INTEGRATING MODIFIED TALKING CIRCLES TO CREATE CULTURALLY RELEVANT FRAMEWORKS

By

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Abstract

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The traditional Native American Talking Circle evolved from Indigenous people throughout many tribal regions and is utilized for a variety of reasons, primarily healing one’s mind, body, and spirit. The integrated use of a modified Talking Circle is emerging into many diverse Western systems of education, justice, recovery, counseling, health, and other systems. Many tribal programs are also utilizing Talking Circles to treat the tribal people in many areas of recovery, mental health, restorative justice, education, health, intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation programs. The purpose of this project was to explore the feasibility of incorporating modified Talking Circles as a method of integrating indigenous ways of knowing into Western and Tribal social, justice, education, and health systems. I drew past personal experience from my participation and telling of a traditional Native American Talking Circle by Autoethnography. I conducted a literature review of published articles describing the use of modified Talking Circles, also called presentation circles, from a variety of settings. Finally, I conducted a participant observation study of a modified Talking Circle that was organized in a local tribal community. The outcome of this research project provided insight and support for the Integrated Talking Circle within Tribal and Western systems.
Acknowledgements

I humbly acknowledge our Indigenous ancestors’ resistance and anticipate those whom will come after inherit freedom of mind, body, and spirit. I embrace all the people who led me to this intersect of my destiny. I thank Avis Archambault for her important work in the revitalization of her tribal Talking Circle and for sharing an integrated approach to other native and non-native professionals.
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Introduction

Description

A traditional Native American Talking Circle developed from Indigenous people throughout many tribal regions and was utilized for a variety of reasons, primarily healing one’s mind, body, and spirit. It was a way for the elders to pass on the stories, songs, and culture to the young as a way to keep the living culture alive through oral tradition. The integrated use of a modified Talking Circle is emerging into many diverse Western systems of education, justice, recovery, counseling, health, and other systems. Many Tribal programs are also utilizing Talking Circles as an integrated approach to treat tribal people in many areas of recovery, mental health, restorative justice, education, health, intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation programs. This form of group communication and facilitation is best described as a safe place for sharing, learning, observing, and listening, in a supportive environment. All individuals are attending for the same purpose to receive healing and support.

Community Context

I explored the feasibility of incorporating modified Talking Circles as a method of integrating indigenous ways of knowing into Western and Tribal social, justice, education, and health systems. I drew past personal experience from my participation and telling of a traditional Native American Talking Circle by autoethnography. I conducted a
literature review of published articles describing the use of modified Talking Circles, also
called presentation circles, from a variety of settings. Finally, I conducted a participant
observation study of a modified Talking Circle that was organized in a local tribal
community. The autoethnography and participant observational study was a way to
compare experience and draw diversities between a traditional and modified Talking
Circle. I included in the literature review qualitative studies that were conducted by
Western and Tribal systems as a method of measurement of program and client success
rates with utilization of the modified Talking Circle. In my discussion and conclusion
sections I emphasis how the community, social work profession, Humboldt State
University (HSU), HSU School of Social Work, HSU Tribal Departments, Western
systems, and other Tribal systems may want to consider the integrated approaches of
Talking Circles into their systems.

**Traditional Talking Circles vs Presentation Talking Circles**

As defined by Avis Archambault (1987), a Native American Talking Circle is a
traditional ceremony and ritual conducted by a Native American healer or significant
cultural leader. The origins of the Talking Circle lie in the oral tradition of many tribal
groups that passed on traditional stories, songs, and philosophies from the elders to the
young through these healing circles. Archambault explained, “A Talking Circle is simply
a group of people and a spiritual or community leader who “runs” the circle,”
(Archambault, 1987). As a participant of the circle everyone comes together in a caring
and supportive environment where an individual is allowed to speak without interruptions
and judgement. This circle helps to develop the Indigenous people’s strong sense of belonging and cultural identity. The Talking Circle fulfills three main needs for Indigenous people which acts as extended family; offers a conduit for passing on traditional knowledge; and it provides some degree of healing of the body, mind, and spirit, (Archambault, 1987). More on Talking Circle procedures will be explained later in this text.

The terms presentation circle and modified Talking Circle are used interchangeably. A presentation circle is basically a Talking Circle that has been modified to address a specific topic. The group facilitator can be a tribal leader or community member invited in to speak to the groups’ topic. As an example, this form of a modified Talking Circle was offered by Archambault for families to provide support in addressing areas such as Self and Cultural Identity; Family Dynamics; Child Development; Traditional Parenting in the Modern World; Decision Making and Problem Solving; The Family Circle: Interpersonal Relationships; and Native Healing, (Archambault, 1987).

According to Archambault (1987) the Talking Circle has much potential for psychological therapy and spiritual healing for both Native and Non-Natives. Use of this ceremony has also gained legitimacy in mental health arenas, (Archambault, 1987). The Talking Circle is based on the Indigenous belief of the right time; the right place; and the right people hearing the right things. Archambault (1987) states, “The Talking Circle has all the elements of good therapy.”
As Native American people partake in the Western systems of health, education, social service, and justice the integrated use of a Talking Circle is emerging as a culturally diverse way to include this type of intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation model, (Archambault, 1987).

**Personal Context**

My interest is the potential psychological therapy and spiritual healing properties that bring groups of people together who want to share, learn, listen, and heal together in a safe environment. To enhance my experience with a modified Talking Circle, I conducted a participant observation study that was facilitated by a Native American professional who works in a tribal agency. I included in my research project other literature reviewed resources to support the concept to create culturally relevant frameworks and uses of a facilitated, modified, and integrated Talking Circle. My intention was to bring awareness to this body of work of Indigenous knowing integrated into Western and Tribal systems of care, education, health, justice, and safety. It was my intention to provide a method of decolonization of Western research methodology to this body of work. I referenced the work of Avis Archambault who reclaimed her traditional use of the Talking Circle. I incorporated an example of what inspired me to want to use a modified Talking Circle as a professional social worker. However, it was not my intent to convince or persuade the reader about the benefits and potential healing properties of a modified Talking Circle, but rather to explore my personal view on whether I believe there is a place for them in Western and Tribal systems. I explored whether I could be
convinced that a modified Talking Circle can be utilized as an effective intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation model for both Native and non-Natives. I provided an autoethnography definition as it relates to my past participation in a traditional Native American Talking Circle ceremony that had been facilitated by Avis Archambault. It was Archambault’s work that has influenced and inspired this research project.

What sparked the motivation behind this body of work was having witnessed the state of affairs between Humboldt State University (HSU) and Native American students; Native American on campus programs; and surrounding tribal communities during the termination of the Indian Natural Resources Science and Engineering Program (INRSEP) Director. I was left feeling that I needed to do something for the Indigenous students to support them in their feelings of grief and loss. This situation had prompted my question, “Does a modified Talking Circle have a place in a Western academic institution such as HSU and can it support Native and Non-Native students?”

Models for Decolonization

According to Chilisa (2012), “The integration of knowledge systems and indigenization is an approach to decolonization of research” (p. 24). Chilisa (2012) states, “No society can develop by inventing everything on its own. When something is found effective and useful, it is desirable that it should be adapted and assimilated, whether it be an artifact or an attitude of mind,” (p. 24). Chilisa (2012) further states, “postcolonial indigenous research techniques include a process of decolonizing the conventional interview technique, using indigenous interview methods such as Talking Circles and
invoking indigenous knowledge to inform alternative research methods compatible with the worldviews of the colonized other,” (p. 24). This body of literature supports the integration and use of a Talking Circle in knowledge systems as a way to decolonize Western research methods and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing with diverse world views.

**Academic Imperialism**

Chilisa (2012) defines academic imperialism as, “the unjustified and counterproductive tendency in intellectual and scholarly circles to denigrate, dismiss, and attempt to quash alternative theories, perspectives, and methodologies” (p. 55). Further, Chilisa (2012) includes, “academic imperialism dominates over who can know, who can create knowledge, and whose knowledge can be bought” (p. 54-55). The integrated use of a Talking Circle in an academic setting has the potential to include Indigenous knowing within Western models of education systems as a way to decolonize and counter academic imperialism.

**Culturally Relevant Framework**

Yellow Bird, (2014) defines decolonization as, “the restoration of cultural practice, thinking, beliefs, and values that were taken away or abandoned (during the colonization period) but are relevant and/or necessary for survival and wellbeing. It is the birth and use of new ideas, thinking, technologies, and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples.” Further, the modified Talking
Circle could lend to this body of work a culturally relevant method of integrating culture with education for the Indigenous student.
Literature Review

I begin by going to one of the sources and pioneers who revitalized the Talking Circle and bridged it over into mainstream. Accompanied by some background history, I will include the community of practice by showing how the Talking Circle has been integrated and is being utilized today by many Western social and justice systems. I will conclude my summary of the research and literary findings and discuss best practices.

Talking Circles as Defined by Avis Archambault

Almost thirty years ago, this groundbreaking and innovative form of group therapy and support by way of Indigenous sharing re-evolved. The Phoenix Gazette newspaper article written by (Smita Madan Paul, n.d.) captured Talking Circle details in an interview with Avis Archambault, MA, Lakota/Gross Ventre Indigenous woman and traditional Native healer. In the article, Ms. Archambault received her calling by way of a vision quest. She received the songs and prayers to this ancient healing ritual of her people that had been lost and nearly forgotten, (Archambault, 1996).

The Talking Circle’s revitalization and origins are explained by Avis Archambault’s “vision quest” ceremony. She received the gift of reviving the Talking Circle ceremony which was a traditional ritual that had been lost to her tribe. A vision quest ceremony lasts for four days and four nights. She prayed and fasted without food and water at a carefully selected sacred tribal site. Ms. Archambault was looking for
answers in her life which a vision quest can fulfill by receiving a spiritual vision, (Archambault, 1996).

As explained by Archambault (1996), there are no limits to the size of a Talking Circle and nobody is turned away regardless of where they are from or their background. The Talking Circle’s beauty and strength comes from the participants respect and acceptance of one another. People are not separated. They sit together as family. The Talking Circle can teach participants how to cope with life’s everyday problems and that there is a natural way to find balance within the chaos. Archambault’s experience with what draws people to want to participate in a Talking Circle is that every person receives attention and can participate. The Talking Circle procedures as explained by Archambault, the leader opens the circle by passing sweetgrass, cedar, or sage for participants to smudge themselves as a purification. The leader next recites a prayer and may ask participants to shake hands to acknowledge one another. The Talking Circle leader then begins by talking to the group without interruption. Regardless of age, all participants sit in a circle and each has an opportunity to express themselves. A sacred object is shared to signify the person holding the object is the only one speaking while all other participants are listening. The sacred object can be an eagle feather or stone. Participants can be in the circle as a listener and can pass if they don’t want to talk. Each participant is shown respect and after everyone has had an opportunity to share the circle is then closed with a prayer, (Archambault, 1996). The cultural and spiritual base of the Talking Circle is considered more effective with Native Americans than any other form of group therapy, (Archambault, 1996).
Western Integration of Talking Circles

Archambault added that the Talking Circle ritual had been revitalized by other tribes and its potential for psychological therapy and spiritual healing has led to the use by non-Indians to include stressed burdened executives in her circles, (Archambault, 1996). Psychiatrist Dr. Carl Hammerschlag presented a paper incorporating the Talking Circle with mental health practice to the Arizona Group Psychotherapy Association. Hammerschlag was trained and facilitates Talking Circles in his practice, (Archambault, 1996). Hammerschlag is quoted, “Sacraments and rituals are dramatically underused in the country. We are always looking to science and technology…Real healing comes from your perceptions,” (Archambault, 1996). Dr. Hammerschlag has utilized the Talking Circle with his clients for many years and recommends it to his colleagues as mental health support circles.

Integrated Talking Circles in Education

The Talking Circle is being incorporated into various Western education systems to support college age students. The authors (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003) state, “Talking Circles, as a unique instructional approach, can be used to stimulate multicultural awareness while fostering respect for individual differences and facilitating group cohesion.” The authors give a brief history of the Talking Circle and detailed instructions on how to facilitate a group. They offer Talking Circle process questions; ideas for classroom discussion after the activity; and teaching strategies, (Running Wolf
& Rickard, 2003). The authors explain how the Talking Circle is used today as “a pantraditional healing intervention throughout the country in tribal inpatient and outpatient drug and alcohol centers, group homes, adolescent prevention and intervention programs, prayer circles, tribal and public schools, and college-based English as Second Language programs,” (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003). The authors state that the Talking Circle is appropriate for the classroom setting as a multicultural approach to multicultural awareness. The Talking Circle is seen as an effective tool that fosters respect, models good listening skills, settles disputes, resolves conflicts, and builds self-esteem. The Talking Circle is appropriate for undergraduate or graduate-level students, (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003).

Authors (Baskin, Green, Hendry, Lavallee & Murrin, 2008) conducted a Talking Circle using storytelling as a method to discuss challenges and successes of bringing Indigenous knowledge into an anti-oppressive school of social work. They created a space to give voice to their struggles, successes, and recommendations to the School of Social Work at Ryerson University in Toronto. A group of women shared a talking stick within a circle and listened to each other’s personal stories. The authors included, “the importance of learning about the history of colonization, strengths of Aboriginal world views, and forming alliances with Aboriginal communities for all educators and students,” (Baskin et al., 2008). The authors listed contributions and recommendations as a result of Talking Circles outcomes. As academic warriors, the author’s state “we know that picking up the talking stick and speaking our truth is both our right and our responsibility. We now pass the talking stick to you,” (Baskin et al., 2008).
Integrated Talking Circles in Health Care

Cited work regarding the Talking Circle in health care is by (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014) who compiled a report incorporating the Talking Circles into primary care among Native Americans. According to the study findings, a portion of the surveyed participants reported significant improvement in symptoms and overall quality of life. The authors stated that, “the Talking Circle is a useful tool to use with Native Americans and may be a means to reduce health care costs by providing alternative settings to deal with stress-related and other life problems,” (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). Some of the Talking Circle discussions among this research group explored how alcohol, drugs, and mental health issues affected participants and their families in their home communities. The authors state, “Talking Circles have been used to foster positive psychology and cultural appropriateness for Native Americans with alcohol problems,” (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). Additionally, the authors stated, “Talking Circles have been used to foster awareness of healthy eating and to improve eating practices among Native Americans,” (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014).

The researchers (Haozous, Escheti & Lauderdale, 2010) conducted a qualitative study using the Talking Circle to determine the cultural components necessary for culturally congruent breast health education for Comanche women. As a result of the study, the research team gained insight into barriers to breast health for women in the Comanche Nation. Their findings contributed to enhancements necessary to make breast health education and interventions culturally appropriate, (Hoazous et al., 2010). Their
findings added to the cultural knowledge of nurses for use in the practice area to improve understanding and communication with American Indian patients, (Hoazous et al., 2010). The Talking Circle provided a forum for Comanche women to discuss their health-illness beliefs and discuss barriers to breast cancer screening, (Hoazous et al., 2010). The researchers’ method of the Talking Circle was an exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative study to collect data. The Talking Circle study was, “guided by the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). This method involves a collaborative approach to the research process in which partners equitably contribute and share decision making and ownership,” (Hoazous et al., 2010).

**Integrated Talking Circles in Mental Health**

The author, (Duffie, 1989) incorporates the Talking Circle in a variety of therapeutic settings such as, existential group therapy applied to the Talking Circle; the Talking Circle in support of Alcoholics Anonymous; cooperative learning and the Talking Circle; principles of children’s group therapy applied to the Talking Circle; troubled teenagers and the Talking Circle; and para-analytic group psychotherapies for adolescents applied to the Talking Circle. Duffie uses the Talking Circle as a communication process designed to produce a therapeutic response and a psychological process and not as a spiritual endeavor. Duffie stays close to her Western psychology roots and believes that according to many American psychological models, “healing occurs from bringing what is unconscious, into consciousness,” (Duffie, 1989). Duffie believes self-disclosure and self-examination are some of the catalysts in the principal
features of the Talking Circle. Duffie researched how the Talking Circle is being used by elementary school teachers as part of a new educational strategy called “Cooperative Learning.” This Talking Circle approach is designed to emphasize group education while addressing the special needs of Native American children. Duffie states that this process remains a psychological one and the element of a "higher power" is not acknowledged. The purpose of the Talking Circle in classrooms is to create a safe emotional environment for the children to share their point of view with others, (Duffie, 1989). Because the Native American spiritual and healing aspects have been removed from the Talking Circle, it is conducted more like a presentation circle.

**Integrated Talking Circles in Restorative Justice**

The researchers, (Coates, Umbreit & Vos, 2003) used the Talking Circle as part of an exploratory study for restorative justice. This research team mentioned in the study that peacemaking circles have received a great deal of attention within the international restorative justice movement. The research team stated that, “While peacemaking circles are particularly integrated and used among the many indigenous tribes of North America, developments and use of peacemaking circles in South Saint Paul, Minnesota is the first exploratory study of circles in the US,” (Coates et al., 2003). The authors claim that South Saint Paul initiative represented one of the oldest efforts in the US to adapt circles as a restorative justice approach within the community and schools. The researchers use of peacemaking circles found them to be, “an effective approach to involve community members in the process of holding local offenders accountable for repairing the harm
they caused, to assist crime victims, and to foster a greater sense of connectedness among all those affected by crime within the community,” (Coates et al., 2003). The research team found that, “Over 40% of the circle participants indicated that having offenders take responsibility and being held accountable for their actions was one of the most important results of the circle process,” (Coates et al., 2003). The research team stated, “We do not want to understate or overstate the spiritual nature of circles as practiced in South Saint Paul. There is no doubt that the circle keepers saw their work as being at least in part spiritual. That orientation would have been part of their training since many of the keepers were trained by Native Americans for whom the circle is regarded as sacred and spiritual,” (Coates et al., 2003). The research team concluded that, “Circles could play an important role in the justice process at any point along the continuum from prevention to diversion, disposition, or aftercare,” (Coates et al., 2003).

Based on Yellow Bird’s definition of decolonization, a Native American Talking Circle can be used to address restored cultural practice as a way to cultivate new ideas, thinking, technologies, and lifestyles in higher learning institutions and other Western systems as well as Tribal systems.

All of the literature compliments the use and implementation of Talking Circle applications. Following Avis Archambault’s body of work, all other literature builds upon the existing work of Talking Circle integration and practical uses. The only contrast would be when choosing the method of group facilitation and use of the Talking Circle in a therapeutic, education, recovery, or spiritual experience. A traditional Native American Talking Circle can be used to heal a person or group and involves use of prayer,
traditional medicine, and song. A traditional Talking Circle is typically facilitated by a respected spiritual leader from the tribal community. A Presentation Circle excludes the use of Native American medicine, prayer, and spiritual leader. A Presentation Circle incorporates Indigenous elements of the borrowed Talking Circle and has selected discussion topics, trained facilitator, and infuses cooperative sharing and listening.

Figure 1. Talking Circle with Altar

Figure 2. Talking Circle without Altar
Methodology

This body of research methodology used a postcolonial Indigenous research paradigm, epistemology, ontology, axiology, autoethnography, and participant observation study to test the feasibility of integrating a modified Talking Circle into mainstream and tribal social systems.

Postcolonial Indigenous Research Paradigm

Postcolonial Indigenous Research Paradigm informs this research by integrating Indigenous knowing with elements of Western methodology. Chilisa (2012) describes a Postcolonial Indigenous Research Paradigm as, “a framework of belief systems that emanate from the lived experiences, values, and history of those belittled and marginalized by Euro-Western research paradigms” (p. 19). My postcolonial Indigenous research approach included a relational epistemology research paradigm. Chilisa (2012) states that “a relational existence is recognized that promotes relations among people, the living and the non-living, the environment/land, and the cosmos” (p. 122). Chilisa (2012) further states that, “a postcolonial Indigenous research paradigm is thus informed by relational ontologies, relational epistemologies, and relational axiology” (p. 20). According to Chilisa, this integrative approach is one of the four Indigenous research dimensions (p. 13).

Applying a postcolonial Indigenous research approach enhanced my research by incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems. This research included oral traditions,
language, culture, environment, song, spirituality, history, and collective sharing within
tribal communities. In my research approach, I participated in a Talking Circle as a
participant observer and wrote about the experience. This integrated approach affects my
research by further validating the content and materials utilized with incorporated
Indigenous knowledge systems. This approach breaks down barriers and promotes
respectful inclusion of tribal knowing.

**Epistemology**

According to Wilson (2008), relational and Indigenous epistemology includes
entire systems of knowledge and relationships, (p. 74). My observation of a Talking
Circle allowed each participant to share their truth, history, personal experience, and
tribal knowledge systems. Each participant’s Indigenous world views, relations to
environment, relations to cosmos, and other Indigenous knowing through storytelling are
acknowledged. Additionally, Tribal elders are necessary for their life experience in
relation to environment, tribal community, family, and other interpersonal relationships.
Their knowledge and connectedness to environment, cosmos, spirits, and all other living
things is balanced with wisdom.

**Ontology**

Chilisa (2012), also validates researcher Shawn Wilson’s definition of relational
ontology which, “emphasizes relations with people, the environment/land, the cosmos,
and ideas,” (p. 113). I, as part of the research team, became a part of the “circles of
"relations" that connected to each other and which I too was accountable to each participant and overall community, (p. 113). In the local tribal communities, there was no separation between individual and environment. I am accountable to sustain and maintain sacred ties to the land and significant sacred sites. All aspects of my research project include being environmentally conscious and mindful of balance between all living things. Maintaining balance between the cosmos includes incorporation of Indigenous spirituality and sacred space. All things are interrelated and require connectedness to the living, non-living, and sacred objects. It is also an acknowledgement of those that have come before us and those that are to come after us. This research project is intended to create a “ceremony” that will improve the quality of life for the group participants, HSU Social Work staff, other students, and tribal communities. Shared connectedness includes honoring those that have laid the ground-work for like projects; honoring those that are yet to come through the HSU Social Work School; and honoring the local Indigenous community of shared knowledge.

Axiology

As stated by Chilisa (2012), relational axiology includes, “research guided by the principles of accountable responsibility, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation, and rights and regulations,” (p. 117). I have the responsibility to be all inclusive in all aspects of my collaborative approach to the research project. I am accountable to serve with integrity to the tribal communities; Native and non-Native staff and students at HSU; and all research project participants. I am accountable to the
environment, spirit world, and those that came before me and those that will come after me. I am held to the HSU Social Science research policies and guidelines for this project.

**Autoethnography**

An Autoethnography is a social science research approach which strives to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) a personal experience (auto) to give understanding of a cultural experience (ethno), (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). Using an Autoethnography approach to research is challenging the canonical ways of doing research and how others are represented within research. This form of research is considered a politically, socially-just, and socially-conscious method, (Ellis, et al., 2011). This research approach allows the blending of autobiography and ethnography to conduct and write an autoethnography as a method of process and product, (p. 1). It lends contribution to the production of meaningful, accessible, and evocative research that is grounded in personal experience, (p. 2). As the authors stated, “when a researcher includes autoethnography, they are writing retrospectively and selectively about an epiphany rooted from being part of a culture or from cultural identity and analyzing their experiences,” (p. 3). An analyzing method can include comparing and contrasting personal experience to the existing researched literature, (p. 3). The product of autoethnographic work is to produce rich contexts of interpersonal experience that can include engaging storytelling through cultural sharing, (p. 3). This approach is aimed to reach broader and diverse audiences in the hope for personal and social change, (p. 4).
Rita Waffler, PhD in Psychology and a Tribal elder, is a Talking Circle facilitator known in this community. Dr. Waffler had invited me to participate and observe in a Talking Circle that she facilitated. Prior to the beginning of the Talking Circle, I asked Dr. Waffler to introduce me to the group and I let them know about my research project in addition to my role as a fellow participant. I then passed around copies of the consent form and answered any questions. I was clear that if anyone did not consent to participate that I was to exclude their interactions and participation from my observation notes. After I collected the signed consent forms, the Talking Circle began. After the Talking Circle concluded, I shared my appreciation to the group for allowing me to observe. I spent time in reflection in order to organize my observation experience and thoughts. I would not be including any identifying information other than participant and facilitator roles. This helps protect the confidentiality of the participants.

I wrote an autoethnography and self-reflection of my past experience in having fully participated in a traditional Native American healing Talking Circle that was conducted by an Indigenous traditional leader. I synthesized the themes from my participant observation and my auto-ethnography to support my final recommendations and reflections.
Results

I shared a personal account of participating in a traditional Native American Talking Circle. I also included my reflections as a participant observer of a modified Talking Circle that took place within a tribal social service agency.

Autoethnography of Traditional Talking Circle

Here is my story and experience of having participated in a traditional Native American Talking Circle in the early to mid 90’s with Avis Archambault at the American Indian Training Institute’s Drug and Alcohol School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. During that time, I had recently graduated from Junior College with my A.A. degree and from State University with my Chemical Dependency Certification. I was working for a Tribe and doing drug and alcohol prevention with Native American youth. I was attending this conference to enhance my field work knowledge. I cannot say that I remember all the fine details about this experience, but I can say that I had a profound experience that had a lasting impact on me. I remember being excited to be around primarily Native American service providers and was impressed that many of the workshop presenters were Native American experts in their respective fields. I soon learned that taking care of self and learning how to manage stress in order to prevent burnout were highlighted workshops. The workshops emphasized presentations with the healing of healers’ concept which is basically self-care. I sought out Ms. Archambault’s workshop because it seemed fascinating. Little did I know it would become one of the
most enlightening experiences that has guided me in my prevention work. The basic concept of Ms. Archambault’s presentation was to heal ourselves as Native American practitioners from internalized oppression so that we do not turn around an oppress our own people. The concept of healing from genocide, racism, oppression, and internalized oppression was new for me. Ms. Archambault took us through some of her hand-outs on defining genocide, oppression, multi-generational grief and trauma, racism, systematic racism, and internalized oppression. Understanding the terminology and putting definitions to the pain that I carried internally was enlightening. Learning terminology is one thing and healing from the “soul wounds” is an entirely different process. I kept an open mind and chose to participate in Ms. Archambault’s traditional Talking Circle that she had recently brought back into practice as a way to heal her people from internalized oppression and the soul wounds that burdened them. I remember her explaining some of the basic norms which included not leaving until the circle was finished; listening while one person talked without disruption; having the choice to pass; having the choice to share from my heart; and having the right to be listened to by the group. Ms. Archambault was the group facilitator and leader managing the balance of this process. She was firm with her position and gentle in her support for each person.

In the opening of the Talking Circle there was smudging with sacred medicines; an alter was placed in the middle of the circle that had traditional medicine colors of cloths; gifts; and other sacred elements. Every participant sat in a chair in a circle. Ms. Archambault was the first to speak with song, prayer, and opening statements while holding and talking with an eagle feather plume which was to be passed around and held
by each participant. We were instructed to speak from our hearts. I remember having feelings of nervousness as I was trying to be reflective of what I would say as the feather came closer to me. Most people chose to speak and only a few passed.

I distinctly remember feeling like what I had to say mattered and that I was being fully listened to attentively without being interrupted or judged. I don’t exactly remember what it was that I had shared in that circle that day, only that what I had shared was heard. The medicine of this circle was so powerful that I witnessed people sharing traumatic life experiences that cut deep passed the bone and right to their spirits. A few were selected to come into the circle and receive additional medicine and healing. This was so powerful to witness. I witnessed a transformation healing that impacted participants. The medicine was managed with Indigenous knowing and discipline. The balance was kept for people’s mental and emotional safety. This could be challenging considering there may have been up to 60 participants and the circle lasted for some time between three to four hours.

The basic message seemed simple enough that we must heal ourselves first before we try to heal others. We must manage our own stress in order to prevent secondary trauma and burn-out. What I do know is that I personally received a healing. My experience was a light bulb moment. I was informed and armed with knowledge. I was taught patience and active listening. I was more empathetic towards others in challenging and extenuating life circumstances. I was a believer. Ms. Archambault’s work inspired me to strive for self-improvement and to help myself first before attempting to help others. Her work changed my life and approach to working within tribal community. I am
able to recognize those that suffer from internalized oppression and perpetuate hurt on their own people. My job and challenge is to make sure that I am not one of those Indigenous women who oppresses her own.

Avis Archambault was teaching decolonization before it became the preferred term. Her deep spiritual, educational, and healing work established a foundational basis for others to build upon. She was not asking permission to use a decolonized approach to her research methodology. She was enforcing the Indigenous knowing and tribal cultural values systems as entrusted to her by the Spirits that awakened her calling by way of her vision quest. Ms. Archambault was integrating Indigenous knowing by incorporating Western education with Native American culture to heal Native Americans from the soul wounds caused by Western colonization. More impressively, she bridged Indigenous knowing and Talking Circle ceremony into mainstream by teaching Non-Natives the skill to facilitating modified and presentation circles that are being practiced today.

My analogy of Avis Archambault and her life works are best described as her being the embodiment of the mother of the Great Turtle Island carrying on her back all of her Indigenous family. Bringing her people along to health, healing, safety, and protection.

A Modified Talking Circle Observation

This modified Talking Circle took place at a tribal worksite as a staff development training. The time, date, and space were agreed upon by the program director and group facilitator. The group participants were all women who worked in
various levels of the tribal government. The Talking Circle was not a mandatory training. It was originally planned to be a group of 6-8. However the group ended up with 12 participants. There were some participants who had never participated in a Talking Circle and did not know what one was and some of the tribal women did have prior knowledge and experience of having participated a Talking Circle. The women were from at least five different tribes.

On the day of the Talking Circle, the electricity went out several times and the tribal employees were free to go home due to no lights and heat. They all chose to stay and participate. There were many windows which let in the natural light. Tables were moved out of the room and chairs were placed in a circle in the middle of the room. Due to the storm conditions, it was decided that the Talking Circle should start an hour earlier than the scheduled time. Food and drinks were set up on the outside of the Talking Circle space. Normally the participants would eat after the Talking Circle. However due to the weather conditions and early start it was decided that the women would eat first.

After everyone had a chance to get something to eat and drink, the participants took a seat in the circle. The facilitator began by asking me to explain my role as an observer to the group. At this time I handed out my consent forms and explained the process before asking for their signatures. All participants signed the forms. The facilitator explained her role and began explaining what her version of a Talking Circle entailed. The facilitator brought many supplies with her that included traditional Native American prayer medicines gathered from the local region. She set up an alter with a
blanket, abalone shell filled with the medicine, and giveaway gifts centered on the floor in the middle of the circle. Added to this alter was a small plate of food and water.

The facilitator explained the expectations for the group participants and made sure all were in agreement with the expectations. She encouraged people to use the restroom before the Talking Circle was to start. She explained that nobody was to leave once the group was underway. The group would decide if it was acceptable for a participant to leave early for an extenuating circumstance and the group approved. All cell phones were to remain in silent mode. There were to be no disturbances from outside people and the office front door was closely monitored. Confidentiality was expected and agreed upon by all group participants. The facilitator covered the issue of establishing trust and explained to participants their comfort levels in self-disclosure. They were all told that they could choose to pass the talking item if they did not feel like sharing. When one person holding the talking item was speaking all others were to listen without interruption.

The facilitator began the Talking Circle with a traditional story from her tribe and related it to women needing to take care of themselves and not tolerate abuse and violence from a partner. After the facilitator finished telling the story, she passed the talking item to the person to her right and told the participants to talk about what was “on their hearts” and were reminded to share only as far as they felt their personal level of trust from this group. Some women chose to pass and some participants really spoke from their hearts about personal things that were important to them. Some women cried as they shared their stories. There was much laughter from the group as women shared
funny details to their personal stories. As the last person spoke and as the facilitator was getting ready to close the Talking Circle, two other participants that had passed earlier chose to speak. Once they were done sharing, the Talking Circle was closed. The next phase which was discussion or response to some of the things that were heard and shared in the group. This opened up dialogue and sharing with feedback. Once people shared their positive and supportive feedback, the facilitator then passed out the giveaway gifts. The group ended with a prayer as they all stood and held hands in the circle.

The modified Talking Circle lasted three hours. I observed a high level of trust and the facilitator kept a safe and friendly atmosphere. I observed some women expressing high levels of trust and others more reserved yet comfortable in their space. As the group broke up and disassembled, they went back for food and drinks and restroom break. Slowly the women left the building. Statements were being made how much they enjoyed the Talking Circle and appreciated the food and giveaway gifts. Others, in passing, mentioned that they would like to have a second and follow-up Talking Circle.

Based on my observations and the positive response of the Indigenous women participants, it was clear and evident that this Talking Circle was much appreciated and supported in the workplace. I believe I witnessed a more cooperative staff and supportive environment that may carry over into the workplace settings. I would have to agree based on my experience that a modified Talking Circle does indeed have a place in tribal settings for professional development.
Based on my personal experience I was in awe of the effectiveness of the modified Talking Circle. At first I could not put my personal experience into words and had to take some time for reflection. I felt only positive emotions and that I was safe, respected, listened to, and supported. This was a truly amazing and humbling experience. The Indigenous women were very generous with their time, sharing, and support to my observation role. I believe I received a healing which was an experience related to a former place of employment.

To sum up what I got out of the Talking Circle I could only put it in story form titled, Redwood Tree Falling:

Now I know what a redwood tree feels when she is viciously attacked by invaders who do not understand her majestic beauty and power. They start with a vindictive look in their eye which allows for the greed, invasiveness, and false sense of power over her nature. They do not acknowledge her as equal only as subservient to their privilege. They only see money which fuels the hate, greed, and destruction of nature. If they are threatened by her majestic size, wonder, beauty, and nature, they plot to destroy her for their insecure overwhelm…how dare her stand up and stand out! She must be cut down to a size less threatening. They underestimate her strength!

She feels the pain of every cut into her flesh. They are draining her life source and she is saddened by the threat to be cut from her roots to this world. She knows she contributes to the balance of her environment and
she is depended upon for her strength, power, nutrients, and life-giving abilities.

They tear at her flesh like the invasive predator to their prey. She is promised with a threat of ruin in her own forest. They use their leadership position to hide behind to do their vindictive work and abuse their entrusted powers. She sees their twistedness and pities them for their mean-spirited-ness. She recognizes that their families, communities, and society must have done this damage to them as they perpetuate hateful acts onto her and others. She knows this destruction and its capability such as the locust to the farmer’s crop. It is a battle she cannot win alone.

Her redwood spirit knows that they do not have the power to destroy her spirit although they threaten her flesh and livelihood. She is deeply wounded from the cuts that come from many directions and some are even of her own community. They love watching her bleed and feed on their false sense of power.

With her mightiness, grace, dignity, courage, and strength, she falls and lays horizontal. She can only pray, fast, and surround herself with the medicine of her ancestors. She lays on a blanket of cedar bows, pepperwood leaves, angelica root, sage, and sweet grass. She knows this is a battle she cannot win on her own accord and must humbly ask for the warrior medicine of the immortals to fight for her….and they do. On day two of her four day fast…her enemies lose their power over her. She is
protected. She is broken and in need of refuge and respite. She prays for her enemies. She can forgive her enemies; pray for her enemies; send the bad medicine back onto the heads of her enemies; or dispel the negative energy back into the ground. She does a little of each.

Her battle was fought for her by the immortals. The immortals broke the power of her conquerors. The immortals are caring for each of her wounds and healing her beaten, battered, and torn flesh. They are healing the wounds of her spirit…and out of the depth of her flesh she regrows new redwood shoots. She has lived. She has learned. She has prevailed. Her seeds manifest into new seed and she has the power to grow right from her dead trunk. She prevailed!

She stands back up tall, proud, strong, graceful, rooted, and wiser. She sways back and forth taking in each breeze and elements of the winds. She now goes to her coastal redwood family to provide respite to them as they too are re-rooting themselves and sprouting new shoots from the ruins of their deadened trunks. The bark of the redwood tree is resilient!

MO/Feb., 2016

Although I had participated in a modified Talking Circle as a participant observation study and it was conducted as a staff development training within a work setting of a tribal government agency, it still had many tribal contexts incorporated. The Talking Circle was led by an tribal elder, had smudging and purification, had traditional
storytelling, were all Indigenous women, had a giveaway, had food and drink, and a cultural alter with traditional medicine. I had pondered the thought if my experience was broad enough to document value for non-Native individuals or with a non-Native group facilitator. In this reflection, I am suggesting that further exploration be done to incorporate the non-Native experience with a Talking Circle.
Conclusions

The social researchers have given voice and pathway for decolonized approaches to Western research methodologies by way of integration of Indigenous knowing. One recommended approach is use of the Talking Circle. The literature supports the integrated use of the Talking Circle in many Western and Tribal systems as a tool for recovery, restorative justice, education, health, rehabilitation, and other social service settings. My observation of the healing capacity of the Talking Circle supports this method of a decolonized learning and research approach. The use of modern technology has provided a venue to connect many mainstream communities with Indigenous cultural practices.

Before I started the research on the Talking Circle, I believed that the history and knowledge of the Talking Circle was kept in oral tradition. I thought the Talking Circle was to remain solely in the tribal community and kept from Non-Natives. I did not realize that there was so much literature available on the Talking Circle. In my research, I came across a video on YouTube of Florence Foy’s Talking Circle, (youtube.com). Most surprisingly was the cyber Talking Circle that is being offered online through First Nations Pedagogy Online, (www.firstnationspedagogy). I am interested in the effectiveness of a modern day technological approach to the Talking Circle. I was left wondering, “What would the ancestors say about this new approach?

I believe there is a place for the use of a Talking Circle in the Western education systems and higher education curriculums; adult and juvenile justice systems; health care and recovery; mental health; and other health and human service capacities that serve
Native as well as Non-Native clients. The Talking Circle is complementary for use by local tribes in providing intervention and prevention programs for their people in the areas of health, recovery, mental health, education, justice, and other social service settings. The Talking Circle is versatile and can be integrated into Western and Tribal social service programs in many ways.

**Recommendations**

Based on my personal account and experience shared by Autoethnography, modified Talking Circle participant observation, and literature review, I recommend that HSU, local county and state agencies serving Native Americans, and tribal systems explore the feasibility to incorporate the use of a Talking Circle for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation. I recommend that post evaluations be conducted to measure qualitative effectiveness and satisfaction for participants.

The Social Work Department at HSU could be a starting place for measured success and effectiveness for student participation and support.

I recommend a Talking Circle for students of the ITEPP Program and Department Native American Studies (NAS) as a method of retention, support services, and academic success.

I recommend that HSU Social Work department staff allow a student to further this study by conducting future researched projects using a Talking Circle.

I recommend that credit be given to Indigenous people who generously share their Indigenous knowing to be an academic resource.
I recommend that tribes continue to incorporate the use of a Talking Circle within their tribal systems. It has proven beneficial to restorative justice, education, health, recovery, prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs and services.

I recommend that Non-Natives seek out the traditional leaders and tribal community members who have knowledge and experience and are willing to assist them in learning this method of Indigenous knowing and cultural group facilitation practice.

**Future Steps**

I believe that a social science study can be conducted at HSU for the students and staff as a method of supporting cultural integration and Indigenous knowing and measured effectiveness. There are Native American staff and students who could facilitate a Talking Circle for academic, social, health, retention, and integrative supports.

As an Indigenous woman and social work professional, I feel strongly that I have the capacity to utilize a Talking Circle in many relational settings with clients and groups. I am interested in exploring the integrated use of the Talking Circle with both Native and Non-Native facilitators. What would this look like in Non-Native settings? The Talking Circle is a versatile intervention and prevention model that has potential to bring diverse groups together to address common themes.

Can an integrated use of a Talking Circle work at HSU as a multicultural educational knowledge system? Could a study or research project have been done to measure the effectiveness of a modified Talking Circle in support of the students and staff of HSU during the chaos of student uprising in the termination of the INRSEP
Director? LeFrak (2014), reported HSU student protests and organized classroom walkouts by the hundreds. After the Director’s firing, the HSU students held multiple demonstrations, rallies, and class walk-outs that led them to gather in the UC quad on campus to “protest against social injustice,” (LeFrak, 2014). Lefrak captured the sentimental emotions of shock, grief, and anger of many staff, students, and community.

In January, 2015 many students took over the Native American Forum building at HSU as a direct protest for what they considered, “abrupt and unjustified firing of the INRSEP Director,” (“Times Standard,” 2015). According to the Times Standard, the manner in which the Director was fired was a traumatic experience for many students. In the article, there was no warning when the three administrators removed the Director and students from the INRSEP house and changed the locks. The Times Standard stated, “The student protesters organized some of the largest demonstrations seen on campus since the Vietnam War,” (“Times Standard,” 2015). According to the Times Standard, the students made it very clear to the administration that their demands are necessary for the success of Native students. The INRSEP Director’s termination prompted hundreds to protest, with some occupying the university’s Native American Forum for over a month, (Houston, 2015).

The Native American students, Native American staff, Native American communities, and HSU needed a starting place of decolonized communication. It is imperative that Native American people feel listened to; have a restored sense of belonging; have a forum to rebuild trust; have a place to heal from social and justice issues; and have a place at HSU that includes their tribal world views. It seems that while
HSU and the INRSEP Director are in litigation, there could have been something put in place for the students who were dealing with the fall-out. Perhaps an integrated Talking Circle could have been a method of support during this chaotic time.

I have explored the feasibility of recommending the implementation of an integrated Indigenous Talking Circle at HSU. I recommended that a student research the utilizing of a modified Talking Circle to bridge the “perceived” gap between HSU and Indigenous students, Native American programs, and tribal communities.

As an outcome of this project, it is my hope to inspire HSU staff to provide support in areas of Native American student retention; promote healing; restore belonging; promote Indigenous leadership; improve communication; and restore tribal collaborations between tribal communities and HSU.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Talking Circle Observation Consent Form 1

You have been invited to participate in a Humboldt State University (HSU) Master’s in Social Work (MSW) student project. The purpose of this project is to explore the effectiveness of a modified Talking Circle as opposed to a traditional healing Talking Circle. I am here as a participant observer. As I am observing you, I will be only listening to general information related to participation. I will not be writing down anything that may be connected to any one person. Your name will not be published in any way in my final document and anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed. If you do not wish to be observed, I will exclude you from by observation notes.

Signed consent forms will be kept in a sealed envelope by researcher. The sealed envelope will be given to Yvonne Doble. She will keep the forms in a locked file cabinet for up to three years as required by HSU policy.

For additional information please contact the principal investigator, Merris Obie at (707) 496-0417 cell or by email: mdr52@humboldt.edu. You may also contact Yvonne Doble, MSW at Yvonne.doble@humboldt.edu or (707) 826-4447, as the responsible faculty member for this project. For any concerns about the project, you may also contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at HSU at ((707) 826-5165. For any questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the IRB Institutional Official at (707) 826-5169.
I understand that I can ask that my activities not be documented at any time. The observer/investigator will answer any questions I have about the project.

Printed Name: _______________________________________

Signature of Participant: _______________________________ Date:_____________________

I you would like a copy of this form for your records I will be happy to provide you with one. Thank you for your participation.
Appendix B: Talking Circle Instructions

CIRCLE TALKS

In its simplest form a circle talk:

- is done in a complete circle
- only the person holding the stick talks, all the rest listen
- the stick is passed around in a clockwise direction
- a person talks until they are finished, being respectful of time
- the circle talk is complete when everyone has had a chance to speak
- a person may pass the stick without speaking, if they so wish
- if desired, the stick may be passed around again
- what is said in the circle stays in the circle
- a circle is used to discuss issues of importance
- is extremely respectful of everyone as individuals and what they have to say.

ONLINE TALKING CIRCLE

- Follow the diagram of the student circle in a clockwise direction
- Only the person who receives the stick graphic contributes, all the rest read and reflect
- When it is a person’s turn, they may comment on what has been said, as well as share their perspective
- A person writes or talks (if video or audio) until they are finished, being respectful of time
- The circle talk is complete when everyone has had a chance to contribute
- If desired, the stick may be passed around again
- What is shared in the circle stays in the circle
- All communications must be written or spoken with respect
- The circle can be synchronous where all students engage at the same time, or asynchronous where each student engages when it is their turn and at a convenient time.