resilience really lies in relationships that they have. *Okwiinowag,* they band together in a group; they travel in a flock.

So what about resilience, we asked ourselves as we sought to describe how *okwiinowag* relates and, perhaps, generates resilience? This whole project is about discovering what makes Indigenous women resilient and helps them to endure and thrive despite traumatic experiences. Does resilience come from *okwiinowag*, from a sense of belonging, from being part of a larger system? Yes, in a sense, but it is just a part of the overall story of Indigenous women's resilience. Throughout the discussions and analysis, we realized that we were concentrating on nouns: things that women referred to, groups into which they organized themselves, and communities to which they belonged. Too focused on the outcomes of scientific inquiry and academic research, the team wanted to see products, factors, outcomes, in short, we wanted to see and know about *things*. And so, yet again, we went back to the women's stories and back to Elders and knowledge holders to dig even deeper for what we might have missed.

RESILIENCE IS NOT A NOUN

The dominant themes in women's stories, as we read and re-read them, were actions and movements, not things and not even outcomes. Women talked about relationships, but a relationship is not a thing. A relationship is all about what people do in relation to each other, their families, communities, cultures, and histories. Emily is not a thing called "mother", Emily *is* (a verb) only a mother insofar as she has a relationship

3 See Rice, 2005; Madjidi & Restoule, 2003; Colorado 1989; Ermire, 1995. Hart, 2010; Castellano, 2000; Hallowell, 1975; Littlebear, 2000.

with her child. Emily, and all Indigenous women who shared their stories in this study, always only exist in relation to other people, things and histories; a relationship is also, always, an action because it requires a response to the behaviour with whom one has a relationship. That is, a relationship always requires one to *relate* (a verb), to do something in response to another's actions. It is clear that Indigenous women's stories, once we listened closely to the words they were using, always described a set of relationships to themselves, to others, to cultural objects, and to the land and the stories were full of actions and verbs. And, insofar as Indigenous women are always relating and acting, there is resilience. That is, the stories indicated movements, actions and responses including women trying again, doing new things and experimenting, but only in relationships.

Thus, resilience is not a noun, it is not a thing that can be possessed, and it is not about factors and outcomes. Instead *resilience is always in the doing*. Resilience is demonstrated and cultivated by action; it is responding, relating and sometimes experimenting. *Okwiinowag* is not a noun and is not about mere things. *Okwiinowag* is about Indigenous women banding together, and moving in a flock. Thus, Indigenous women's responses to violence and trauma are about moving and acting together. This realization came upon us very and this only came to us when we were together in a group, thinking and talking in-relation-to-each-other. As we sat and watched the video of the murmuration of starlings, we described what we saw and began to connect it to the stories we were hearing. "It's like seeing the relationships between the women on screen", another would say; "all the birds have to communicate with each other", another of us would reply. And so this conversation continued until, banding together and moving in a group as women, this fledgling definition of Indigenous women's resilience emerged.

"DOING" CULTURE

Women told us repeatedly, as they gathered around and shared their stories, *okwiinowag,* that they drum, smudge, sing, make moccasins, walk, paint, write, and that all these actions could make them stronger when they do them together. When we listened to women's stories about their culture, this is what they told us, about the actions and relationships with cultural practices. What we heard at first, however, was that culture makes women stronger and so we thought that culture is *the* mega protective factor that fosters Indigenous women's resilience. At first, this made sense to us, especially as we found an ample evidence for this in existing literature and because all strategies, initiatives, programs, frameworks, plans, and policies designed to support Indigenous people are based on this premise. But this assumption was not what Indigenous women were really telling us. What we finally understood, once we really started listening to women and not just to what we thought we knew, was this: culture in itself does not foster Indigenous women's resilience. If culture is just there, it is only just a pretty decoration, a lovely, aesthetically pleasing ornament, a token feather, as some people say, or a piece of art which can be sold and bought in gift shops and exhibited in museums. It only has an effect insofar as it is practiced *as a relationship*.

Culture mattered to women when they were in ceremonies, when they were drumming, smudging, beading or singing; "practicing culture is where I belong" one woman said. "The doing of culture" reminded women of who they were as this very doing fostered their resilience and nourished their self-identity. Culture is a relationship between practice and the person who does it. When women come together to make drums or to drum, culture manifests itself in the activity and this very act of doing culture together makes women stronger, confident, empowered, and resilient. An opportunity to "do culture", or in other words, to practice it, creates a safe space for women to be Indigenous, to master the confidence that comes from a well-internalized cultural identity, and to experience the power that comes from sharing this confident identity with others. Resilience and culture are actions that intersect. That is, they have an intersecting *relationship*.

IN RELATIONS

MOVING FULL CIRCLE

There is no closure to this project, instead the circles and the relationships that we've forged will continue. This study is just one "murmuration" and a weaving together of Indigenous women's stories, and we hope that there will be many more iterations and tellings that create new and emergent patterns. This project was a meaningful experience for all of us, the research participants who became researchers, and the researchers who became research participants. *Okwiinowag* - we all have banded together in a group and travelled in a flock as we shared our stories, heard others, and weaved it together into an emergent description of Indigenous women's resilience.

We initiated this project to identify particular "breakthrough moments", in which Indigenous women leave violent situations or specific events that lead to women changing their lives. We also anticipated identifying how Indigenous women break through already identified barriers that prevent them from leaving violent situations or seeking help, including poverty, lack of education, lack of childcare, difficulty accessing resources, unemployment, racism and other social determinants of health.

We found that breaking through violence does not happen as a specific moment, but is a pattern that shifts and changes shape. Resilience does not occur when risk and protective factors even themselves out – there is no one linear continuum of resilience. Indigenous women's resilience occurs in the patterns of shared experiences. Indigenous women's resilience is always about relationships to others: people, things, cultures, communities, and histories. Indigenous women's resilience is in "the doing", in practicing culture and women's relationships are what make up their resilience.

OFIFC and ONWA will continue to work together and our hope is that the Indigenous women who shared their stories in Fort Frances, Hamilton, Ottawa, Timmins and Thunder Bay, Ontario will continue to maintain or develop relationships with each other; below we offer further recommendations that have emerged from this project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project is the first step in identifying promising practices in assisting Indigenous women heal from domestic violence; there is much work to be done. All of the recommendations that we make are consistent with our understanding of resilience as relational, collective and in the doing. It is our hope that this Indigenous specific notion of resilience will inform new research, policy, and programs for Indigenous women who have experienced violence.

1. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of policy implications that arise from this research project which are consistent with the kinds of recommendations that both OFIFC and ONWA have been making throughout our histories. These implications include: appropriate funding and the length of time required for culture-based programs for women who have experienced violence; recognition that relationships are integral to the success of any programs for these women; and, the creation of spaces for Indigenous women who experience violence to develop the relationships that are necessary for their healing.

Considerable policy capacity will be required by both the OFIFC and ONWA to translate this research into concrete policy recommendations. While both organizations have policy analyst positions that will continue to address ending violence against Indigenous women and girls, Indigenous organizations should receive consistent annualized funding in order to continue this necessary work.

2. STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH

Policies and programs must employ a strengths based approach. This means going beyond a deficit approach, recognizing that Indigenous women are resilient, and recognizing Indigenous women's actions and practices as well as their historic and ongoing contributions to Canadian society. This approach requires developing positive education campaigns about the strengths and resilience of Indigenous women. It also requires looking at what is supportive in women's environments and building upon those programs with evidence-based successes.

3. COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

Further research is needed that is community driven and strengths based, to ensure that Indigenous women are recognized for their inherent strengths and resilience. From this project, we have identified further options for research including land based research, more arts based research, interpersonal relationship development, cultural activities, and importantly, action oriented research. It is recommended that the OFIFC and ONWA be provided with further funded opportunities to work with communities to develop research that is driven by local questions, interests, and needs. This will also give our organizations an opportunity to continue developing and indigenizing our research methods, which, in turn, adds to the body of knowledge about Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

4. RECOGNIZE THE COLLECTIVE

The Indigenous women in this project appreciated the benefits that flowed from the opportunity for relationship development and sharing. Creating programs that allow women to explore and develop opportunities for resilience in a group setting are beneficial; arts based programs, such as the approach employed in this research project, is a good example. The positive response from the participants indicates that arts based programs should be accessible to Indigenous women who have experienced violence as participants described an increased sense of wellbeing, connectedness and strength. *Okwiinowag*, or "moving together in groups" turns out to be a very important finding as it provides evidence that women affected by violence will benefit from group social, psychological, and spiritual supports, instead of just individualized plans of care.

5. CREATING SAFE SPACES

Creating safe spaces is at the centre of the *Breaking Free, Breaking Through* research project; in such spaces, Indigenous women were able to share their voices, create their own artistic representations, and demonstrate their resilience. Without safe spaces, Indigenous women cannot get together to share their experiences and discover that they are not alone. Safe spaces also create opportunities for Indigenous women to learn or do the cultural practices that contribute to the creation of a strong and positive Indigenous self-identity.

A safe space is needed to experiment with positive identity creation. A safe space also means a physical place that is free from violence of any kind. It is for this reason that Indigenous controlled infrastructure is so important, to create the safe spaces that allow Indigenous women to partake in their own resilience to band together, *okwiinowag.* Additionally, safe spaces need to respond to local needs, as identified by the women who will occupy those spaces; Indigenous women must be consulted and asked about their unique local and community needs.

6. CULTURE IS A PRACTICE

Indigenous organizations, such as the OFIFC and ONWA, have continued to understand and point out that, for Indigenous people, healing is impossible without access to one's Indigenous culture. Culture is not just a recreational activity that is nice to have, but is a vital aspect of the kinds of programs and services that only Indigenous organizations can offer. As this project has demonstrated, culture is an ongoing practice that requires both knowledge of those practices and the opportunities to carry them out.

Although this research has found culture to be a practice, current program funding itemizes and quantifies culture as a deliverable and, sometimes, just a series of objects. To recognize the importance of culture *as a practice* to Indigenous people requires that program funding be rethought to acknowledge that culture is not a deliverable, but an going, and shifting, practice that takes place in diverse and specific contexts. In other words, the process is just as important as the outcome.

7. SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

The benefits that Indigenous women expressed as a result of this project were inherent to the relationships that were developed or strengthened through each session. However, relationships take time to develop and sustain. For this reason, program and research development and funding needs to account for the significant time it takes to develop respectful and meaningful relationships. Because these relationships are so important to the success of programming for Indigenous women who have experienced violence, these relationships cannot be imposed, but must be developed by community members themselves as an ongoing aspect of programming and research.

APPENDIX 1

RESEARCH SESSIONS

In five communities across Ontario (Fort Frances, Hamilton, Ottawa, Timmins and Thunder Bay) Indigenous women adapted arts-based methods and shape the research processes to meet their own individual and local needs. Guided by an expressive arts therapist, Indigenous women who experienced violence got together to actively document and share their experiences. Because Indigenous women in Ontario come from a variety of Indigenous nations and cultural backgrounds, the diversity and particularities of each location meant that the expressive arts therapist allowed each community to define which arts therapies were more relevant and which aesthetic practices to spend more time on.

An Indigenous female expressive arts therapist was hired on contract to complete sessions in five communities. Three assistants served as a scribe/observer/participant/assistant. Their role of was to observe and take notes in each session. They photographed the work as it was created, wrote verbatim notes, described the mood of the group, and recorded the responses to individual stories that were shared. They also assisted the expressive arts therapist in preparing the materials and setting up the session. The scribe was present for the entire two-day session and debriefed with the expressive arts therapist after each session.

There were three different research assistants for the project, including a Justice Policy Analyst and an Urban Aboriginal Community Activator (UACA) from the OFIFC, and a Research Assistant from ONWA. The UACA was selected to provide support and to engage front line workers at the local level as prior relationships had been forged, and trust and respect were previously established. It was expected that relationships with front line workers would need to be established as they have greater insight into the community and are better able to promote and recruit participants for the project. ONWA provided numerous local contacts for workers in the various locations to ensure that participants were recruited from several sources.

The art therapy sessions typically had seven components: introductions, socio-metric ice-breaking exercises, creation of a life map, medicine wheel/shield painting, poetry writing, creation of a mask and a large mural canvas. Additionally, where possible, each session was opened and supported by an Elder.

The arts therapist began each session with introductions. The introductions served to create a sense of familiarity between the women and the art therapist. Different ice-breaking activities were also included in the sessions under the direction of the art therapist. The women were situated in a modified circle, to mimic the physical structure of a sharing circle. These activities functioned to further create a safe, sharing environment for women. The relaxed setting helped to create an open atmosphere where women felt comfortable to share their experiences with the group. This foundation of comfort would later be required when the women shared intimate, private and oftentimes painful details of their lives.

The arts therapist then asked the women to complete their first arts based project of the session. The women were given a large sheet of paper and asked to create a life map, or a “healing journey map”, which she described as an illustrated personal time line. This piece would essentially be a visual representation of each woman’s life. The therapist instructed the women to depict pivotal moments in their lives, both positive and negative, which tell their story of what lead them to their current situation. She let the women know this would be the most introspective task of the session, and would require them to look at their past in depth.

Upon completion, participants were then asked to share their creations, or portions of their creations, depending on their comfort level, with the group. They were to highlight and explain the most significant moments in their lives. This activity further allowed the women to get to know each other. By sharing their stories a safe space was created, one where the women could feel at ease interacting with each other in a non-judgmental environment. This exercise served to further humanize the women; the group could see similarities in experience, and in some cases a sense of kinship and acknowledgement of strength was forged.

The next activity was a medicine wheel/shield painting. The direction given to the women was to paint what makes them strong and empowered. Upon completion the women were to present their creations to the group by naming the painting and sharing the significance of the image. The group was then asked to honour each other's paintings with either a vocal or physical gesture. This exercise served to provide group validation and recognition of the women's experience, and to strengthen the support system the women in the program had created amongst each other.

Another activity was poetry writing. The women were instructed to write a poem beginning with the statement "I come from...". This task required the women to reflect on their histories, much like the life map, but in this instance to verbalize their past.

The final activity was for the women to make a mask. The therapist instructed the women to create the mask which is a representation of their empowered selves. While the medicine wheel paintings the women created earlier were a depiction of the outside sources that had an impact on their lives these masks were meant to be a reflection of the internal sources of strength and self-efficacy. Upon completion of the masks the women shared their creations with the group. The masks were animated with an application on an iPad and each participant was invited to record approximately thirty seconds of the "I am" poem with their corresponding mask.

When time permitted, all of the activities were completed, although in some cases the time allocated to each activity was shortened or lengthened, and in some cases omitted in entirety. The arts therapist took direction from the women as to which activities were most helpful to the women when determining which activities to include.

APPENDIX 2

EVALUATION

A written evaluation was completed at the close of each session which the research team later used to assess the success of the project. The participants unanimously described the sessions as a positive, rewarding experience. Not a single participant delivered negative feedback on the process. To acknowledge their participation and contributions a stipend was given to the women to use as they deemed appropriate.

When asked to describe how the process impacted them, women responded in a variety of positive ways. Some reported it helped them relate to themselves more, and assisted in continuing on their healing journies.

> First it was hard to identify the roots of my being, but now I'm on a journey to discovery about self. It's up to me to express my desire.
>
> At the beginning I didn't know if I could be creative, but with love anything is possible as long as we are out looking for truth.
>
> It opened up my mind to help me see my real path that I call my "Red Road".

The women reported that this method helped them to discover truths about themselves, which allowed them to develop healing strategies. Additionally, the women said that this method provided a new way to communicate, and allowed them to overcome their fears associated with sharing these painful truths. They were only able to do this because they felt that the space created was safe and supportive.

Most women had never participated in an arts based project before, and were pleased with the project's ability to help them to express themselves, give voice to their experiences and empower them to speak.

> It was the first time I was able to speak and able to be heard. I discovered how to feel with my heart and soul. I was always afraid to express myself around people. I found I was able to express those deep feelings that are sometimes hard to talk about
>
> I'm surprised that art can help bring out emotions. My feelings came.
>
> This is an excellent way for the feelings to come out, and it's great to be able to share it with others.

One woman, when asked what she would take away from the experience poignantly responded, "My voice!". Additionally women identified the many lessons and insights they gained through the process, including an increase in self-esteem, self-efficacy and sense of belonging:

> A better tomorrow.
>
> I feel stronger.
>
> I feel my strength as a woman.
>
> I learned to focus on my strengths rather than worrying about my weaknesses. This is only the beginning.

Some reported that the experience helped them to feel an increased sense of community, and bond with fellow women.

> Sharing with others and hearing the stories from the participants is instrumental in some of the things that I know I have to work at in my personal life. The knowledge that I have gained in the past two days will help me for the rest of my life.I know that I am not alone in this, that there are a lot of women who are still struggling, but one day I will overcome the hurt and the pain. I will always remember this experience.
>
> I will take away the healing that was shared.
>
> I am not alone. There are so many others out there struggling just like me.
>
> It was an awakening of knowledge for all to see where they were, what they have overcome, and how they are all truly strong women – Aboriginal women. The acknowledgement of that pivotal point is moving us forward.

Through women's evaluations, we understood that we were successful in creating safe and non-judgmental spaces where women could share both their experiences of violence and their resilience in responding to that violence. The evaluations indicate that Indigenous women responded positively to the opportunity to share their stories and hear those of other women in their communities. Both creating community and claiming one's voice can be viewed as methods to combat the gendered and racialized violence that Indigenous women and girls too frequently experience. In the face of colonial processes that have attempted to censure the lives and experiences of Indigenous women, Indigenous women defining for themselves their own experiences provides opportunity to counter dominant western discourses. Indigenized research processes that allow Indigenous women to share their stories become a form of resistance against colonial narratives; and, we hope, a form of resistance against ongoing colonial violence.

To facilitate these relationships, we have created a closed website and online community where participants can collectively draw on their strengths. Rather than replicate the existing networks of the internet, the website will be designed as a virtual sharing circle convened by an Elder. By creating an inclusive and reciprocal sharing circle rather than an impersonal and amorphous network, we hope that participants of the website will be encouraged to share their resilience rather than leave anonymous comments or experience the exclusion so common on traditional social networks. Our website experiment is just one example of possible ways to foster the resilience that emerges from Indigenous women's relationships and actions.

WORKS CITED

Aboriginal Family Healing Joint Steering Committee. (1993). For Generations to Come: The Time is Now. A Strategy for Aboriginal Family Healing. Toronto, Ontario.

Aldridge, D. (2009). Therapeutic Narrative Analysis: A Methodological Proposal for the Interpretation of Musical Traces. Knowing Differently: Arts-Based and Collaborative Research Methods. edited by Liamputton & Rumbold. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 205-227.

Archibald, L. & Dewar, J. (2010). Creative Arts, Culture & Healing: Building an Evidence Base. Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health. 8(3), 1-25.

Bagley, C. (2008).Educational ethnography as performance art: Towards a sensuous feeling and knowing. Qualitative Research, 8(1), 53-72.

Barber, K. (2008). Indigenous rights or racial privileges? The rhetoric of 'race' in New Zealand politics. The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology. 9(2), 141-156.

Bopp, J., et al. (1984). The Sacred Tree. Alberta: The Four Worlds Development Project.

Brennan, S. (2011). Violent Victimization of Aboriginal Women in the Canadian provinces, 2009. Juristat. Ottawa, Ontario.

Burack J., Blinder A., Flores H., Fitch T. (2007). Constructions and deconstructions of risk, resilience and wellbeing: a model for understanding the development of Aboriginal adolescents. Australian Psychiatry. 15(1), 18-23.

Cahnamann-Taylor, M. & Siegesmund, R. (Eds.) (2008). Arts-based research in education. Foundations for practice. New York: Routledge.

Cancienne, M.B. & Bagley, C. (2008). Dance as Method: The process and Product of movement in educational research. Knowing Differently: Arts-Based and Collaborative Research Methods. edited by Liamputton, P. & Rumbold, J. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 168-186.

Castellano, M. B. (2000). Updating Aboriginal traditions of knowledge. Indigenous knowledges in global context. edited by Hall, B. L., Dei, G. J. S., & Rosenberg, D. G. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Cavagna, A., et al. (2010). Scale-free correlations in starling flocks. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 107(26), 11865-11870.

Colorado, P. (1989). Bridging Native and Western Science. Convergence. 21(2-3), 49-63.

Cross, T. (1998). Understanding family resiliency form a relational world view. Resiliency in Native American and immigrant families. edited by H.I. McCubbin, H.I., Thompson, E.A., Thompson, A.I., & Fromer J.E. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.

Daykin, N. (2009). Knowing Through Music: Implications for Research. Knowing Differently: Arts-based and Collaborative Research Methods. Nova Publishers. 229-243.

Dion Stout, M. & Kipling, G. (2003). Aboriginal People, Resilience and the Residential School Legacy. Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Ottawa.

Ermine, W (1995). Aboriginal Epistimology. First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds. edited by Battiste M., & Barman, J. Vancouver: UBC Press, 101-123.

Farley, M., Lynne J., & Cotton, A.J. (2005). Prostitution in Vancouver: Violence and the colonization of First Nations Women. Transcultural Psychiatry. 4(2), 242-271.

Ferrara, N. (2004). Healing through art: Ritualized Space and Cree Identity. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Flemming, J. & Ledogan, R. (2010). Resilience, an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research. Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health. 6(2), 7-23.

Frith, H. & Harcourt, D. (2007). Using photographs to capture women's experience of chemotherapy: reflecting on the method. Qualitative Health Research. 17(10), 1340-1350.

Furman, R. (2011). Poetry and narrative as qualitative data: Explorations into Existential theory. Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology. 7(1), 1-9.

Garmezy, N. (1971). Vulnerability research and the issue of primary prevention. American Journal of orthopsychiatry. 41(1), 101-116

Goin, L. & Mill, J.E. (2013). Resilience: a Health Promoting Strategy for Aboriginal Women Following Suicide. Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health. 11(3), 485-499.

Graham, B.L. (2001). Resilience Among Indian Youth: First Nations Youth Resilience Study. PhD Dissertation. University of Minnesota.

Grandbois, D.M., & Sanders, G.F. (2009). The Resilience of Native American Elders. Issues in mental health and nursing. 30(9), 569-580.

Grotberg, E.H. (2003). Resilience for Today: Gaining Strength from Adversity. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Guillemin, M. (2004). Understanding illness: Using drawings as a research method. Qualitative Health Research. 14(2), 272-289.

Guillemin M., & Westall, C. (2009). Gaining insight into women's knowing of postnatal depression using drawing,. Knowing Differently: Arts-Based and Collaborative Research Methods. edited by Liamputton P., & Rumbold, J. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 121-139

Hallowell, A. I. (1975). Ojibwa ontology, behavior, and world viewTeaching from the American earth: Indian religion and philosophy. edited by Tedlock, D. & Tedlock, B. New York: Liveright, 141-178.

Hanevik, H., et al. (2013). Expressive art therapy for psychosis: a multiple case study. The Arts in Psychotherapy. 40(3), 312-231.

Hart, M.A. (2010). Indigenous Worlviews, Knowledge and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm. Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work. 1(1), 1-16.

Hass-Cohen N., & Carr, R. (2008). Art therapy and clinical neuroscience. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Herring, R. (1997). The creative arts: An avenue to wellness. Journal of Humanistic Education & Development. 36(2), 105-112.

Hunter, A.J. (1999). Adolescent resilience. Journal of Nursing Scholarship. 31(3), 243-247.

Kaplan, H.B. (1999). Toward an Understanding of resilience. A Critical Review of Definitions and Models. Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adapations. edited by Glantz M.D, & Johnson, J. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 17-83.

Kickett, M. (2011). Examination of how a culturally-appropriate definition of resilience affects the physical and mental health of Aboriginal people. PhD Thesis. University of Western Australia.

Kim-Cohen, J. (2007). Resilience and Developmental Psychopathology. Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America. 16(2), 271-283.

Kirmayer, L., et al. (2001). Rethinking Resilience From Indigenous Perspectives. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. 56(2), 84-91.

Lalonde, C. (2006). Identity Formation and Cultural Resilience in Aboriginal Communities. Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare. edited by Flynn, R.J., Dudding, P., & Barber, J. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 52-71.

LeBeuf, M.E. (2006). Control or Regulation of Prostitution in Canada- Implications for Police. Research and Evaluation – Community, Contract and Aboriginal Policing Services Directorate. Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Ottawa.

Liebmann, M (ed). (1998). Arts Approaches to Conflict. London: Kingsley Publishing.

Little Bear, L. (2000). Jagged worldviews collide. Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision. edited by Battiste, M. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 77-85.

Luthar, S.S. & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. Development and Psychopathology. 12(4), 857-885.

Madjidi, K. & Resoutle, J. (2003). Comparative Ways of Knowing and Learning. Comparative and International Issues for Teachers. edited by Mundy K. et al. New York: Teachers College Press.

Masten, A.S. (2001). Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development. American Psychologist. 56(3), 227-238.

Masten, A.S. & Coastworth, J.D. (1998). The Development of Competence in Favourable and Unfavourable Environments. American Psychology. 53(2), 205-220.

Masten, A.S. & Wright, M.O. (1998). Cumulative risk and protection models of child maltreatment. Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma. 2(1), 7-30.

Miller, D.B. (1999). Racial socialization and racial identity: Can they promote resiliency for African American Adolescents? Adolescence. 34(135), 493-501.

Newhouse, D. (2006). From Woundedness to Resilience. Journal of Aboriginal Health. 3(1), 2-3.

Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres. (2012). Utility Self-Voicing Access Inter-Relationality: Research Framework. Toronto, Ontario.

Ontario Native Women's Association. (1989). Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change To Aboriginal Family Violence. Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Oxman-Martinez, J., Lacroix, M., & Hanley, J. (2005). Victims of Trafficking in Persons: Perspectives from the Canadian Community Sector. Research Statistics Division. Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada.

Parr, H. (2007). Collaborative film-making as process, method and text in mental health research. Cultural Geographies. 14(1), 114-138.

Parry, A.P. (2005). Native Wisdom in a Quantum World. Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness. No.9, 29-33.

Pearce, M. (2013). An Awkward Silence: Missing and Murdered Vulnerable Women and the Canadian Justice System. Doctoral Thesis. University of Ottawa.

Perreault, S. (2011). Violent Victimization of Aboriginal People in the Canadian Provinces. Juristat, Statistics Canada. Ottawa, Ontario.

Rice, B. (2005). Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes: A four dimensional perspective on human and non-human values, cultures and relationships on Turtle Island. Winnipeg: Aboriginal Issues Press.

Rutter, M. (1999). Resilience concepts and findings: implications for family therapy. Journal of Family Therapy. 21(2), 119-144.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2014). Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview. Ottawa, Ontario.

Scarpino, G. (2007). Resilience and Urban Aboriginal Women. Native Social Work Journal. 6(1), 33-55.

Sebescen, M.R. (2000). Overcoming the odds: Resiliency in First Nations Adults. Master's thesis. University of Manitoba.

Stouthamer-Loeber, M., et al. (1993). The double edge of protective and risk factors for delinquency: Interrelations and developmental patterns. Development and Psychopathology. 5(4), 683-701.

Tafoya, T. (1995). Finding Harmony: : Balancing Traditional Values with Western Science in Therapy. Canadian Journal of Native Education. 22(11). 7-27

Tarter, R.E, & Yanyukov, M. (1999). Revisiting the validity of the construct of resilience. Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptions. edited by Glantz, M.D & Johnson, J.L. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 17-83

Waller, M.A. (2001). Resilience in ecosystem context: Evolution of the concept. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. 71(3), 290–297.

Werner, E. & Smith, R. S. (1992). Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood. New York: Cornell University Press.

Wright, M. (1998). Resilience. Behavioral Medicine and Women: A Comprehensive Handbook. edited by Cableman, E. & Brownell, K. London: Guilford, 156-161.

Wexler, L., et al. (2014). Lived challenges and getting through them: Alaska Native youth narratives as a way to understand resilience. Health Promotion Practice. 15(1), 10-17.

Yates, T.M, Egeland, B., & Sroufe, LA. (2003). Rethinking Resilience: A Developmental Process Perspective. Resilience and Vulnerability: Adaptation in the Context of Childhood Adversities. edited by Luthar, S.S. New York: Cambridge University Press, 243-266.