

KIOKIEREN:TON /INTRODUCTION

This dissertation begins with the *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen*, Words Before all Else. These words are an opening prayer used by my people to start the day, to start meetings, to begin a journey. They acknowledge *Kasatstensera sa'oye:re*, the intelligent benevolent energy that exists in its purest form in all of us and in all life, and has always existed. I use them here to start this dissertation as a journey, a meditation, and a prayer. The *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen* is also an invitation to you the reader to join me on this journey, a journey that is at once intensely personal as well as an academic and professional query.

As such, this dissertation is a personal narrative of my own experience of the loss of family cohesion and a description of a therapeutic approach that can help address the effects of colonization on Indigenous people. In fact, for me these two are bound together by the application of family therapy and my own worldview. In the spirit of my Mohawk ancestors, I seek oneness with others.

As a family therapist, I discovered in my training and in over 30 years of practice that other helping professionals often had little or, in some cases, no awareness of the history of Indigenous peoples, our wholistic, family-centric worldviews, and the impacts of colonization on our families. There was little awareness as to the root causes of the pervasive symptoms of Indigenous clients such as dual diagnosis, addictions, and violence. There was and continues to be a lack of research on the relationship between colonization and the traumatic symptoms presenting in Indigenous families. What I am proposing in this dissertation is a model that addresses these contextual influences.

I am aware that the Indigenous worldview can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for the reader when Western/European views are the norm. For such individualistic approaches it may be foreign and difficult to grasp. This understanding has motivated me to locate a mainstream academic model, that is, social construction that creates a pathway for the reader as it complements the Indigenous worldview.

The relational approaches of systemic family therapy and social construction theory align with the relational focus of Indigenous families. Individualistic Western psychotherapeutic approaches often further pathologize Indigenous families and reinforce colonized views of inferiority. Therapists who rely on individualistic Western approaches to therapy are often unable to help Indigenous

clients access cultural and family strengths, nurturing, and healing practices central within Indigenous traditions. In such cases, little or no change occurs. I realized early in my career as a therapist that in order to serve my people and my Indigenous clients, I needed to develop a therapeutic approach that fits with an Indigenous worldview. I found these kinds of approaches in family therapy practices that are systemic, experiential, focused on intergenerational narratives and include emotion.

My central research question developed over time in my personal life and in my family therapy practice. I had always been aware of Native people and culture as a child even though I lived in a family that presented as Euro-Canadian. I was curious about the silence in my family. As an adult, I had direct contact with urban Native people and with some Indigenous communities. I began addressing the silence in my family of origin and located my Native heritage. As a new family therapist, I lived in a First Nations community as a community member. I became both curious and concerned about the state of the community and developed this question: Can family therapy assist this community to heal?

Some answers arrived when a community member became the first person in Canada to report sexual and physical abuse at the local residential school. He had completed some family therapy healing with me. Other community members followed suit. They attended family therapy with me and shared stories of their abuse in the school. This was the first insight I had about the complexities of these issues when considering possible healing approaches.

Next, I took time to address my own personal wounds and used my knowledge of family therapy, but more often, turned to Elders, Indigenous healers and knowledge keepers to assist me. I was invited to participate in community healing groups and culture based treatment centers. I felt a shift in myself as the Indigenous teachings resonated within me, and I truly felt at home in the world for the first time.

I knew that I now lived with the Indigenous worldview as my foundation. I moved into an urban centre and established a family therapy practice where I offered family therapy from an Indigenous view. An emerging question for me became: Is it possible to successfully intertwine family therapy with Native knowledge and healing practices for the benefit of Indigenous families?

My family therapy practice grew quickly and attracted urban Indigenous people and people from surrounding Nations. Motivation for healing the impacts of residential school and colonization was growing stronger across Canada and I became part of this movement.

As the practice expanded, the horrific events of a childhood in these institutions became public knowledge as did the history of the church and government's implicit administration of them. The people attending my practice now told incredible stories of the impact of residential schools on their lives.

This intensified my practice question so that it now included the impact of colonization at a meta level. I began to note the answers given to me by the amazing and resilient people who shared their lives with me. I grew increasingly aware of my own family's functioning and how it included repeated fostering over several generations as a result of colonization.

I wondered how I could refine and clarify the firsthand information I was receiving. I wanted to organize the raw information from my practice question. I decided to find an academic approach that understood the therapeutic value of narratives and complemented the Indigenous worldview. I did this for two reasons: first for myself because I appreciate linear organization and academic study; second, I hoped that as an academic study, the information would reach a larger professional audience and ultimately benefit a greater number of Indigenous families.

Once I studied social construction and learned of its strong alignment with the Indigenous view, I focussed once again on my central research question: "Is there a therapeutic approach that addresses the horrific effects of colonization and provides a way of healing for Indigenous families?" Several supporting sub-questions to the central question were named that referred to clinical practice and utility.

I further reviewed and refined the information I had before me and realized I **do** believe there is an approach that can offer healing to Indigenous families who have been impacted by colonization and genocide. What I came to realize is that Indigenous knowledge, complemented by social construction, together with systemic family therapy has great potential. I have experienced such a healing approach.

My central question is now: What might be possible by using Indigenous knowledge, complemented by social construction, together with systemic family therapy to heal Indigenous families impacted by colonization and genocide?

The response to this central question will be made by answering three sub-questions:

1. What kinds of knowledge emerged?
2. What culturally sensitive approaches were used?
3. Is this model of healing transferable to other marginalized families?

Indigenous cultures and systemic family therapy are based in relational and narrative practices. I situate myself in this study by sharing my personal story. By doing so, it becomes the embodiment of this form of family therapy practice. My story also demonstrates that even the most horrific events are forgivable. Forgiveness is the means by which Indigenous traditions create oneness and I realized forgiveness on my family therapy Indigenous journey. With forgiveness, with reconciliation, Our Minds May Become One as stated in the Thanksgiving Address.