

## Decolonizing Social Work Education Through Indigenous Family-Based Research

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### Abstract

Family-based research is an Indigenous methodology that engages the self, family, and relationships as important sites of resistance and resurgence. Grounded in an Indigenous worldview, family-based research invokes a broad concept of family that recognizes both human and non-human relations. Family-based research is explicitly introspective and emphasizes the power of personal, relational, and small-scale change in supporting the broader movement of Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and transformation. Mainstream social work education does not know how to deal with, assess, or value family-based research. Western academia claims to have “made space” for Indigenous research, yet there remain limits to this acceptance. Social work education continues to privilege Western methodologies. In doing so, social work disciplines Indigenous students into pursuing research that supports Western theories of knowledge production and Western strategies of change. If social work is truly committed to transforming Canada’s colonial reality, then changes to social work curriculum, assessment, and training standards are needed to support diverse understandings and strategies of Indigenous resistance and resurgence, including Indigenous methodologies such as family-based research. To improve student experience, social work education needs to unpack its ongoing role in colonizing Indigenous students through academic gatekeeping.

*Keywords:* education; family; Indigenous; research; resistance; methodology

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*Family-based research* is an Indigenous methodology concerned with the survival of knowledge, remembering, and the transformative power of knowing one’s stories, history, gifts, and responsibilities as an Indigenous—or in my case, First Nations, Anishinaabe—person.<sup>1</sup> Family-based research is the name I have given the approach that emerged through my graduate research in social work (King, 2016). My research used Indigenous storytelling to gather stories from my grandmother about her life and about our family. A daughter of a Sixties Scoop survivor, my purposes were to learn more about my family stories and history as an Anishinaabe person; to nurture the relationship between my grandmother, mother, and me; and to honour my grandmother by sharing parts of her life story. My grandma’s stories provided a foundation from which to take responsibility for my own learning and to seek further knowledge about our family and territory. While

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Indigenous” to refer collectively to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Canada. I am First Nations, but more specifically I am Ojibway/Anishinaabe. “Aboriginal” is another term used to refer collectively to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Canada.

my research focus was on sharing life-experience stories, it is important to clarify that my use of the term “family” invokes a broad concept of relations that recognizes both human and non-human entities, such as animals, land, and water. Indigenous family-based research invokes a broad approach through which students and scholars can strengthen, develop, and nurture their knowledge of and their relationship with a wide range of diverse “relatives” as a means of empowering the collective.

In developing the concept of family-based research, I struggled to find a way to fit my learning into the “social work research” box. Western academia does not know how to deal with, assess, or value this type of research. In privileging, however implicitly, studies that interrogate or link to *big-picture* issues (of systems, structures, or discourse), social work disciplines Indigenous students into pursuing research that supports Western theories of knowledge production and strategies of change. I seek to challenge this norm by expanding social work’s understanding of what can, should, and does count as (Indigenous) research. As will be discussed, social work education must expand its understanding of Indigenous resistance and resurgence to incorporate strategies that embrace w/holistic knowledges and encourage introspective and family-based questions in research.

First, however, I need to introduce myself. This too is an aspect of Indigenous research (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Introducing oneself in Indigenous research differs from the practice of self-location found in some Western paradigms, such as feminist research. Introducing oneself stems from a different ontological and epistemic base. Introducing oneself is about reciprocity, relationship, and acknowledging our relations. Rather than a simple extraction of knowledge, Indigenous researchers are required to give back by sharing something of themselves and contributing to the research relationship (Kovach, 2009). Introducing myself is also about acknowledging my place in the web of creation that includes both the physical and spiritual worlds. Introducing myself is about acknowledging who I am as an Anishinaabe woman and of inviting a relationship with you, the reader. It tells you something of my relationship to the topic. Why am I interested? What does this work mean to me?

### **Introducing Myself**

Boozhoo, Jennifer King ndizhnikaas. Wasauksing ndoonjibaa. (Greetings, my name is Jennifer King. My family comes from the Wasauksing First Nation.) I am the daughter of a Sixties Scoop survivor. My mother, Toni, was adopted by a white family in the 1960s. The *Sixties Scoop* refers to the time between approximately 1960 and the early 1980s marked by a dramatic rise in child-welfare apprehensions and adoption of Indigenous children by white families (Sinclair [Ótiskewápiwskew], 2007, 2009). My mother’s adoptive parents were English. They were married in England and came to Canada after the Second World War. Sadly—though perhaps not surprising given their origins, England being the birthplace of the so-called British “Empire”—they held all the hurtful, derogatory views about Indigenous people that were common to the era. They regarded “Indians” as lazy, dirty, drunks ... and so on. My mother has spoken publicly about the violence of her upbringing and its toll on her life and well-being (Nease & Cotnam, 2016; Smith, 2016). As her daughter, I have come to understand the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual necessity of knowing who we are and where we come from as Indigenous Peoples.

I was about 12 years old when my mom located her birth mother. A decade passed before my mother, my siblings, and I had the chance to meet my grandmother, Carolyn, in person. The process of getting to know one another was slow and tentative. Although the visits got easier and more comfortable with time, we rarely talked about the past. I was in my final year of graduate coursework in social work when my grandma happened to mention a cousin of hers/ours who became Chief in the 1950s after her husband, also a former Chief, died in jail. “The cops said it was natural,” said my grandma matter-of-factly, “but everyone knows they beat him to death.”

Listening to my grandma talk so casually about family and community history that I knew nothing about, of colonial violence that remained hidden away, I felt heavy with everything that had been lost. I wanted to hear her stories, the stories of her life and our family. It was shortly after that visit that I decided to pursue storytelling with my grandmother as the topic of my social work thesis. Instinctively, I felt that knowing our family stories was about more than me, my mother, my siblings, or my grandmother. As I came to understand, knowing my family stories is about relationship, remembering, and collective transformation. Knowing my stories is about strong Indigenous families and communities made up of people who know who they are and where they come from. I am writing this article in hope that my experience offers a useful example and an academic precedent that will benefit other students and researchers. I seek to contribute to the rich body of Indigenous scholarship in social work, scholarship that has been so influential in my own journey, by highlighting the transformative potential of family-based research and its implications for social work curriculum, pedagogy, faculty training standards, and student experience.

### **Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence**

Though I had long believed in the importance of family, community, and cultural connection in terms of healing from colonial impacts, it was not until I started to explore the literature on Indigenous resistance and resurgence that I came to understand how deeply the personal and relational are tied to collective change and self-determination. In contrast to the more conventional focus on political mobilization or legal gains, there is a body of Indigenous scholarship that argues that resistance and resurgence must come from within: from within our communities and from within ourselves (see for example Alfred, 2009; Coburn, 2015; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2011).

I was (and am) particularly influenced by the work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist. From Simpson’s work (2011), I learned that “transforming ourselves, our communities and our nations is ultimately the first step in transforming our relationship with the state” (p. 17). Simpson called on us to shift our energies from trying to change “the colonial outside” to focus on “a flourishing of the Indigenous inside” (p. 17). In rising up as individuals, we can come together from a place of integrity to restore the power of the collective and work toward meaningful change (Alfred, 2009). In this way, small-scale, personal, familial, and relational change is understood as the foundation of collective transformation. Simpson (2011) pointed to the power of resistance and resurgence at the level of the individual and family:

When resistance is defined solely as large-scale political mobilization, we miss much of what has kept our languages, cultures, and systems of governance alive.

We have those things today because our Ancestors often acted within the family unit... This, in and of itself, tells me a lot about how to build Indigenous renaissance and resurgence. (p. 16)

Strategies that emphasize personal transformation and small-scale change embrace the spiritual and affective realms as important sites of resistance and resurgence (Alfred, 2009; Coburn, 2015; Simpson, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Such approaches call for a more w/holistic, heart-centred approach, one that comes from a place of love—what Wilson (2015) described as “action that effects love” or “love in action.” Action that effects love is about fulfilling our inherent responsibilities to each other and to all living things: “we, the land, the water, and all living creatures, are related and, as relatives, we are meant to love and care for each other” (p. 256). In this way, love that effects action is “a very contemporary political expression of old knowledge” (p. 256). Coburn (2015) acknowledged that the idea of love as resistance or political action may be met with skepticism in the academy. She argued, however, that love has been and continues to be a theme continually expressed by Indigenous Peoples, especially women, as something that matters personally and politically, and therefore deserves serious consideration and engagement in the realm of Indigenous resistance and resurgence.

This is not to say that love is always the most appropriate or valid source of momentum. In highlighting love as an aspect of Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and scholarship, it is important to position rage, resentment, and similar emotions as equally valid. Flowers (2015) discussed the “increasingly common tendency to conflate Indigenous women’s resistance with love” (p. 33). Implicit in this tendency is the impulse to situate rage as a problematic, unhelpful response—a stage to be overcome so that Indigenous women might move from being “trapped in ‘frustrated anger’” to the “redemptive stage of ‘empowering loving action’” (Flowers, 2015, p. 41). Like Wilson (2015), Flowers stated that love is central to Indigenous laws and teachings; she prefaces this, however, by arguing that we must direct our love inward. In her words, “we affirm our love for self as a technique of collective self-recognition” (p. 40). Affirming our love for self, family, and community does not mean giving up anger and rage in the face of past and ongoing colonialism in Canada and around the world.

An introspective, heart-centred approach to change embraces a wide range of actions beyond those that are commonly recognized as resistance or political mobilization. Coburn (2015) defined *resistance* broadly as “any refusal to accept any given aspect of colonization in its multiple, shape-shifting forms” (p. 32). From this, it follows that Indigenous resurgence “is about the reinvention of diverse, specifically Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Put another way, if resistance signifies challenges to colonial practices and ideas, resurgence decentres colonialism by reimagining and re-creating diverse Indigenous worldviews and practices” (p. 32). Given the interplay between these efforts, resistance and resurgence can be understood as part of the same overarching project of personal and collective self-determination and autonomy (Coburn, 2015). Importantly, an introspective theory of resistance and resurgence requires “neither oversight nor ‘recognition’ from colonial institutions and non-Indigenous peoples” (p. 25).

Strategies of resistance that seek legal and political recognition from the state are dependent on the “good will” of colonial institutions in a way that introspective strategies

are not. Coulthard (2014) argued that prevailing legal and political strategies fail to challenge the core of the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler state; the concessions offered in terms of self-government agreements, land-claims settlements, and Aboriginal rights are ones that maintain the colonial status quo, with no real moral or economic threat to the non-Indigenous population (Alfred, 2009; Coulthard, 2014). In short, the terms of recognition are determined by and in the interest of the settler state (Coulthard, 2014).

Consistent with the authors cited above, Coulthard (2014) called for an introspective strategy of politics and resistance rooted in the practice of self-recognition and collective self-affirmation, urging Indigenous Peoples in Canada to “‘turn away’ from the colonial state and society and instead find in their own *decolonial praxis* [emphasis in original] the source of their liberation” (p. 48). This is not to suggest that introspective theories of change are somehow separate from the reality of ongoing colonialism, or that one’s personal choices and actions are free from systemic and discursive constraints (such as poverty, Eurocentrism, or racism). Rather, introspective theories of change are about (re)asserting the validity and transformative power of loving ourselves and directing our energy toward embracing and upholding “the Indigenous inside.” It is in this context that I position family-based research as an important strategy of Indigenous resistance and resurgence, and a necessary addition to social work education.

### **Indigenous Family-Based Research**

As I explained above, family-based research is an Indigenous methodology that emerged through my graduate research in social work (King, 2016). I say “a methodology that emerged” because I believe family-based research to be an approach to learning and change that has existed for a long time. This distinction is important. Absolon [Minogizhigokwe] (2011) reminded us that Indigenous research is not about creating new paradigms or methodologies. Rather, Indigenous research is about revealing those ways of thinking, seeing, and doing that have guided Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial and transferring those ways to or replicating them in the contemporary research context. Family-based research is the name I have given to a research approach that I believe found me, not the other way around.

Indigenous methodologies are methodologies that emanate from an Indigenous ontology, or worldview. Indigenous worldviews are w/holistic, relational, and relationship-based (Absolon, 2011; Archibald [Q’um Q’um Xiiem], 2008; Hart, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).<sup>2</sup> From this, it follows that attending to relationship(s), personal and collective, will be an important aspect of any Indigenous research framework. Indeed, Kovach (2009) and Absolon (2011) discussed at length the relationship between Indigenous research, “learning about self,” remembering, reconnecting, and belonging. *Remembering* refers to both memory (recalling where we come from and what we know) and reconnection (Absolon, 2011). Remembering, or *re-membering*, is a response to the attempted dismemberment of Indigenous nations through colonialism (Absolon, 2011). Family-based research takes this

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<sup>2</sup> While there are commonalities across Indigenous worldviews, there are also important contextual differences. Indigenous worldviews differ across territories and between peoples. It is therefore necessary to speak about Indigenous worldviews in the plural (not singular) form.

emphasis on remembering, relationship, and introspection a step further by making the self, the family, and the research process the explicit site(s) of attention and transformation.

Importantly, and as noted above, my use of the term “family” invokes both human and non-human relations. Family-based research is not limited to attending to family connections in the Western sense but encompasses work with community, clan, nation, the water, land, animals, our ancestors, and the spiritual realm. Working, thinking, and writing in English impacts how I am able to conceptualize the world and transmit knowledge; my choice of the word “family” to describe family-based research as a methodology reflects this limitation. Indigenous worldviews are encoded and reflected in language; unfortunately, as a non-speaker, I am limited in my choice of wording. I am aware that my use of the English word “family” carries with it Western understandings of the nuclear or extended human unit. In fact, my understanding and use of the term “family” is much broader, rooted in the Anishinaabe teachings I have received about the interrelatedness of all things.

The differences between these teachings and the English word “family” are significant in that they illustrate both the reality of ongoing colonial impacts, in which English and French are the official languages of academia, as well as the vital importance of Indigenous language revitalization. That said, while language revitalization is crucial, it is important to emphasize that Indigenous worldviews are very much alive, allowing Indigenous research to flourish as a distinct way of being, seeing, and doing in the pursuit of knowledge. I encourage Indigenous students and scholars to look, wherever possible, to their own language(s) for words and concepts of family as the foundation of their work.

Family-based research invites students and scholars to strengthen, develop, and nurture knowledge and relationship with a wide range of relatives. Learning and practising our stories, histories, traditions, responsibilities, and gifts are an important means of resistance and resurgence. Importantly, and in contrast to most Western methodologies, Indigenous family-based research is about not only the knowledge gained or produced but also the personal changes that occur through the process of remembering and reconnection. From this perspective, research is not only, or even primarily, about the knowledge produced but also the changes that occur through the process undertaken. The research process itself becomes a site of resistance and resurgence. In this way, family-based research is both a personal project of remembering and a strategy of collective transformation.

In my case, my desire to re-member my stories, history, and identity as an Anishinaabe woman led me to my grandmother. Traditionally, grandparents and Elders are known as teachers—as carriers of family and community knowledge and history. Ceremonies, culture, language, the natural world, Elders—these are our first and most important sources of knowledge as Indigenous Peoples. My research used Indigenous storytelling to gather stories from my grandmother about her life experiences, our family, and its history (King, 2016). As an Indigenous methodology, *storytelling* refers to the telling of stories in research and reflects a fundamental belief in stories as an important source of knowledge (Archibald, 2008).

Given the broad definition of family from an Indigenous perspective, readers may wonder why I sought stories from only my grandmother and not a larger group of relatives.

Simply put, I wanted some special time with her. I sought to use my academic journey not only to share and gather stories but to nurture the relationship between three generations of women in my family: my grandmother, mother, and me. As such, my mother was invited (with my grandmother's consent) to take part in the research. Though my grandma's stories were the focus, my mother was encouraged to ask questions about the stories and share stories of her own, allowing for an intergenerational exchange of knowledge about our lives and experiences. Story talk with my grandma took place around her kitchen table over hot drinks and food, often blueberry muffins (my grandma's favourite). Her stories were recorded, transcribed, and presented as a separate chapter in my thesis (King, 2016).

When it came time to analyze my grandma's stories, however, I began to struggle. I wrestled with what it would mean to analyze her stories in a manner consistent with academic requirements or standards. Indigenous researchers have taken up analysis in storytelling by re/presenting the stories shared and drawing from these stories specific lessons, teachings, and meanings (Daniels, 2005; Green [Kundojk]., 2013; McGuire, 2013; Thomas [Qwui'sih'yah'maht]., 2000; Turner, 2010). At the same time, having just completed two years of social work coursework that focused heavily on postmodernism and critical theories, I sensed that "good" and thorough analysis should interrogate discourse, challenge common-sense meanings, and make room for new and different narratives. And yet, in asking my grandmother for stories I wanted to remember, not deconstruct. Ultimately, I came to understand Indigenous analysis as an organic process of meaning-making and deciding what to do with the knowledge gained (Green, 2013; Thomas, 2005).

Learning about our family and the history of our community, Wasauksing, through my grandmother's stories offered a starting point from which to further my own knowledge about our family and community history. My grandma's stories position me in a web of history and relations and re/connect me to my ancestors and territory. In strengthening my relationship with my grandmother, I hoped to create a solid foundation from which to expand my circle and to build relationships with other family members.

Family-based research, as I came to call it, has a ripple effect. It is in this sense that family-based research is not just about the knowledge gained, but a process that can lead to other avenues of (self) discovery and new relationships and connections. How does one "analyze" and re/present this sort of learning in written form, in a manner that will satisfy academic standards? Ultimately, my approach to analyzing my grandma's stories was to reflect on some of the many things I had learned through the research process, not just about our family but also about Western academic constraints (King, 2016). I concluded that social work education disciplines Indigenous students and researchers to conform to Western standards that favour outcome over process and separate the mind from the heart.

Indigenous students and researchers are disciplined by the fear (and in some schools, the likelihood) that instructors or peers will dismiss their work and its significance. They are disciplined by the implication that research that looks at systems, structures, and discourse is more rigorous and therefore more difficult and worthy of attention, and by the privileging of big-picture issues for academic awards. In addition, research-ethics boards may challenge or force changes to research proposals that differ from established Western norms. Whether stated outright or tacitly implied, research that focuses on the personal or

individual is often considered less important than studies that focus on big-picture issues and invoke Western strategies of change, such as policy change, program evaluation, or discourse analysis.

### **Family-Based Research in the Academy**

Family-based research differs, in purpose and outcome, from the majority of research in social work; at least, it differs from the majority of research I was exposed to in my social work studies. Western academia claims to have “made space” (a condescending and problematic concept, as will be discussed below) for Indigenous research, yet there remain limits to this acceptance (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009). Indigenous thinkers in the academy have advanced new disciplines of thought (LaRocque, 2015), have challenged Western ontological and epistemological assumptions, and have brought to light Indigenous methodologies in research. The next step, I believe, is to challenge the meaning of academic research itself. As a profession purportedly committed to ensuring that its pedagogy and curriculum contribute to transforming Canada’s colonial reality (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2017), social work is well placed to accept this challenge, unsettle the status quo, and champion family-based research in the academy. The following section discusses implications of family-based research for decolonizing social work education.

- **Social work curriculum needs to reflect a broader understanding of Indigenous resistance.**

Social work education can support Indigenous resistance and resurgence by denaturalizing Western norms and expectations to embrace family-based research and other introspective Indigenous methodologies. Despite growing recognition and space for diverse knowledges, the academy retains its monopoly on what counts as knowledge (Kovach, 2009). In staying true to my research vision, I struggled with feeling that my topic was too personal, that my work needed to be applicable to a wide audience. The idea that emancipatory research should focus on interrogating systems, structures, or discourse is difficult to shake. I worried that readers, especially academics, would view my research as little more than a personal and individualized project of “finding self.” This concern is not unfounded. Absolon’s (2011) study into the experiences and methodologies of Indigenous graduate researchers found that students continue to face opposition on the grounds that their work is “too personal,” “too subjective,” “too emotional” or that they are “too involved” (p. 146). Absolon referred to this as gatekeeping in the academy. Gatekeepers “watch over the academy to ensure you play by their rules” (p. 144). The trepidation with regard to differing knowledges in the academy is ironic indeed. As Kovach (2009) wrote, “resistance to epistemological disruptions within academia is so great that it can stymie that which it seeks to create—new knowledge” (p. 36).

As an Indigenous researcher, but moreover as an Indigenous person, I refuse to accept that family-based research is too personal for academic inquiry. Family-based research is about the survival of knowledge. Asking my grandmother for stories was an important step in a life-long journey to restore balance in my family and to aid in the transfer of knowledge between generations. At the core, Indigenous family-based research is about refusing to accept the dismemberment of our nations. Colonial laws and policies in Canada targeted



Indigenous children and families, attempting to sever the transfer of knowledge between generations (Absolon, 2011; Fournier & Crey, 1997). It is no accident that my mother was adopted by British immigrants; rather, it was a choice made by social workers as to the best place for a First Nations child. The Sixties Scoop, whether through explicit policy or Euro-Western assumption, sought to assimilate Indigenous children and sever the link between family, culture, community, and territory. My mother was never meant to identify as a First Nations person; she was supposed to grow up identifying with and believing in the superiority of whiteness. I was never supposed to know my grandmother's stories.

Sadly, my family situation is not unique. There are more Indigenous children in care today than at the height of either the residential school system or the Sixties Scoop (Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2009). Generations of Indigenous children have been robbed of the opportunity to know their stories, history, and culture. In this context, research that seeks to restore connections, to engage with our stories, responsibilities, gifts, and history as Indigenous Peoples, is a powerful avenue of resistance and resurgence. Family-based research is a way of finding our way home. "Finding our way home," as Absolon (2011) explained, "means searching to return to our own roots and to find the dignity and humanity intended by the Creator" (p. 55). Finding our way home is about knowing who we are as Indigenous Peoples. In supporting family-based research, the academy can serve as a place of liberation for Indigenous students wishing to restore balance in their lives and families.

This is not to suggest that macro, discursive, or systems-level change is not important, or that micro- and macro-level strategies are somehow entirely separate. Indeed, family-based research is premised on the belief that personal (micro) change feeds collective (macro) empowerment. Together, micro- and macro-level strategies comprise a broad continuum of engagement that supports Indigenous self-determination and well-being. Critical analysis and structural work by Indigenous scholars are also ways of re centring Indigenous stories, values, and teachings. My call for family-based research in the academy is not meant to limit or diminish these efforts. Rather I seek to encourage Indigenous scholars to amplify their introspective and relational work. I am calling on the academy to embrace these strategies as legitimate and powerful and to support and honour this work as they would more conventional strategies of resistance and change.

- **Social work pedagogy needs to support both Indigenous students and established researchers in finding new and meaningful ways to analyze introspective research, such as family-based research, and must be open to different forms of academic assessment.**

As I have argued, family-based research is about more than creating or interrogating knowledge—it is about personal transformation. I echo Absolon (2011), who believes that Indigenous research can be healing. Indigenous research is healing as it invokes restoration, repatriation, reclaiming, recovering, and relearning. Indigenous methodologies, and family-based research in particular, empower researchers to use a colonial institution, the academy, to create time and space to explore our roots and re-orient our way of thinking and being in the world. Absolon (2011) described the research journey as a gift. In her words,

the gift of our searches ends up being in the remembering of ancestral ties, their legacies and knowledge.... Searching becomes a gift that invokes memory, and

this both re-members us to our nations, families and communities and brings knowledge forward that was meant for us. If we don't remember who we are, how can we pass that on to our children and families? ... Remembering is giving back and contributing to the continuance of Indigenous peoples' way of life and existence. (p. 78)

Western academia does not know how to deal with, assess, or value this sort of introspective research. Western research frameworks are founded on the premise that, for research to be valuable, it must be generalizable in nature, or at the very least offer a concrete interpretation of the data gathered—preferably with recommendations or suggested actions to be taken. Positivist and perhaps even more emancipatory research approaches, such as participatory action research, feminist research, and other critical approaches, may dismiss the utility of research that sees the researcher and their family as the primary site of knowledge transfer, resistance, and change. Research that leads to recommendations or action items for addressing the “colonial outside” offers something tangible: “We can see she worked hard—what great analysis! What great recommendations!” Other academics can see the work that has been done and feel comfortable attesting to its significance.

What did I learn from my grandma's stories? I learned that the most powerful transformations are not always ones you can articulate or even see. The deepest learnings are not necessarily ones you can explain. As time went on and the research progressed, it became apparent that what I was learning was happening primarily in my heart, not my head. The knowledge gained was (is) best described in terms of stronger family ties, a feeling of belonging, and knowledge of place. I had started my journey home.

How do you assess emotional learnings, personal transformation, the relationships that are formed or strengthened, the awakening of spirit, of love? Such things cannot be measured or assessed via Western academic standards such as grading or graduate defence mechanisms, and yet these changes represent the most significant learnings of my academic journey. In the end, the approach I took was to analyze my own learnings and reflections about the research process. Though valuable, this approach does not truly capture the introspective learnings and changes that occurred during my research. I raise the issue of analysis and academic assessment without having any real answers. I do know that Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, resisting, and reclaiming may lead to forms of analysis that look substantially different from current academic practice and may well require a whole new approach to academic assessment. My hope is that, through this article, Indigenous students and social work educators alike can build upon my experience with family-based research to address these questions of analysis and assessment.

- **All social work faculty, especially non-Indigenous faculty, need training on Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. Training standards need to be developed and included as part of accrediting social work education programs in Canada.**

Social work faculty, as well as instructors who supervise student research, need to educate themselves on Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. It is impossible for the few (but growing in number) Indigenous faculty in Canada to advance Indigenous approaches in the academy—nor should it be their responsibility alone. Again, if social

work is really “committed to ensuring that social work education in Canada contributes to transforming Canada’s colonial reality,” then it is social work educators who have an important role to play in advancing “the overall indigenization of social work education” (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2017). This includes understanding and backing diverse strategies of Indigenous resistance and resurgence, particularly in terms of research that supports Indigenous students in finding their way home.

Had I not decided to pursue storytelling as a thesis topic, how long would I have waited to ask my grandmother to share more about her life and family history? Would I have made the time to read book after book, article after article, by Indigenous thinkers on topics ranging from Indigenous knowledge to strategies of resistance? Would I have sat down to research the history of my community? Certainly, none of these things were or are dependent on academic research; however, committing myself to personal and family-based research as part of my graduate degree gave me the time, space, and support to begin the work of restoring, reclaiming, recovering, and relearning—to exercise resistance and resurgence in my own life journey.

I was fortunate to have the support and guidance of two incredible Indigenous women as academic advisers, both with strong backgrounds in storytelling research (Green, 2013; Thomas 2000, 2005). Without their encouragement and validation, I doubt I would have had the confidence to pursue this type of work. Indeed, Absolon (2011) emphasized the vital role of academic supervisors in helping emerging researchers to assert their location and personal involvement and to employ Indigenous methodologies in the academy. With the support of my academic advisers, I was able to privilege the work of Indigenous scholars in developing my research framework. Unfortunately, not every emerging researcher has the benefit of Indigenous advisers to support their work. By challenging social work institutions and educators to promote family-based research, I hope this article will provide an academic precedent to counter the reticence of gatekeepers who seek to maintain the status quo.

- **To improve student experience, social work education needs to unpack and acknowledge its ongoing role in colonizing Indigenous students through academic gatekeeping.**

Though an important first step, decolonizing social work education requires more than learning about Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. Rather, it requires unpacking and addressing the ongoing bias toward Western academic standards and preferences. Schools of social work may state their commitment to uplifting Indigenous research, but what does this look like in an everyday and practical sense at the level of student experience? To what extent are Indigenous students actually free to pursue research that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, resistance, and resurgence?

Social work needs to understand that supporting introspective strategies of resistance and resurgence, such as family-based research, requires more than making space in the academy. The concept of making space situates Western theory as the norm, giving Western academics the power to recognize—or not—the validity of Indigenous research. In this sense, the academy is a microcosm of Coulthard’s (2014) argument vis-a-vis the politics of recognition in Canada, in which the terms of recognition are determined by, and in the interest of, the settler state. Western academics retain the power to decide which and

to what extent Indigenous methodologies are granted space. The balance of authority remains unchanged.

This raises another important question: To what extent does research and education in social work disrupt the status quo? Does it challenge Western hegemony in a fundamental way? Research that focuses on the colonial outside is often less contentious because it deals with improving or reforming established systems and services. For instance, there has been a push in recent years to improve the experience of Indigenous Peoples by making social systems and services “culturally relevant.” However, as Blackstock (2009) argued, the idea of cultural relevance is largely about modifying existing systems and services without challenge to their underlying values or assumptions: the status quo remains intact. Real and meaningful change depends on whether (and to what extent) dominant powers are prepared to recognize the claims being made. In discussing support for Indigenous self-determination movements in Canada, Coburn (2015) was candid about the potential for “scholarship and policy documents purporting to support Indigenous resistance and resurgence” to become “nothing more than a compilation of ‘good words,’ or worse, merely ‘fancy word(s)’ disconnected from transformative change” (p. 26). Critical social workers need to be honest about the extent to which some Western research leads to meaningful change at the level of policy, law, practice, or social relations.

Research that seeks to change the colonial outside is largely dependent on the will of others. The learnings and transformation that occur through the process of family-based research, however, are personal. Like Coburn’s (2015) point about introspective theories of resistance and resurgence requiring neither oversight nor recognition from colonial institutions, the “implementation” of learnings gained through family-based research does not need the participation or acquiescence of governments, organizations, policy bodies, or any other external or colonial power. In this way, encouraging students to pursue introspective approaches like family-based research may have greater potential for meaningful personal and social transformation than “conventional” types of research. None of this is meant to dismiss outright the potential value of Western research methodologies that seek justice in addressing Indigenous issues or to suggest that Indigenous researchers only concern themselves with introspective approaches such as family-based research. Rather, I seek to challenge the academic gatekeeping in social work that devalues personal and familial research as less rigorous and less valid. So long as Indigenous researchers are disciplined to conform to Western standards, social work education remains a tool of the colonial system. Research that seeks to honour and practise our teachings and our values as Indigenous Peoples, that works to strengthen our personal sense of self, our family, and community connections, must be treated as a serious and important endeavour worthy of academic support and respect.

### **Conclusion**

Social work must expand its knowledge base and understanding of resistance and resurgence to embrace family-based questions as important areas of Indigenous and decolonizing research—as critical sites of transformation and change. Family-based research is love in action (Wilson, 2015). I hope that this work, which extends beyond this article to include my master’s thesis and possible future publications, might inspire other Indigenous students not only to find their way home but to pursue and claim the academic

space in social work to do it. Moreover, I hope that Indigenous students and scholars will take the ideas raised in this article, expand on them, question them, complicate them, and make family-based research their own. This article is my call for others to further explore the implications and nuances of family-based research. For example, how might the teaching of family-based research show up in social work programs? What are the ethical implications and responsibilities of students taking up this work? What about issues of gatekeeping in our own (Indigenous) communities? What supports are needed for students who, because of colonial impacts, are disconnected from their roots and unsure where to begin? Family-based research is a methodology grounded in love, but with love come issues of responsibility, accountability, ethics, and, potentially, feelings of loss and grief. How can social work education ensure it properly supports and cares for those who undertake the crucial restorative work of family-based research?

Unfortunately, the reality of ongoing colonialism in Canada means that disconnection from family and community through child-welfare “care” remains an ongoing issue. In other cases, the devastating social impacts of colonialism can make it necessary to distance oneself from family and relations for reasons of physical, emotional, or spiritual safety. In this context, it is important to reiterate that family-based research invokes a broad definition of family that includes human and non-human relations. Possible areas of learning and resurgence extend far beyond one’s immediate human family in the Western sense. Family-based research invites students and scholars to explore a broad range of stories (life-experience, historical, cultural), as well as traditional responsibilities, gifts, and history.

Questions remain, but I can say this with truth: family-based research has made a difference in my life. The chance to sit with my grandmother and share stories was very special. I learned a great deal not only about my grandmother, our family, our history, and our territory but also about myself. This is not to romanticize the process. Family-based research can be powerful, but a few months of sharing stories is certainly not enough to bridge decades of silence and trepidation. There remains much to be done. But this research was not about trying to re-create a past that never was. And there has been change. In undertaking this research, in declaring it worthwhile, I took another step in an ongoing journey to restore the connections that colonization tried to sever. I know so much more about my grandmother, her life, and our family than I did before. And I believe she knows more about us, my mother, my siblings, and me too. And so we persist. We carry on. And when my grandma kisses us goodbye and says she loves us, I know she means it.

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