

Chapter 9

A Critical Review of the Native American Tradition of Circle Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a critical review of circle practices. The author first examines the philosophical underpinnings behind similar practices of restorative justice, circles, circle practices, and talking circles. Then, the author explores the description of protocol and procedures of talking circles in the literature by various others. Thirdly, this literature review examines talking circles used in practice in the literature. This chapter synthesizes and critiques existing literature, as well as video resources and oral tradition. Circle practices are a traditional Native American practice of communication and community which has a strong spiritual core as a means for restorative justice. For some Native American people during talking circles, it is believed the person holding the eagle feather or talisman cannot tell a lie.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the results of a critical review of the scholarship surrounding Native American circle practices. This chapter presents results of the review and discusses the existing literature on talking circles as they relate to Native American people. This critical review first examines the philosophical underpinnings behind the similar practices of restorative justice, circles, circle practices, and talking circles. Second, this review explores the explanation of conducting talking circles. Third, this critical review examines the actual practice of talking circles present in literature. The chapter is organized by topic to explore the decolonizing ideologies of talking circles, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, the topic of indigenous law versus public policy, protocol for talking circles, discussion of the burden basket, the theme of vulnerability in circles, the oral tradition aspect of circle practices, and an in depth review of a seminal talking circle workshop. This chapter discusses the importance of talk-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3729-9.ch009

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ing circles for Native American people, as well as the multicultural use of talking circles. The literature surrounding appropriation is also considered.

This review synthesizes and critiques the scholarship, including journal articles, books, films, and interviews, for oral traditions as a valid form of history and knowledge to the Native American community (Vansina, 1985). The chapter also incorporates knowledge from elders, leaders in my Tribal Nation of the Oneida, and family. Family is incorporated because passing down of information between generations is seen as a valid way of transmitting traditional knowledge, also known as the decolonizing practices of testimony, storytelling, reframing, restoring, remembering, revitalizing, regenerating, discovering the beauty of our knowledge, and sharing. Furthermore, learning about the stories and indigenous values help families restore their sense of stability (Native American Rights Fund, 2016). These decolonizing practices are used intentionally in this literature review through indigenizing processes (Smith, 2012) to claim what is predominantly a Euro-American paradigm when viewing indigenous peoples. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on circle practices and to critique existing literature.

BACKGROUND

As a clarification, the term Native American will be used interchangeably with American Indian, Indian, Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, and native, depending on how researchers in the literature used it. The following are monikers for groups of indigenous people discussed as generally, in academia, the terms Native Americans, American Indian, and Indian refer to people who traditionally, and to this day, occupy North America, referred to as Turtle Island by Native American people (Jervis et al., 2006; Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017; Lyons, 1992). In Canada, First Nations people is the term used to describe their original inhabitants (Quinn, 2007). In Australia, the term for their indigenous inhabitants is Aboriginal people (Atkinson, 2002). In New Zealand, the original inhabitants are referred to as Maori (Pihama et al., 2017).

Although it is not standard practice to include a statement of positionality in a literature review, it is my understanding through academics such as Rupert Ross (1996), it is connected and interrelated. Particularly as it pertains to my critiques of literature, I would be remiss if I did not mention my own ethnic identity as an Oneida researcher. This is important to note because my paradigm as an Oneida indigenous researcher is influenced by (a) my ontology, my view of reality; (b) my epistemology, how I think about this reality; (c) my axiology, my morals and ethics; and (d) my methodology, how I go about gaining more knowledge about reality (Wilson, 2008). Research is also seen as ceremony for some indigenous researchers. Shaun Wilson of the Cree Nation puts it best when he states,

Something that has become apparent to me is that for indigenous people, research is a ceremony. In our cultures an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place. As one Elder explained it to me: if it is possible to get every single person in a room thinking about the exact thing for only two seconds, then a miracle will happen. It is fitting that we view research in the same way- as a means of raising our consciousness. (Wilson, 2008, p. 69)

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