

Embracing Mino-bimatziwin and surviving Gang life:
Narrative Action Therapy and Indigenous Street Gangs

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I work and live on the stolen lands of Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene and Metis people. I am a white man with predominantly settler ancestry. I acknowledge that my privilege is afforded to me on the backs and blood of the ancestors of these nations and that the living members of these nations are the rightful stewards of this land. I pay my respects to the ancestors of this land, the Elders, and the future generations of Indigenous people to come. I am honored to have been adopted as a son, brother, husband, father, and uncle into a beautiful family of original people. I am honored to be married to a beautiful Anishinaabe Ikwe and raising proud Indigenous children. My growing up along side Indigenous people and belonging to such a beautiful family informs the work I do. I am grateful to the Elders who took the time to teach me and set me straight when needed, I am grateful to the youth who have taught me through this work, and I am grateful to this land and the source of creation for the sustenance of life.

A note about Action Therapy

Action Therapy is a name that has been attached to a particular modality of engaging with youth. It is not born out of one school of thought or theoretical discourse, it is simply a name that was given to a style of work that I have come to do. It was originally created and carried out through the 90's and early 2000's by a mentor of mine, a therapist, and Metis elder named Mitch Bourbonniere. He would work with young people in the care of CFS and through the youth justice system. His style of engagement was not typical of a therapist, he would take young people out, do activities in the community, build relationships outside of an office, engage with a whole family and meet people where they are at. Some of the activities would include, doing community service work (lateral empathy), attending sporting events, attending Indigenous ceremony, and supporting community based social movements (rallies, vigils, community patrols). Mitch would be there in times of crisis and in times of celebration. It happened that

many of the youth responded well to this engagement, and some of the so called most difficult youth were becoming really engaged. Many youth who get funneled through the justice system and who are in street gangs would not go to see a therapist in an office, but for some reason when Mitch would come and pick them up, they would jump in the truck and roll for the day. It got to the point that Mitch was getting so many referrals that he couldn't keep up. As Mitch explained "there wasn't many other therapists who wanted to do it, it was undervalued, the pay wasn't as good as if you sat in a little office all day. The work itself was hard and people were scared, also people weren't comfortable with the boundaries" (Bourbonniere, 2021). Mitch, also being an instructor in some community-based programs through the local collage and university recruited some students he thought could do the work. "Workers were not masters level educated people, but with a little bit of education under your belt, some lived experience and a good heart I think you can do this work. So I told the agencies, hey, I can't take on any more but I know some people who can, you just have to accept that they don't have a masters degree; but I tell you they will do a better job than a guy in an office with a masters degree" (Bourbonniere, 2021). And in 2011 the community of Action Therapy emerged. This is when I started to get involved in this work and the community has been growing with new forms of practice emerging all along. Many of us, when we first started in this were at a college level education, engaged in community worker or counseling certificate programs and have now gone on to get undergraduate degrees and master's degrees but maintain the style of work. I have been excited to now incorporate narrative practice and ideas into this work to influence further growth and change. Action Therapy has broadened in scope and has changed the landscape of therapy in our city.

The context

Indigenous street gangs in Winnipeg's north end neighbourhood are born out of the colonial condition that has been manufactured since the onset of the colonial project. The north end of Winnipeg has always been a racialized space subject to conditions of poverty. In the early 1900's the north end was the landing pad for many waves of immigration from eastern European countries. Immigrant populations came to work in the manufacturing industry in factories and along rail lines that divided the city in half. On the south side of the tracks were predominantly upper-class Anglo-Saxon immigrants and the north side was home to the working poor, eastern European workers. At that time in the north end substandard housing was quickly built to house the growing population of immigrant workers. It was in this neighbourhood that workers organized, and the labour union movement took hold in Winnipeg eventually having a general strike in 1919.

Meanwhile in Indigenous communities throughout Turtle Island, various genocidal projects of colonization were being inflicted on the people and land. Forced relocation in the name of natural resource development, apprehension and imprisonment of Indigenous children in institutions, the creation reserves with a pass system, out-lawing of traditional ceremony, state-violence, state manufactured food insecurity and other forms of violence were all a part of the colonial project taking place. Despite ongoing resistance and uprisings among Indigenous nations the power of the colonial project took hold, and the impacts were devastating. The colonial project causes many traumas to Indigenous nations. Family violence, alcoholism poverty, and many forms of violence became the reality for many Indigenous people living in northern Manitoba reserve communities because of these imposed colonial conditions (Comack, Lawrence, Morrissette, & Silver, 2013).

Back in Winnipeg, after the second world war changes in the global economy and the rise of neo-liberal and global capitalist ideals caused changes in the labour market and many eastern European settlers who populated the north end began to exit to the south side of the railroad tracks and north beyond the boundaries of the north end in the movement of suburbanization and urban sprawl. This caused the area of the north end to be hollowed out with many properties owned by absentee landlords (slumlords) being vacant. In 1961 according to the Canadian census there were 1082 Indigenous people living in Winnipeg; throughout the 60's an average of 400 Indigenous people per year came to Winnipeg and that increased to 1200 people per year throughout the 70's (Comack, Lawrence, Morrissette, & Silver, 2013). As of the 2018 census 84,305 Indigenous people are reported to be living in Winnipeg (Winnipeg, 2018), the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada. For the four decades post war Indigenous people migrated to the north end attracted by low housing costs and hopes for opportunity, escaping the harsh conditions created by colonization in their home communities. The reality is that they were met with something very different. Economic changes and de-industrialization replaced full-time unionized jobs in the manufacturing industry with low wage part-time work in the service industry and those jobs were not even available to many Indigenous people who were confronted by a wall of racism in the job market and education system (Comack, Lawrence, Morrissette, & Silver, 2013). The north end of Winnipeg became not only a racialized space but also a colonized space. Racialized poverty, discrimination, racism, and the oppressive conditions of colonization created the perfect conditions for the rise of Indigenous street gangs, which are a response and resistance to these colonial conditions.

This reality is often overlooked by dominant colonial systems that seek to place the blame on individuals for the outcomes of street gang movements. The interaction between

dominant colonial discourses and people who have experience in the gang life contribute to spoiled identity conclusions. One man, in a therapeutic interview shares his thoughts on how he was depicted by a crown attorney at a sentencing hearing, *“they just think were all bad, like I woke up and decided to be in a gang one day, like there is nothing wrong with the messed-up life I had to live. Man, they made me look real bad. Even my lawyer just making me look all pitiful, like I have mental problems or something.”*

The following is an exploration about how I have been able to incorporate some narrative ideas into the work that I do with Indigenous men who are members or former members of street gangs in Winnipeg. Some of the men I work with through our Action Therapy program and are referred through CFS (child and family services) or the justice system, some are self referrals, some are members of various community groups that I am a part of, and some are just friends, family, and neighbours. The elements I share about are in the context of one-to-one counseling, group work, land-based therapy and cultural engagement, and community engagement. It is my hope that through narrative practice I can open up opportunities for Indigenous men involved in street gangs to tell their stories and listen to the stories of others in their own way and ways that they prefer, Aunty Barbara Wingard says “We have our own ways of telling and listening to stories which are important to us” (Wingard, 2000). I appreciate the statement that “our identity is our story” (Drahm-Butler, 2015) and that the way in which we tell our story shapes our identity. When I as a therapist can ask questions about stories or parts of stories that are often overlooked or not included in the dominant problem stories then people can tell stories that can contribute to more positive identity conclusions. This is particularly important when working with Indigenous people. As Aunty Barbra explains, “us Aboriginal people been knocked so many times that we often don’t think very well of ourselves” (Wingard, 2001). In my work I try

to keep in mind and ask questions that bring to light the knowledge that many of the problems that Indigenous people bring to explore in counseling are responses to oppression and are social issues not just personal problems. Mino-bimaziziwin is a word that is used in both Anishinabemowin and Cree languages, it loosely translates to “the good life”. The process of coming to know bimaadiziwin requires taking responsibility for one's own healing (Hart, 2002). Michael Hart says that Mino-bimaadiziwin "is seen by many people as the overall goal of healing, learning and life in general" (Hart, 2002, p. 44). Many of the men that I work with who are active or former gang members are embracing this concept fully, through their initiatives to survive, resist oppression and find preferred ways of being and preferred ways of telling stories about their lives.

The crew and the missions

As reported by some of the men I have worked with, the crew and the missions are important elements of life in a gang. Gangs have very hierarchical structures with a boss at the top, captains under him and each captain running a crew of full-patched members and each full patched member have a crew of strikers or perspective members usually younger men who are trying to earn their patch. There is also always a mission. Maybe the mission is selling drugs, moving drugs or money between people or locations, doing a robbery, shooting someone, or committing another act of violence, stealing a car or any other task that is assigned by a “higher-up”

A young man said to me once “*“Did it every occur to you that you run a crew? It’s like you’re the higher-up and we go out and do missions, but our missions are good ones”*”- Mylez (*action therapy youth*). I found this striking as the structure of action therapy does somewhat resemble the structure of a gang. Mitch Bourbonniere a long-time social worker and innovator

of action therapy is *the boss* he invites people to do the work and triages the contracts that come from various agencies. All the action therapists that he gives contracts to are *captains* and each captain has a crew of guys or girls that they work with. In my work as an action therapist, I can gather up a crew of young men. These young men are able to get to know each other and have the shared experience of engaging in action therapy, many of the crew members have a variety of other shared experience too. The crew is something they can belong to through participation in activities we engage in; it provides opportunity to build relationships among the young men and act as a force that join them together. As a crew we also have missions. Sometimes the missions may be big, and our little crew will join up with other action therapists and youth or the mission may be smaller and just our little crew will do it. The missions we do might be things like, delivering beds through our charity bed program to people who need beds, collecting donations of furniture, delivering furniture to people in need, helping people and families move households, cooking soup or making sandwiches and sharing them with our relatives who live on the street, volunteering with groups such as *mama bear clan* (a community patrol) or *drag the red* (searching the red river for clues to missing and murdered people), delivering food hampers, we may shovel walks in the winter or do yard work for elders in the neighborhood, we may cut wood or collect rocks or keep a fire for a sweat lodge ceremony and the list could go on. These missions we have also come to call “lateral empathy” providing a counter to lateral violence that exists in the community. What I have come to discover through narrative practice is that these missions are real-time re-authoring actions. These missions provide opportunities to young people in the landscape of action (White M. , 2007) to create a new story or provide an opportunity to visit an old one. Having re-authoring conversations can relate these actions to the landscape of identity finding new meanings or preferred stories to tell (White M. , 2007),

contributing to preferred identity conclusions. These missions also provide opportunity to have rich therapeutic dialogue outside of an office setting. With most missions being done in a group it also provides opportunity to have some impromptu or informal out-sider witness practice. Here are some examples of questions and responses with young people after a day of doing missions. In this circumstance of this conversation, we had just spent the day delivering beds through our charity bed program. We have a partnership with Sleep Country Canada and can go to their bed warehouse where they have a large selection of beds that they donate to us. We will deliver a bed to anyone who wants one, no questions asked.

Billy: You could have been doing anything else today, what made you decide to come and help today?

Mylez: I like to help people out. Man, that one place we went to, all those kids slept on the floor, I know I don't always sleep on a bed, but a kid should have a bed bro.

Billy: What do you think it meant to that family that we brought them free nice beds?

Mylez: That lady was so happy, it seemed like she had a tear in her eye. Like nobody gives you shit for free, but we did. Maybe it's something she was worried about for a while and now she doesn't have to worry anymore. Those kids seemed happy for sure dude. As soon as we put that one down, they started jumping on it.

Billy: All the work you did today, and all the other days too, what does that say about who you are?

Mylez: I guess I'm just the type of guy that would give you something if I can. It makes me feel good to see others happy.

Billy: So, you're a helper? Would it be ok if I said you have a good heart?

Mylez: Ya, I guess

Billy: Would anyone be surprised to know this about you?

Mylez: Ya, my PO (probation officer) and my social worker.

Billy: Why would they be surprised?

Mylez: They just think I'm a thug, they just worry about all the wrong stuff I do like not showing up for curfew or getting locked up. They don't see the good in me.

Billy: Well, I think that that family saw the good in you, and man I see the good in you. Is there anyone you can think of that knows you're a helper and that you have a good heart?

Mylez: My grandma. Well now she does, you remember I didn't treat her good, but ever since Babycakez (an older former gang member that joined our crew one day a while back) talked to me, I've been better. I gave her \$500 for groceries last week. She sees the change in me.

Billy: Can you think of anybody we can help in the next while? If you have people who need beds, we can get them too.

Mylez: Ya there's this chop from down the block, she's got like 6 kids, I went to deliver a piece there and she's got nothing, could we get them some beds? And maybe I could fix up these bikes (pointing to broken bicycles around our storage) to give to the kids".

Re-authoring conversations support people to connect events into an alternative storyline according to a particular theme or plot (Russell & Carey, 2004). In this conversation the theme was Mylez being a helper, there is a dominant story about him being a gang member, who doesn't listen to his probation order or the demands of what child and family services wants him to do. I need to point out that what Mylez is talking about when he calls this woman a chop and he's delivering a piece. A chop is a name given to a person who buys drugs and the piece he is referring to is a piece of crack. So here is a young man who sells crack to a woman and notices that she could use some help and wants to help out by getting her beds, even put in time to fix some bikes to give to her kids.

Connection to Culture, land and ceremony

Some of the work I do with the men that I work with involves connecting with Elders and Traditional ceremony. In my work being aware of colonial history and enacting processes that keep me accountable and responsible to the people I work with is something I believe I must do.

I have developed relationships with Elders, knowledges keepers, Indigenous therapists and workers, and other members of the community who I consult with regularly and who provide critique and guidance in my work. These relationships have developed over the years, and I have been afforded the honor to learn about traditional ways of knowing about the land and participate in ceremony. Many of the elders who I connect with are open and inviting allowing me and the men I work with to learn and connect with ceremony. As a part of my work along with the men that I work with we have the opportunity to attend sweat lodges, annually the Sundance, ghost dance, fasting ceremonies, naming ceremonies, learning traditional songs and language, harvesting of traditional medicines and other land-based activities. Our crew helps to harvest wood for ceremony fires, collect rocks for sweats and maintain traditional ceremony grounds

Anishinaabe Elder Eric Courchane says “historically in our nation there is a process in life where we all are warriors, and we become warriors for the people. That teaching has not left our people. What it comes down to is, our young people are hungry for identity and unfortunately in that drug life, that gang life it is there too” (Vice News, 2014). Many former gang members have told me that one thing that drew them to the gang life is a sense of belonging and that sense of belonging had a lot to do with identity. Here in Manitoba many street gangs have names like “Indian posse”, “Native Syndicate”, or “Manitoba Warriors”. Gangs are also represented by different colors that members will wear to represent the gang they are in. Also, many gang members have street names. This interested me in terms of what narrative practice would refer to as the absent but implicit (White M. , 2000). What does this structure say about what is important and valued by Indigenous youth who join street gangs? Mitch Bourbonneiere says “this is not surprising at all, within every person from every nation there exists a blood memory” (Bourbonneiere, 2021). In the Anishinaabe culture traditionally there is a process when

a person will get a spirit name (street name) and will find out their clan (gang) and what traditional colors belong to them (gang colors). A spirit name will help a person learn about who they are in their relationship to creation. A clan helps a person learn about what kind of responsibilities they have in the community. Colors are traditionally put on shirts or skirts in the form of ribbon or painted on sacred objects identify who a person is in relation to creation through their name and clan to the spirits and others around (Calder, 2021).

In the summer of 2021, I was able to be a part of a naming ceremony with a young man that I work with. We had invited a friend and Elder Lance Wood from Manigatogin to do a naming ceremony for this young man. When Lance gives a spirit name, he asks questions about the person's life. The question asked was: *"tell me about your walk on mother earth that brought you to sitting here with me and asking about your spirit name. What can you say about who you are, where you come from and why you want to know this name?"* After listening to the story and witnessing the naming ceremony, I was allowed to ask Lance some questions. The questions focused on expression, image, resonance, and transport (Freedman, 2021). When responding to the question about image, Lance explained that: *"the grandfathers in the spirit world that help, show me images that become the spirit name. The name given to his young man was Red Wolf. Part of the young man's story was about needing connection and wanting to be a part of a group and work together for a common cause. That is how wolves live their lives and what they showed me was a red wolf running with a pack of grey wolves."* This young man was given the name Red Wolf. Later in the fall Lance and this young man were able to catch up with each other at a local gathering. When talking with Red Wolf about this meeting he said, *"Billy I seen that guy who gave me a name. You know what he said to me? He said, look boy, you're running with your wolves now, I told him that I'm learning lots about wolves now and how they're*

connected to the culture, they teach humility and cooperation. I'm getting a tattoo with my spirit name and my auntie is making me a ribbon shirt with my colors on it". This young man just one year previous was trying to get down (obtain membership) with a street gang and now he is pridefully engaging with his identity in a different way.

Making connections across generations is also very important. The colonial system has disrupted knowledge translation from one generation to the other and Elders express to me that they appreciate being able to engage with young people. Lance comments *"It makes me happy Bill, when you bring these young guys. I was young too and I had my own struggles. It wasn't until I called my spirit that I started to love myself and feel better about life. Everything I learned it doesn't belong to me, it belongs to our people, so it is a gift for me to share the little I know"*.

I meet with a Cree Elder, Mr. Spence who consults with me about a variety of topics he wishes to discuss about his life and work in his home community in northern Manitoba. Mr. Spence carries a vast amount of knowledge about his community's history and genealogy. He tells me stories about his community and family and how he has come to hold the knowledge he has. He expresses that he wishes to share with young people and that he notices that many young people in his community do not know their history or speak the language. I love the stories he shares, and I love being able to listen to them, I learn a lot from them. However, I began to feel we are not really engaging in "therapy", as I am being paid to do. When I check in with him about how sessions are going for him, he shares that it helps a lot for someone to listen and engage with him about his stories. "Everyone needs a witness to the stories of their life" (Wingard, 2000) says Barbra Wingard. But am I the right witness? I also work with a young man who is 28 and who comes from the same community as Mr. Spence, his mother was taken

as a young girl to residential school and oral histories about his community and genealogy were not passed on to him. In his younger years he found belonging and identity through membership in street gangs. He now expresses that he wishes to have people to talk to and learn about history of his community and his genealogy. The two people I am working with have expressed desires to share and to learn. So, I got them together to share each other's stories, in hopes that they could achieve what I cannot as a therapist (White M. , 2011). It went very well and as it turns out they are blood relatives. Junior (the young man) said in subsequent meeting *"It was really nice to meet a new Uncle. That old man knows everything about my family he even knew my traditional last name before white people came. I am a descendant of a man named Strong Heart and a woman called Forever Woman, they're the original grandma and grandpa that started my family"*. Mr. Spence and Junior continue to meet, and I have been told that they have attended ceremony together.

One ceremony that I attend and participate in with some of the men that I work with is the Sundance ceremony. The Sundance is among one of the most sacred ceremonies belonging to multiple Indigenous nations throughout Turtle Island. Mike Calder an Ojibway elder is the chief at a Sundance we attend. It is a difficult and powerful ceremony. Sundancers will dance for four days with no food and no water focused in prayer. At certain times in the ceremony a Sundancer may through their flesh, be attached to the tree which is the focal point of the ceremony and dance until that flesh breaks or from their flesh drag, buffalo skulls around the Sundance lodge. Everyone who participates has very personal reasons for making the commitment to complete the ceremony. This past summer six men who identified they are gang members completed the Sundance ceremony. After the ceremony I was able to engage in some narrative conversations with some of the men. These conversations brought together practices of

re-authoring (White M. , 2007) and double story development. Some questions I asked were to find meaning, to trace histories of skills and knowledges and to explore new and alternative storylines.

- What did completing the Sundance mean to you?

“It meant everything, I felt all my ancestors here, I’ve missed my kooko (grandmother) for a long time and I felt that she was here with me the whole time, I felt her real strong at the tree ceremony. I know now that I want this way of life.”- White Buffalo Charging

“I felt so welcomed, I was scared to go, I always thought because of stuff I did, that ceremonies like this weren’t a place for me but everyone has a past, and nobody judged me”-Looking Bear

- Does what you just went through change how you see yourself in anyway?

“Like that elder said, I am a Sundancer now and nobody can take that from me. I am Circling Thunderbird Man from the Martin Clan. Thunderbirds are loud and powerful and bring healing, that’s what I want to do for my Family. And now I have a new family all my Sundance brothers and sisters, we went through this together, I love all of you and its real, like I’ve never cried in front of anyone until now.”- Circling Thunderbird Man

- Is there any kind of special skill or knowledge that you needed to accomplish what you did at Sundance?

“I needed to not give up, even though it was hard, I wasn’t going to back down and quit.”- Looking Bear

- Did you ever know about or use that skill or knowledge before Sundance?

“Life on the street is like that, I don’t back down, if I did, I’d be dead. I’m not saying this was easy, but I would have died before I quit, but instead of chasing paper I’m chasing the good life here and I’m not going to quit, I’m getting my life on track.”- Looking Bear

A men's group and collective documentation

There is a group of men that I meet with at a local woman's centre. About 5 years ago a group of women at the North Point Douglas Woman's centre expressed that they wanted to share the space with men in the community. While they were enjoying the resources, networking, solidarity, and connection they were experiencing at the centre, they expressed that they were going home to the same sons, nephews, fathers, uncles, partners, and friends who are men and didn't have access to what they do at the centre and that they wanted to share space. So, for the past 5 years myself and colleague, Mitch Bourbonniere have been opening the centre two Monday evenings a month for men to share, network and eat together.

From this group I invited some men along with others that I work with to form another group. The men that I invited all had current or previous gang involvement and involvement with the criminal justice system. There is a total of 10 men that I initially invited and have left it open for members to invite others who they think would benefit from the group, keeping the focus on men who have experience in the gang life. We have been meeting in different spaces, sometimes at a green space in the neighbourhood by the woman's centre and sometimes in a common room by my office or the women's centre when they have had space to share. Usually we sit in a circle, engage in a prayer and smudge (led by a different man each time), we share, we sing and sometimes eat together. Not all men show up every time but every man I have invited has come at least once so far. When we first started, I was open and transparent, explaining that I am studying in a master's program and asked permission to document some of what comes out of the group and use as a part of my schoolwork and to share with others who may benefit from what we are learning about each other. I explained that I would keep anonymity and would seek permission from the group to share any parts of the guy's stories. All

agreed and were even encouraging towards my academic undertaking. In our first group meeting 5 men showed up. I asked the question; how and why they think young people get involved in street gangs. Out of this conversation I was able to document some common themes in the stories. Some of these themes included survival, income, sense of belonging, family legacy, lack of opportunities and resistance to dominant culture. I asked questions inviting the men to share why they think circumstances in their own lives and the lives of other young Indigenous men living in the north end of Winnipeg lead to involvement in street gangs. This invited rich descriptions to be told about how it was for them and their families and why they think they were led to the gang life. These questions led to discussions that exposed things like racism, marginalization colonial oppression, poverty and disposition of land, culture, and language. After hearing these stories the next two group meetings focused on exploring some of the reasons why and how these themes are important in the stories of young people getting involved in gangs. With this, the men collectively chose to call all reasons why they and other young men get recruited into the gang life “the devil” and externalizing conversations (White M. , 2007) about “the devil” have been able to provide rich descriptions of why and how these men had been recruited into street gangs. In these conversations’ things like poverty, racism, police brutality, loss of language and culture, disconnection from the land, unstable housing, lack of opportunities, violence and other negative impacts of colonialism are referred to by these men as works of “the devil”. In the group meetings that have followed up until now we have been talking about how gang activity itself a response and an act of resistance to “the devil”. Some of our meetings have focused on skills and knowledges needed to survive on the streets and in jail, and some meetings have been exploring ways that some of the men are reclaiming their lives from “the devil” and about how they can resist “the devil” in ways that make themselves, their

families, and their ancestors proud. Double-storied testimonies (White, Freedman, & Denborough, 2008) are coming out in these groups. Sometimes a man will be telling their story and I will be asking questions about responses and values, hopes, and dreams that are attached to some of the ways of resisting “the devil”. One group naturally unfolded into an outsider witness practice (Russell & Carey, 2004) as an older group member told a very descriptive story about his journey through and out of gang life. It made perfect sense to ask the other men present questions about image, resonance, and transport (Freedman, 2021).

Many of the men have shared about how learning about their culture, participating in traditional ceremony and learning from elders has been a big part of separating from gang life and over-coming the effects of “the devil”. In August one of our group members passed away and as a group we came together to sing at a fire that was being held to honor him. Many of the men have learned traditional songs and singing and drumming have become a part of what we do as a group. One of the men suggested we always sing to close our meetings because sometimes we talk about hard things and a song can help us deal with hard emotions.

There are collective documents (Denborough, 2008) that are arising out of this group. One man shared *“if my story can help someone else then I’ll tell it, whenever I can”*. Processes and documents used by narrative practitioners working with Ibuka (White, Freedman, & Denborough, 2008) in their work with survivors of genocide in Rwanda have inspired some of the work and future aspirations of this of this group. I shared with the men the idea of collective documentation and some examples that came from the work of Ibuka. The men agreed that the creation of collective documents could be useful in helping others. The idea of a resource for schools, community groups and organizations came about as it was mentioned and agreed upon by some of the men that often, there is a lot of misinformation about how and why young people

are recruited into street gangs and that there are not many opportunities for them to tell their own stories. Typically, resources like this are developed by police organizations and academics in the areas of criminology and from the (in)justice system. The document is still in its infancy stages but one important part that came about is when the men took issue with my use of the word “recruit”. Here are some of the questions that informed this conversation:

What is the problem with the word recruit?

Who uses this word?

If kids aren't being “recruited”, how are they getting involved with gangs?

How do young people get into street gangs?

How did you get into a street gang?

If there was a recruiter who/what would it be?

Through this conversation and discussion this collective statement was made:

- We don't like the way we are depicted as recruiting little kids to join a gang. We always hear in the news, and it seems like cops, social workers and those kinds of people think gangs are out there trying to scoop up little kids. This is not the case at all. Most of us agree that it hurts our heart to see young ones getting involved in the violence, drugs, and partying. The fact is, that the young ones come/came to us, some of them will do whatever they can to get down. We don't/didn't have to recruit there is enough kids running to the gangs. Some of them, like some of us were, are running from violence at home, some are needing to make money to feed themselves and their family, some of them want nice things like they see others have. One of us told a story about being 10 years old and having to make soup using only ketchup packets and water because they were hungry and that the

gang meant they would never starve again. Some of us say when we were young, we looked at the older Gs and saw them with money, gold and girls and we wanted that, we looked up to them. Other kids look up to cops, sports stars, and firemen, most of us could never see ourselves be like that so we looked up to the gangsters. It can actually be really tough to get into a gang, some of us had to take a beating just to get in, some of us had to spend years doing things we didn't want to, just to get down, some of us had to go to jail to prove ourselves its not like the door is wide open. One of us said his dad brought him in to the crew just protect him so another crew wouldn't take advantage of him. Some of us had to live in group homes and foster homes with mean people so we ran away to be with people who are like us. It is CFS that scoops up kids not gangs. Most of us couldn't go to school because we always got kicked out or moved too much to stay in one school. All of us feel racism from schools, cops, and social workers. Most of us didn't know who we were as Indigenous people or things about our traditional culture. Being in a gang we got to be around other Indians like us. The world around us isn't good to our people. If there is a recruiter to gangs it's the government and systems that make it, so kids live in poverty, it is racism, it is the history about what happened to our people. Colonization is the recruiter; colonization is the original gangster.

In creating this collective document I kept in mind teachings about narrative responses to trauma and listening for individual and collective speech patterns (Denborough, 2008) being aware about how framing questions to the collective can make it easier for people to tell their individual stories especially linking it to collective history of colonial oppression here in Canada.

Another collective document we are considering is one like “Living in the shadow of genocide: How we respond to hard times, Stories of sustenance from the workers of Ibuka” (White, Freedman, & Denborough, 2008). The similar document that is envisioned would be about what sustains men during incarceration, this document could perhaps be shared with guys who are currently locked up or with guys who are on their way to incarceration that they could take with them

Gang awareness presentation and outsider witnessing

Sometimes agencies, organizations, community groups or schools will ask me to give a presentation on gang awareness. Typically, these presentations might be done by police officers or criminologists, probation officers or other professionals all who can provide a single storied account of gangs from a colonial lens. But when I get asked to do a presentation, I bring in six highly trained individuals who are leading experts in the area of awareness about gangs in the north end of Winnipeg. These men are former members of street gangs who survived and found there way out of gang life and are now doing other things. The men tell their life story. They include stories before they were in gangs, how they got involved, what the experience of gang life was for them and how they got out and where they are at today, the men and I have explored stages of separation, liminality and reincorporation (White & Epston, 1992) in their stories. In this circumstance the men were presenting to a group of permeant ward social workers from a child and family services agency. Folks in the audience are invited to ask questions. Some questions relate to the stories the men tell and some are seeking advice in their professional context. At the end of the day, I spent the last hour asking the audience questions related to the four categories of inquiry, expression, image, resonance, and transport (White M. , 2007). The questions I asked were:

1) After spending the day hearing these men talk so openly about their life, what is something that captured your attention? What was said that gives you an idea about what is important to these guys? Is there anything that they said or how they said it that gives you an idea to what they might value?

2) Are there any images that arise based on what you heard today? Maybe these images take the form of metaphor. What do you think these images or metaphors that arise reflect about what these guys value or about what their hopes and dreams might be?

3) Why were you drawn to these expressions and images? Did any of this relate to your own personal experience either in your personal or professional life?

4) After being here today, is there any impact on how you will move forward with your life and work? What will you bring home with you or what will you bring next time you show up to work that you gained from hearing these men?

I purposely framed these questions to elicit responses about the collective of stories that were told by individual men. I know that each shared unique and individual stories, however, there are many commonalities and altogether they formed a collective story and other young Indigenous men, perhaps who these workers work with may be perceived as a part of the collective story. During the retelling I did have to respond to audience talking directly to the men and sharing praise and positive reinforcement (superlatives) (White M. , 2007) explaining that we would make time for that but that I am interested in elements of the stories that stood out and had to re-explain a few times the connection between the expression, images and values.

The men heard the engagement between audience and myself, I interviewed the men about what their experience hearing the re-telling, here were some of the responses about what caught their attention and what it means for them.

“I think its amazing that my story, like my life is valuable and helpful to others, I really hope that these workers can do what they say and have a different way of looking at the kids they work with, because I was that kid and look at me now”-Kevin

“You know I never liked social workers and I actually still today get nervous around them; I’m always scared for my own children even though I know there’s nothing wrong. But after hearing some of their stories, gets me thinking, maybe I could even be a social worker”-Blake

“I imagine now that there is possibility for people to think differently about us who have been through the ringer. And I’m not just an ex-gangbanger, there’s more to me than then that.”-

Mark

Documentation: Certificates, letters, co-authored reports and resumes

Some men have shared with me documents written about them, everything from new articles, court reports, institutional records (wreckcords) and social histories. In my work I have read many social histories and chart notes that serve to uphold the moral self worth of the systems involved (Epston & White, 1990) and diminish the self worth of the people they are writing about. Narrative practice has opened possibilities of alternative forms of documentation that uphold self worth and fight back against oppressive forms of documentation.

Certificates

Junior was released from prison on parole as a part of his conditions he must always carry with him paperwork that outlines his parole conditions and the reasons why he is on parole. Targeting

and profiling by government agents (the police) is a prolific practice here in Winnipeg and he was always being stopped, questioned, and being made to show his paperwork. Another one of his conditions is to obtain several certificates including, anger management, relapse prevention, parenting, and others. Nowhere does it say to attend “programs,” just to obtain certificates. We were laughing as I have a word processor and can make certificates quite easily. I have however, felt justified to give him some certificates (including managing anger and difficult emotions, overcoming anxiety, relapse prevention, certification in peer mentorship, and employment readiness). He has been carrying these certificates around with his parole conditions and reported that there has been a different attitude from police when he was stopped; police were congratulating him on his work and encouraging of the changes he’s made and that eventually when the same cops are driving by, rather than stopping him, they are giving a smile and a wave. Not only are the documents I am providing reinforcing his own positive identity conclusions they seem to be influencing the way others (the police) think about him as well.

Resumes

When young men come out and do community work, the tasks that they perform are things they could put on a resume, they are building employable skills. When somebody comes to deliver beds or move furniture, they are a mover, when someone shovels an elder’s walk, they are a landscaper, when a man leads the men’s group for the night, they are a facilitator and when an older man connects with a younger man, they become a mentor, and all these can be put on a resume. A resume is a powerful document, it is hard for young Indigenous men to find employment, so a resume is a good to have. Seeing these skills documented on a resume can serve to strengthen positive identity conclusions.

Letters

Sometimes police will pick members of our crew up and they become incarcerated. When this happens, we will write letters to them. Some of the men will express that what they have experienced through their involvement with action therapy is something that keeps them going while they are locked up and that they look forward to re-engaging when they are out. Letters from the crew and myself serve to maintain connection to preferred ways of knowing themselves while they are incarcerated. Also, during the pandemic when in person visits were prohibited letters maintained the therapeutic relationship.

Co-authored reports

For much of the contract work that I do there is an expectation to provide written therapeutic/treatment summaries about the therapeutic process. Many professionals use these reports as opportunity to translate an appropriated story into professional language (Mann, 2002), which is typically privileged by agencies that would refer people for therapy. It seems that this professional language may make it seem to the referral sources that they are getting their money's worth. I have recently begun to co-author reports in the forms of letters from the person I am working with and myself to the referral source. This practice is one way that I can take a decentered approach and ensure that what is being sent to others has the contributions and approval of the person I am working with.

In conclusion I would like to acknowledge that there are many folks and initiatives in the city of Winnipeg that are doing great work with Indigenous men who are involved in street gangs. There are many outspoken Indigenous men who are sharing their stories, providing

mentorship, and developing various supports for people who experience(d) or are impacted by gang life and other responses to the colonial conditions here in Winnipeg. There are Indigenous led men's groups, organizations, agencies, Indigenous therapists, workers and Indigenous people with lived experience who do really good work and have beautiful stories about working with Indigenous men involved in street gangs. Sometimes in the work I do I realize that given my position of privilege the best way I can engage is to step back, to support, to collaborate or follow the lead of other people and initiatives that are emerging in our community. I would like to acknowledge a few community groups who are creating beautiful stories through their support and engagement of young Indigenous men and their resistance to the ongoing colonial projects. I would encourage readers to look them up and be witness to some of the beauty they bring into our inner-city community in Winnipeg. In no particular order I would acknowledge: Mama Bear Clan, Bear Clan, OPK (Ogijita Pimatswin Kinamatawin), Anishiativ, Community204, Strength in the Circle, and Healing together.

Appendix: Document examples



Whistling Therapy Services
Billy Dubery, BSW, RSW
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 204-992-3455



Billy Dubery and Tristen James Action Therapy Summary Report April 2021
 Co-written by Mylez and Billy

Dear Gina,

During the past 6 months we have continued to engage in a therapeutic relationship. Mylez says he feels ok to talk about emotions and topics that are of importance to him with Billy. We both agree that as Mylez grows up and matures, he continues to be more open in therapeutic dialogue, exploring relationships and aspects of his identity. We are consistently willing to meet and engage with each other both in community activities and in one-to-one counseling. Mylez continues to reach out to Billy when he feels he needs support or someone to talk to.

Therapeutic activities we engage in:

- One to one counseling
- Participation in traditional ceremony
- Community service work.

Stories we share with each other have been about:

- Aboriginal Identity
- History and effects of colonization
- Past trauma
- Family separation
- Being in care
- Relationship with family
- Mental health
- Moving toward independence
- Self-esteem
- Education
- Substance use
- Healthy Sexuality

Therapeutic Summary:

We both notice that Mylez continues to take pride in his identity as an Indigenous man. Mylez says that he finds comfort and healing in helping and participating in traditional ceremony. Together we are consistently enthused to help or participate in traditional ceremony such as events, medicine picking, lodge building and other healing ceremonies. We are both looking forward to attending Sundance this year and hope very much that the pandemic doesn't call for restrictions that cause Sundance to be cancelled. Being a Sundancer continues to be an important

part of Mylez's identity and in therapeutic dialogue we have explored the differences in perceptions of identity between childhood and early teen years to now. We had conversations about how ceremony and understanding concepts of colonization and racism has contributed to a more positive perception of identity.

We have talked about how good it is to be living close to nature after being away from her for so long. Mylez says being a good son and helping his mum out is something that he is proud to do. We also talk about having a partner and maintaining a healthy relationship.

We talk about how this pandemic has made everything really weird in the world and how it is really hard to go to school because it is all on zoom and it is hard to pay attention on there.

Mylez wants you to know that he is not giving up on school though, but for now he wants to wait to go back. We had lots of talks about looking for work. Mylez says that he put out many resumes on Indeed and had a few interviews but nothing really worked out. Just a couple weeks ago though, Mylez said he was able to work again for an old boss doing a few landscaping jobs.

Recommendations:

We both agree that Action Therapy is something that we both want to continue to do together. Billy says that the therapeutic engagement that Action Therapy provides can continue to help in exploring concepts of identity while working through the impacts of past trauma and other things that come up on the road of life. Action Therapy can continue to provide support and advocacy in the community. Action Therapy will also maintain connection to a community where we are active in participating in traditional ceremony, cultural activities that are important to us and being helpers.

Warm Regards,
 Billy Dubery and Mylez Smith



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