Article

Talking Circles: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Practice

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Abstract

Talking Circles are safe spaces where relationships are built, nurtured, reinforced, and sometimes healed; where norms and values are established; and where people connect intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally with other members of the Circle. The Circle can also be an evaluation method that increases voice, decreases invisibility, and does not privilege one worldview or version of reality over another. The purpose of this article is to describe how the Circle can be a culturally responsive evaluation practice for those evaluators wishing to build relationships, share power, elicit stakeholder voice, solve problems, and increase participants' capacity for program design, implementation, and evaluation. Circles can be used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous evaluators. By offering the global evaluation community this concrete, practical, and culturally responsive approach, we open the door so that others can build on this work and offer additional insights as this practice is used, refined, and documented.

Introduction

Evaluators who choose to embark on the quest to decolonize evaluation and address issues related to historical harm and intergenerational trauma may find themselves crossing disciplinary boundaries in search of new methodologies, practices, and approaches that disrupt sociohistorical power imbalances, create more just and equitable evaluations, and result in more authentic, valid, and viable outcomes (Fetterman, 2017; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Hood et al., 2015; McBride, 2015; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015; Patton et al., 2016; Swadener & Mutua, 2008). Such approaches are often explored, developed, refined, and encouraged by culturally responsive evaluators who approach evaluation with the intention and commitment to do good (Greene, 2005). However, exactly *how* to do good and *what* culturally responsive approaches to use can be mystifying to an evaluator, especially one who is a member of the dominant culture. While culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) methods provide no single recipe to follow (Nelson-Barber et al., 2005), we offer

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that the Circle[1]—an ancient yet lasting dialogic method—provides a structured yet flexible process (Pranis et al., 2003) for conducting evaluations in ways that do good, empower participants, transform organizational culture, and potentially even heal communities.

Coauthor Brown (settler colonizer) is an independent evaluation consultant and a restorative justice (RJ) teacher/practitioner who drew the connection between the Circle processes primarily used in RJ contexts and CRE methods. Coauthor Di Lallo (Métis) is a team lead/manager for Stollery Awasisak Indigenous Child Health and offers a case study of how Talking Circles[2] were used to enhance the delivery of health services to Indigenous children and families in Alberta, Canada. We believe that the Circle has broad applications and enormous potential for use in participatory evaluation approaches that seek to mitigate power imbalances between the evaluators and evaluation participants. We accept and understand the impacts that racism and other forms of systemic oppression have had on us and the world(s) in which we live (Hall, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018; Waapalaneexkweew, 2018) and seek to increase the awareness of the Circle as a method that increases voice, decreases invisibility, and does not privilege one worldview or version of reality over another (Mertens, 1999; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to describe how Circles can be a CRE practice for those evaluators wishing to build relationships, share power, elicit stakeholder voice, solve problems, and increase participants' capacity for program design, implementation, and evaluation. First, we introduce readers to the origins of the Circle, followed by a theoretical framework grounded in critical and RJ theories that support the use of Circles in evaluations. We then describe the Circle method and values and offer suggestions for when to use Circle in evaluation, including as a substitute for traditional focus groups in a variety of contexts. We will present a case study illustrating how the Talking Circle process was used by the Stollery Awasisak Indigenous Health Program to elicit community input and improve program participation and outcomes. Finally, we will conclude by addressing some of the challenges of using Circles in evaluation and will offer ways to overcome barriers that could preclude evaluators from incorporating Circles into their evaluation practice.

Circles: Then and Now

From Aotearoa to Stonehenge to Turtle Island, Circles, and the ceremonial rituals that accompany them, can be found in both ancient and contemporary cultures. Brown's ancestors, the Celts, sat in Circle. Di Lallo's ancestors used Circles and her relatives still do today. The authors have delivered presentations on Circles in evaluation at the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) conferences and, as a result, have generated an interest within the evaluation community to learn more. For Di Lallo, Talking Circles incorporate the concept of walking together, which involves finding the balance of walking between, or straddling, the two often opposing worldviews of Indigenous and corporate cultures. These sacred Circles are guided by Elders in prayer and ceremony. Each person has an equal voice and all views are respected. "When everyone has their turn to speak, when all voices are heard in a respectful and attentive way, the learning atmosphere becomes a rich source of information, identity, and interaction" (First Nation Pedagogy Online, 2009, para. 1). Talking Circles are culturally appropriate, accessible, intelligible, and experiential and rely on storytelling, listening, and personal narratives. The Talking Circle provides a safe environment that is nonhierarchical and embraces the participant-as-expert approach. The Talking Circle model provides an excellent process for interaction and learning to hear Indigenous voices for Indigenous solutions (Learn Alberta, 2011). Talking Circles draw upon the Anishinaabe Seven Sacred Teachings:[3] wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, and truth. Wampanoag Elder John Peters (Slow Turtle) explains, "It is a Native tradition to sit in a Circle and talk—to share what is in your heart" (Coyhis, 2018).

For Brown, Circles are a treasured gift from Indigenous people—a transferable, relationally based method for use in Indigenous and non-Indigenous evaluation, research, teaching, or

consultation contexts. On the Living Justice Press (n.d.) website, Denise Breton provides a brief history of how the Circle came to non-Indigenous people:

> During the 1990s, members of First Nations in Canada began teaching the Circle practice to non-Native people. They chose to do this because First Nation communities were seeking alternatives to the mass incarceration of their people, which was—and remains—another form of genocide. Returning to Native ways to resolve conflicts and harms required collaboration with non-Native people: lawyers, prosecutors, judges, as well as non-Native neighbors. In the process, non-Native people experienced the Circle process and its power to bring positive transformation for everyone involved. (para. 2)

Talking Circles are safe spaces where relationships are built, nurtured, reinforced, and sometimes healed; where norms and values are established; where people connect intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally with other members of the Circle (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Pranis, 2005). Circles are commonly used worldwide, especially in the practice of RJ in Canada, United States, Brazil, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Until now, however, Circles have been almost exclusively used in Indigenous evaluation (Tachine et al., 2016). For many Indigenous people, the Circle's philosophy and energy are present even when people are not physically sitting in Circle, as described by Bowman and colleagues (2015):

> As Indigenous evaluators and authors, we often say, "We work with you, not on you" when serving an Indigenous community or client with an evaluation study. An analogy used by elders to describe this process is to envision sitting in a Circle around the ledge or campfire and talking equally about perspectives, strategies, decisions, and usefulness of information for now and the next seven future generations. (p. 339)

Today, Circles' application and ancient wisdom transcend disciplinary and cultural boundaries and penetrate even the most entrenched racialized systems and institutions, including criminal and juvenile justice (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007), education (Brown, 2017, 2018; Morrison, 2007; Riestenberg, 2012), and now, evaluation (Tachine et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

While the Circle may be a new concept for non-Indigenous evaluators, its potential use as an evaluation method is grounded in a framework that includes critical theory (Freire, 2008), critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995), critical Indigenous theory (Brayboy et al., 2012), feminist evaluation theory (Brisolara et al., 2014), critical relational theory (Vaandering, 2016), relational theory (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015), restorative justice theory (Zehr, 2002), and prejudice reduction theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011). What these theories share is a deep desire to create a just, rational, humane, and reconciled society (Vaandering, 2016). Both Circle processes and evaluation approaches grounded in critical, feminist, and RJ theories seek to address power and privilege, improve lives and communities, and empower individuals to transform their world (Brisolara et al., 2014; Fetterman, 2017; Freire, 2008; MacNeil, 2005; Mertens, 1999; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015; Nelson-Barber et al., 2005; Vaandering, 2016). Critical theories challenge presumed superiority by asking, *Who benefits?* and *Who bears the burden?* of societal and institutional norms and decisions (Freire, 2008). Vaandering's (2016) critical relational theory adds three additional questions: "Am I honoring the people I am engaged with? Am I measuring them? What message am I sending them when we are together?" (p. 65). To varying degrees, evaluation approaches grounded in critical theories focus on building relationships through dialogue and dialectic processes and thus prioritize stakeholder inclusion and voice (Bowman et al., 2015; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005;

Greene, 2005; Hood et al., 2015; King, 2005; MacNeil, 2005; McBride, 2015; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015; Nelson-Barber et al., 2005).

Participatory, critical, developmental, empowerment, and Indigenous evaluation approaches often place the evaluator *inside* the evaluation and require evaluators to develop strong interpersonal relational and listening skills, making Circle a viable method. Within these approaches, the role of the evaluator changes from outside expert to educator, change agent, collaborator, facilitator, coach, critical friend, organizer (Brisolara et al., 2014; Fetterman, 2017; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; King, 2005; MacNeil, 2005; Nelson-Barber et al., 2005; Patton et al., 2016), and evaluator-Circle keeper (E-CK).[4]

Grounded in critical theories, culturally responsive approaches seek to humanize evaluation by prioritizing relationships between and among the evaluator and evaluation participants while not being afraid to sacrifice impartiality for the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of participants' positions that may be revealed through extensive dialogue (Greene, 2005; Hood, 2005; Hood et al., 2015; McBride, 2015; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015; Nelson-Barber et al., 2005). The three important components of CRE are values, decision-making, and relationships (McBride, 2015). McBride emphasizes that the tools used to gather data must ensure community voice and support empowerment, and this emphasis is shared by those who practice and research RJ (Brown, 2018; Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Llewellyn et al., 2013; Morrison, 2007; Pranis, 2005; Zehr, 2002).

Relational theory encourages building connections among all people and provides a lens through which to engage relationships as the primary focus of measurement, evaluation, and programs (Llewellyn et al., 2013). Restorative justice theory asserts that people are interconnected to each other and all life around them and that when any kind of harm breaks or damages relationships, there manifests an obligation to repair harm and make things right (Zehr, 2002). Critical relational theorist Vaandering (2016) reminds us: "Though who we are as human beings is complex and often confounding, RJ, in returning to the wisdom of ancient and contemporary Indigenous and spiritual traditions, taps into a profound simplicity—that *all* people are worthy and relational" (p. 63). Thus, it makes sense for Circles—a values-based and relational process—and CRE to get to know each other.

Bringing the Circle process to evaluation, however, does not assume nor guarantee a reduction in prejudice or a higher level of "cultural competence." Sitting in Circle with marginalized and often silenced individuals and groups may increase empathy and decrease anxiety among the outgroup members. Circles can provide a way for members of different groups to have positive contact with each other as "one begins to sense how outgroup members feel and view the world. This increase in empathy and perspective taking diminishes prejudice" (Pettigrew et al., 2011, p. 277).

Circles and Social Justice

People who have done Circle work have long talked about the "magic of the Circle." Although it sometimes feels uncomfortable at first, something both magical and humanizing happens when people sit in front of each other without desks or other physical barriers. The equalization of power is both visible and tangible and is reinforced by the facilitative role of the E-CK and the talking piece.

In their workbook entitled *Dismantling Racism*, Jones and Okun (2001) suggest that antidotes to White supremacy culture include an emphasis on dialogue; sitting with discomfort; taking the time to listen to people's stories, including teamwork and power sharing; pressing for deeper explorations of statements and discourse—unpacking meaning behind words; and being open to finding different ways to reach goals and solve problems. The co-creation of group values that ground the evaluation process can even allow for the compassionate confrontation of evaluator biases, which according to House (2016), can lead evaluators to draw incorrect conclusions. Circles create the space for both

evaluators and participants to reveal their biases, to be confronted in supportive ways, and to learn new information that helps to eradicate those biases.

When sitting in Circle, a sense of openness and vulnerability takes over, which for some produces feelings of discomfort regardless of the topic being discussed. However, the Circle by its very nature creates a safe space where people can rapidly work through or lean into their discomfort and share at a very deep level. It is also common for strong emotions to be released and expressed, especially after people have been in Circle for a period of time and have developed trust in one another. It is in this space where the magic happens. It is in this space that evaluators can learn the most about themselves and the people involved in the evaluation, and the participants can learn about the evaluator. This is where trust happens. This is where people and communities can begin the process of healing and be truly transformed. It is a space for real social justice to manifest.

That said, evaluators cannot simply take up the Circle practice and claim that by doing so they are somehow "culturally competent" or are practicing social justice. The Circle does not magically erase implicit bias, prejudice, and racism, and adherence to values is not enough (The Colorado Trust, n.d.). When evaluators who are members of the dominant culture work alongside members of marginalized groups, they must consciously embrace the values of respect and humility, while also doing their own personal anti-oppression work. Although Circles promote an increased awareness of self and others, evaluators who can work successfully across cultures are difficult to find, and those doing this work must concentrate on culture, social identity and group membership, and power and privilege (The Colorado Trust, n.d.). An E-CK, especially if they are a member of the dominant culture, must be critically self-aware, humble, and often apologetic for the macro- and microaggressions that they will likely make—even in Circle.

The Circle Method

The Circle is embedded in the traditional ways of many Indigenous peoples and must always be acknowledged as such. Although it is adaptable to almost any context and can be used in any participatory evaluation, non-Indigenous practitioners must always acknowledge and respect its origins. Care must be taken to not culturally appropriate the Circle by using cultural artifacts without permission or by failing to acknowledge Indigenous people as the original inhabitants of the land (Waapalaneexkweew, 2018). When conducting Circles and evaluations with Indigenous people, the evaluator must ensure that local protocols are being followed. Circles create a safe space for participants to express different viewpoints and strong emotions by offering a structure for dialogue, especially around difficult subjects; the Circle structure itself elicits respect and inclusion, engages people, and builds community (Ball et al., 2010, p. 14).

Circles focus on consensus decision-making and have a wide variety of uses and applications, including but not limited to team-building, problem-solving, resolving conflict, and developing new programs in an agency (Pranis, 2005). As participants become more comfortable with the process, they take ownership of the Circle, become Circle keepers themselves, and build their capacity to work together, hold each other accountable, and reach consensus. It is a process that empowers people and communities to continue doing good long after the evaluation is complete.

The Circle Process

The Circle process itself is profoundly simple: When two or more people meet, they arrange their chairs in a Circle without any tables or other artificial barriers to separate them. Everyone is physically and fully present, and everyone can see and be seen by all others. There is no beginning or end to the Circle and there is no "head of the table" or designated power seat. Circles can be convened by anyone at any time (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Talking in Circle.

Several key elements comprise a formal Circle process: Circle seating, ceremony, guidelines/ values, talking piece, keeping/facilitation, consensus decision-making, and a focus on relationships (Ball et al., 2010; Pranis, 2005). The setting of the Circle also matters. It is important that people are greeted warmly and that attention is paid to acts of hospitality, aesthetics, and that refreshments are provided afterward when possible (Block, 2008). While an evaluator may have little control over the aesthetics of the room in which Circle happens, it is important to remember that the more comfortable and welcoming the setting, the more relaxed Circle participants will be—which is especially important if participants are new to Circle processes and/or evaluation.

A Circle keeper facilitates the dialogue but does not control it. When used in evaluation, Brown suggests using the term *evaluator-Circle keeper* to call attention to the changing role of the evaluator and the redistribution of power. When introducing the Circle process and elements of the Circle, the E-CK should explain the common Circle guidelines, which are (1) respect the talking piece, (2) speak from your heart, (3) listen with your heart, (4) speak with respect, (5) listen with respect, (6) remain in the Circle, and (7) honor confidentiality (Pranis et al., 2003). People can choose to share or not share when they receive the talking piece. There is also a very practical element that E-CKs should address and that is being mindful of time. Circles can be very long given that people are encouraged to speak from the heart. But in an evaluation context, it may be necessary to ask that Circle members help balance time constraints and the need for all voices to be heard. Respectful speaking also means consideration for others and not monopolizing the dialogue. E-CKs may have to gently remind some participants to be mindful of this.

Here, we provide a short description of a basic Circle process.

1. E-CK and evaluation participants sit together in chairs arranged in a Circle. The E-CK brings people into the Circle by opening it with a ritual such as reading a meaningful poem or story, ringing a meditative chime, a prayer, or conducting a breathing exercise.
2. The dialogue is guided not so much by a person but by a talking piece, an unbreakable object that sometimes has personal or symbolic meaning to the group or the E-CK. Only the person

holding the piece can speak, while all others listen. The E-CK introduces a "round" by posing a question and may choose to answer first or last or not at all. The nature of the questions depends on the purpose of the Circle and the evaluation.

3. The E-CK passes the piece in the direction most suitable to local customs and protocols. Many Circle keepers are trained to pass the piece clockwise, but some tribal cultures pass it counterclockwise. A Circle dialogue will encompass multiple rounds. The E-CK should start each round by giving the talking piece to a different person. As the talking piece is passed, those who choose to speak will, and all others will listen without responding or debating. Those who choose not to speak may pass the piece to the next person. Silence is OK.

4. When the Circle process is complete, the E-CK honors participants for speaking their truth and closes the Circle with another ritual or ceremony, which could include breathing, a chime, a closing prayer, or another meditative reading. (Brown, 2017)

The Circle is not a quick process. If decisions are being made that affect the lives of everyone involved, then time and space must be dedicated to answering two or three questions around a theme and working through the process of examining options, uncovering issues, and ultimately reaching consensus and mutual understanding or developing strategies and recommendations. Processes done with integrity should increase the likelihood that the outcomes of the Circle will be widely supported and successful (Ball et al., 2010). A meaningful Circle process can lead to authentic and desirable outcomes through empowering evaluation participants to develop a sense of personal agency and facilitating a restorative approach to community development, healing, and transformation (Block, 2008).

Circle Values

Common values guide all Circle processes: love, respect, inclusivity, generosity, courage, trust, sharing, empathy, humility, and honesty (Pranis et al., 2003). However, because "values emerge from our interactions with each other and with the world [and] . . . are integral components of our thinking process" (House, 2016, p. 107), people in Circle may add other values specifically appropriate to the evaluation. Different practitioners emphasize different values; however, values are not assumed or taken for granted. Most non-Western cultures place values such as trust and respect at the center of all relationships and interactions, whereas the dominant culture tends to value self-expression and individualism more strongly (Nelson-Barber et al., 2005). Personal narratives are key to Circle processes, and because new information or perspectives sometimes come in the form of stories that Circle participants tell, it is imperative that the participants agree and adhere to universal values, especially trust and honesty, as well as those values they determine for themselves. Stories are what give meaning to people's lives, help people make sense of their world by giving structure to perceptions, allow for people to connect with others, and forge the bonds that lead to community building (Gay, 2000). House (2016) argues that cognitive research supports storytelling in evaluation, but stories can only be told if the storyteller feels safe, respected, cared for, and honored. Storytelling will inform how the group interprets outcomes and determines action items and recommendations. Unless evaluators are trustworthy, humble, and respectful, it is unlikely that they will ever hear the very stories that could be critical to the evaluation findings.

On the other hand, telling stories is not a requirement of being in Circle. People show up as they are and have the power and choice to participate however they feel best. This may mean sitting in silence, saying few words, being direct, or using metaphors. It is not uncommon for some Circle participants to never speak—but that does not mean they are not engaged and listening—or that they are not valuable members of the Circle.

Circles as a Trauma-Informed Evaluation Practice

Understanding and utilizing Circles as a trauma-informed evaluation practice is beyond the scope of this article and warrants a deeper exploration than can be provided here. However, the Circle, when done with respect and care, can be a trauma-informed practice that invites the whole person to be present and empowers members to participate or not participate to the degree they are comfortable. For some tribal cultures, a Circle exemplifies the medicine wheel for balance and harmony, where a person's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects are interconnected to the land and exist in relationship to others, including family, communities, and nations. Rounds in a Talking Circle follow the holistic Indigenous worldview and the needs of the participants in the Circle. Therefore, people have as many rounds to share, reflect, and express their thoughts and feelings as time allows. The individual connects to their authentic self through story, self-reflection, or experiential-based learning (Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia, 2018), with this connection to self being one leg on a person's journey toward healing from trauma (Elliott et al., 2005).

Confidentiality

Confidentiality issues in Circle are like those in focus groups. Whether evaluators ask participants to keep the discussion confidential orally or in writing as part of the voluntary informed consent process (an example of which appears later in this article), there are no guarantees that participants will not talk about it with others. When Brown keeps a Circle that is not part of an evaluation, she addresses confidentiality with the adage, "What happens in Circle stays in Circle." This calls participants to trust, respect, and honor each other. She also says that participants are free to share their own experience outside the Circle if they feel the need to, but not the words, experiences, emotions, or reactions of others. Circle keepers should always ask participants to commit to keeping the trust and confidentiality of the Circle.

When to Use Circles in Evaluation

Because the Circle is flexible, it can be used in different ways and at different times throughout an evaluation. Circles do not preclude or replace any dialogic activity that elicits stakeholder voice in respectful, open, and honest ways. Rather, Circles add to the list of methods evaluators can employ any time the priority is on dialogue, trust, communication, information gathering, and sharing.

Participants in Brown's workshop at the 2018 Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) conference felt that Circles would be highly appropriate processes in evaluations with youth and people who have experienced trauma and/or intergenerational trauma. Circles by nature promote social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies (Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, n.d.), including awareness of others, which may help "big talkers" self-regulate. Workshop participants said that Circles may also be helpful in alleviating evaluation anxiety and dealing with painful emotions that might come up in the evaluation. Circles can be used at the outset of an evaluation to build relationships and set group values as well as to check in with each other as the evaluation progresses.

Before discussing design, evaluation questions, and methodology, evaluators should hold a Circle and establish trusting, open, and honest relationships with all stakeholders. This can be a fun, lighthearted Circle to get to know each other as humans and discover commonalities. This will determine what Greene (2005) refers to as the relational character of evaluation and includes establishing values and norms that will guide how people interact throughout the evaluation. The values determined by the group form the foundation for the rest of the evaluation process, and Circle participants can hold each other accountable to the group's values as they move through the

evaluation. The use of Circles at the outset of an evaluation demonstrates that the evaluator is committed to a relational-based, just, and equitable process that involves the entire community of stakeholders and respects every voice. It shows that power plays are not the order of the day and that titles and pedigrees do not matter; instead, everyone in Circle is seen as an equal, each with their own unique gifts to contribute (Ball et al., 2010).

Evaluators who integrate Circles into their practice may find that their relationships with evaluation participants are deepened and their findings are more valued. Intentionally developing a relational-based orientation (Brown, 2018) can potentially alter an evaluator's position significantly (Greene, 2005) as the entire evaluation process becomes more personal and humanized and the traditional role of the evaluator changes. Relationally-based evaluators have a vested interest in the well-being and safety of evaluation participants while remaining unattached to outcomes. Circle participants can co-construct meaning, determine solutions to problems, and reach consensus on how evaluation findings should be interpreted. Evaluators can increase the validity of their evaluations by holding Circle dialogues that deepen their understanding of historical and political contexts (Nelson-Barber et al., 2005; Waapalaneexkweew, 2018). Circle processes are especially useful when problems occur or when evaluation findings are negative (Ball et al., 2010; Wandersman et al., 2005), as they allow people to process their emotions and move into a space where they can then consider solutions. Circles can work to ensure that the findings are interpreted and disseminated in ways that reflect the truth according to the people involved.

For the evaluator, Circle processes naturally encourage self-reflection (Barrington, 2017) and offer a way for evaluators to reflect on their practice, their own cultural influences, and the institutions that influence them and their work (McBride, 2011). When in Circle, evaluators can become more aware of their own biases by deeply listening to others' stories without responding or defending. Awareness, followed by critical self-reflection, calls into question both evaluators' identities and what they think they "know" and could lead to a radical personal and professional transformation (Bledsoe & Donaldson, 2015; Mertens & Zimmerman, 2015). Circles offer a safe space to do this kind of work and can be used to bring multiethnic evaluation teams together to learn from and with each other and decide how the team will work together and communicate.

Circles can also be used instead of traditional focus groups in many evaluation contexts. In their 2016 article entitled "Sharing Circles: An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching with Groups of Indigenous Peoples," Tachine, Yellow Bird, and Cabrera argued effectively as to why Circles should be used instead of focus groups in Indigenous evaluations. We honor their work, and rather than repeat their argument here, we encourage our readers to also read this article, as their argument holds for non-Indigenous evaluations as well. Both Circles and focus groups serve similar purposes, but because the relational and dialogic dynamics in Circle are often much deeper than in focus groups, Talking Circles may produce richer data, more accurate interpretations, and thus more valued outcomes.

Talking Circles for Program Planning and Evaluation: A Case Study

This case study provides an example of praxis by bringing the theories discussed thus far to life in a real application of Talking Circles in an Indigenous health program implemented in Alberta, Canada.

Background

Alberta is home to one of the youngest and fastest growing Indigenous populations in Canada. Over 30% of the province's Indigenous population is under the age of 14. Indigenous families, particularly those in rural or remote communities/reserves, often experience profound disruption, difficulty, and ongoing challenges when their children require extensive follow-up and/or home care

posthospitalization. The Stollery Children's Hospital Awasisak[5] Indigenous Health Program in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, was established October 2015 and is the first of its kind in Canada to espouse a culturally safe and patient–family centered perspective on service delivery.

Circles for Increasing Community Engagement

The Stollery realized that to develop tangible actions that would improve delivery of services and program outcomes for Indigenous people in rural communities, it needed to go to the people living in those communities. They approached the communities with the intention of engaging them in meaningful and collaborative ways. This approach involved following protocol engagement with elders and Ceremony. Di Lallo and her colleagues held a Vision Day to discover the best way of caring for children and their families at the Stollery and chose to hold this important dialogue in Talking Circles. The Circles were based on storytelling that helped reduce perceived barriers, marginalization, and lack of information about services, clinics, physicians, and programs. The participant-as-expert approach considered current and historical Indigenous experiences and relationships with authorities, government, and health-care providers . The Circle talks also included the dissemination of information regarding how to access programs, services, and staff more readily and efficiently. Over 160 participants, including local Indigenous family members of the Stollery, elders, and health-care providers from over 32 Indigenous communities participated in the Circles. Through these Circle dialogues and guided by our elders in Ceremony, four priorities and recommendations were made to help support the families.

Method

To develop a robust evaluation methodology, the Stollery built on existing ally and Indigenous partnerships by collaborating with communities and Alberta Health Services. Meaningful engagement with First Nations and Métis communities required that three key stakeholders be included: (1) Stollery clinicians/staff who understood the needs and experiences of Stollery families in hospital; (2) community members, including families, elders, and community health-care providers, who holistically understood the journey that Stollery families were on; and (3) research and evaluation experts to ensure ethical practice, robust methods, and thorough analysis.

The methodology for the Talking Circles was governed by the Anishinaabe Seven Sacred Teachings. The teachings cannot work in isolation; they need to be implemented into practice as a whole. If practiced in isolation, the other teachings would have an opposite effect. For example, if you are not honest, then you are dishonest. If you are not humble, then you are self-centered. If you are not courageous, then you are a coward. The teachings show us how knowledge leads us to wisdom. To know peace is to experience love; to honor creation is to have respect; to face integrity is to be courageous; to be honest with self-first in action is to know honesty; to know self as part of creation is to have humility; and to know all these teachings is to know truth (Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia, 2018).

The Stollery Awasisak team, with elders' support, elected to collect data through Talking Circles. Data analysis was conducted by the Stollery Awasisak team and the Health Systems Evaluation & Evidence team. The goal was to couple the holistic quality of storytelling from the Indigenous viewpoint with rigorous analysis informed by evaluation science (Di Lallo et al., 2018). The recruitment process involved identifying a champion in the communities to help organize the Talking Circles. The process started with a few participants who networked and then forwarded names to the organizer and/or passed the organizer's name on to those who expressed interest. It was appropriate to start with elders and then reach out to community health-care providers who assisted in directing the organizer to individuals and families to encourage participation. Other actions involved organizing the Talking Circles with those champions and compensating participants for their time by

Figure 2. Voting on priorities.

providing honorariums, cultural exchanges, and catering for families and elders. The role of the facilitator was to determine the themes for discussion and keep the Circle by asking the prompts.

Upon registration to the Talking Circle, everyone signed a consent form to release information. The evaluation team explained to each person the reason for the consent form, which gave permission to audio record the Circles. How information would be kept confidential was explained to each person and included in the consent form. Recordings were transcribed and participants' identities anonymized. The quotes used in the reports were anonymous, and photographs used in this article were altered to blur faces.

Vision Day Structure

Vision Day structure included welcoming participants as they arrived, an opening prayer by an elder, a presentation on Talking Circles, and the reason they were asked to attend. The first round of Talking Circle prompts focused on experiences and needs. The second round of prompts focused on identifying priorities and ideas for change. Participants spoke and listened from the heart and told their stories honestly. One person spoke at a time as the Talking Stick was passed around the Circle in a clockwise direction. Participants were asked to speak spontaneously as preplanning often causes people to stop listening and speaking from the heart. Participants were also asked to speak briefly, so that everyone would have a chance to talk or to pass if they had nothing to share. One individual, usually an evaluator, was in charge of flip chart notes, recorders, objects to hold, or the Talking Stick. During a break, the team consolidated notes from flip charts into a list of priorities. All participants were invited to amend priorities and vote on them by placing stickers next to each listing on the flipchart (Figure 2). During the last Talking Circle, participants shared their thoughts about the day. The day ended with a closing prayer and goodbyes.

The Talking Circle format opened a dialogue that continued beyond the time/space boundaries of each Circle. Collaboration and networking happened throughout the day as participants shared stories

and experiences, resources in their areas, and contact information so they could work together more closely. The method itself was not just a way to collect data but also a system for improving care.

Culturally responsive data collection and analysis included having multiple evaluation and organizing team members chatting and networking throughout the day, recognizing themes on the go, listening from the heart as a form of analysis, and facilitating group amendments. It was important to handle facilitation, analysis, technical, and practical issues as they arose. This type of data collection required a dialogical approach to both data analysis and report writing. Ultimately, the analytical voices of the researchers blended with experiential voices of the participants, creating a "true north" for the report which was then shared with communities and participants.

Outcomes of the Talking Circle–Based Evaluation

Participant stories revealed that the care journey was more circular than linear and frequently involved bouncing between providers, returning home without support, or not accessing care because of previous negative experiences. As a result of what the Stollery Awasisak Indigenous Health Program learned in Talking Circles, they are now making changes and working to increase community awareness of available resources. While this process could not change the price of baby formula and food in northern and remote communities, it did produce realistic and implementable priorities for Stollery (see Di Lallo et al., 2018).

Stollery Awasisak Indigenous Health Program committed to hosting Talking Circles for three years (1) to invite families and communities to continue sharing experiences, hopes, visions and dreams; (2) through conversations, to look to the future to provide with services; and (3) to determine what steps needed to be in place for a supportive and positive transition to/from hospital and community. Many of the same themes and priorities regarding systemic problems emerged in the second year, further justifying the use of Talking Circles. Because these are complex problems with multiple actors (federal systems, province systems, First Nation and Métis governance systems, etc.), change will be slow; therefore, it is important that Indigenous voices continue to be heard. In addition, the Talking Circles honor the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) recommendations, especially #19, that says:

> We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and to publish annual progress reports and assess long term trends. Such efforts would focus on indicators such as: infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence, and the availability of appropriate Health services. (p. 2)

Overcoming Challenges to Using Circles

The collaborative, dialogic processes and Talking Circles used by Stollery Awasisak Indigenous Health Program to evaluate service access and delivery were effective because they employed culturally responsive methods. The case study provides an excellent example of how Circles contributed to a successful evaluation that elicited executable solutions from evaluation participants. However, the authors understand that Circles may not be a good match for every evaluator and evaluation and that there are barriers and challenges to overcome before we see a widespread acceptance and usage of Circles. We acknowledge some of those challenges here while circling back to a question posed earlier: What does this mean to non-Indigenous evaluators who wish to incorporate Circles into their own practice?

The greatest and most current challenge is evaluator training. House (2005) acknowledged that a major problem within the evaluation community is that most evaluator training does not deal with

social justice issues and that most evaluators lack training in methods, practices, and approaches that do not replicate harm and oppression. This includes training in keeping a Circle. Even though the Circle process is simple, flexible, and adaptable to most any evaluation context, evaluators should still be trained in keeping Circles to minimize their chances of doing harm. Evaluators should learn that they cannot predict, control, or expect what will happen or come out of a Circle process (Ball et al., 2010). Sometimes issues are brought up in Circle that may blindside the evaluator whose job as E-CK is to continue holding the space even if it appears that things are falling apart. Again, the value of trust comes into play: trusting the wisdom of the Circle, trusting Circle participants to have the capacity to move through pain and challenges and reach a place where the work can continue. Unfortunately, in the United States but less so in Canada, access to Circle trainings may be dependent upon where one lives. For instance, Circle keeper trainings abound in Vancouver, Calgary, Oakland, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Chicago, Virginia, and Connecticut but are scarcer in rural areas and conservative regions of the United States. A Google search of Circle trainings or RJ may help evaluators identify where they can attend Circle workshops, and AEA regional affiliates may be able to host on-site training workshops for their members. Pranis' *The Little Book of Circle Processes* is an excellent source for learning the basics of the Circle process, as are other sources in this article's bibliography. International, national, provincial, regional, and state RJ associations exist to provide access to training and information. Videos of Circle processes are widespread on YouTube. Universities that have RJ or conflict resolution centers can often provide resources, trainings, and community connections. What one learns about Circle processes in other disciplines (i.e., criminal justice, education) can be combined with existing knowledge of evaluation approaches and modified for specific evaluation contexts that consider the culture of the participants.

Before evaluators try incorporating Circles into their practice, they must ensure their motives are aligned with the common values of Circle (Ball et al., 2010). Circles are inherently transformative and hold great potential to change how evaluators see the world and do their work. "Circles are not, therefore, the latest technique fad but an embodiment of both ancient and modern wisdom about how to keep human relationships alive, free, open, and constructive . . ." (Pranis et al., 2003, p. xiv). This advice should not be taken lightly.

It is natural to experience fear or anxiety when attempting to use a new method. Evaluator experience and comfort with Circles is one challenge; stakeholder unfamiliarity is another. It is highly likely that most stakeholders who are not Indigenous or familiar with restorative practices will have never heard of or participated in a Circle process. Discomfort may be high, and using Circles with high-powered stakeholders may be extra challenging and intimidating. It is not an easy task to straddle the two often opposing worldviews of Indigenous and corporate or institutional cultures, and much of the decision to use Circles will depend on the depth of relationship between the evaluator and stakeholders. Although we advocate for the Circle as an evaluation method, we encourage evaluators to use their own wisdom to discern whether or not to use Circles. Participants in Brown's workshops felt that Circles should probably not be introduced in the middle of an evaluation. On the other hand, if an in-progress evaluation reaches an impasse or major challenge, it may be appropriate to hold a Circle to uncover hidden or unaddressed issues. Obviously, evaluator comfort, familiarity, and judgment are key to deciding when to use Circle. Circles are available to all people, but stakeholder power and privilege may inhibit their willingness to be vulnerable in Circle and adhere to Circle values.

Moving Forward

Becoming a culturally responsive evaluator means critically reflecting on one's own biases, teachings, and practices, as well as learning ways to conduct evaluations that leave people better than when we met them. The Circle process allows those who embrace this method to embark on a

journey of personal and professional transformation that can have profound impacts on how they do their work. That said, there is much to be learned about how Circles inform and influence evaluations and their outcomes. Our field needs more evaluators willing to hold Circles and then share their experiences. This article is one step forward on the long road to having Circles be an accepted and widely used evaluation method. It is a tool that all evaluators can use to build relationships and increase participant engagement with evaluation. By offering the global evaluation community this concrete, practical, and culturally responsive approach, we open the door so that others can build on this work and offer additional insights as this practice is used, refined, and documented. Building connections with each other in Circle is an appropriate and effective way to continue our journey toward conducting culturally responsive and more just evaluations that actually *do good*.

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Notes

1. Circle is capitalized to distinguish it as a specific process, not geometrical shape; to honor it as an Indigenous-inspired ceremony; and to adhere to many Indigenous conventions that capitalize special ceremonies or practices: Sundance, Inipi, Vision Quest.
2. For some, the Talking Circle invokes connections with Indigenous ancestors and holds deep spiritual and tribal meaning. In restorative justice (RJ), the Talking Circle is a term commonly used to describe Circles used for discussion and dialogue. Recent discussions among RJ practitioners and culturally responsive evaluators suggest that non-Indigenous people may be culturally appropriating the term "Talking Circle." While the issue remains unresolved, the authors have agreed to use both terms in this article.
3. While the Talking Circle is a common practice in many different tribal cultures, not all of these incorporate the Anishinaabe Seven Scared Teachings.
4. The descriptor Evaluator-Circle keeper was first introduced in this article by Brown.
5. Awasisak means *children* in the Cree language.

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