Empowered Circles: Using Talking Circles in Research

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Abstract

Talking circles, also known as sharing circles, have been used in ceremonies for hundreds of years. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to community, participants share power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they want in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. Talking circles can be used for assessment, evaluation, research, discussion, problem-solving, and decision-making. In a study focused on student sense of belonging, participants and I employed talking circles, which changed the dynamic of data collection in ways that focus groups never could. In this article, I center on the differences between focus groups and talking circles, a reflection on the process of utilizing talking circles, and why and how more studies should consider the use of talking circles.

Keywords: talking circles, Indigenous research, research methods, storytelling, data collection.

My grandma once told me to “smile at the world, and the world smiles back.” As a gay Indigenous man, this was not always easy. It has been hard to find myself in academic writing, to feel confident in my academics, etc. Often because of this, I did not feel like there was a space for me within academia. However, this all changed when I started my doctoral journey at New England College (NEC). I was pushed to think for myself, but more importantly, show up as myself. I was able to show up as my authentic self and utilize my studies to connect each one of

my identities to my research. I did this by using an Indigenous paradigm in my dissertation while using Indigenous research methods, such as talking circles. Talking circles are a form of Wiisokotaatiwin, which means gathering together for a purpose in Anishinaabemowin.

Talking circles, also called sharing circles or circles for short, can be employed as an equity-centered alternative to traditional focus groups. This does have a connection to my Anishinaabe and Menominee background, which is why it was significant for me to use circles within my research. The use of talking circles created an opportunity to connect to my Indigenous roots and have authentic conversations with my participants. Talking circles are based on the idea of participants' respect for each other and are an example of a focus group method derived from postcolonial Indigenous worldviews (Chilisa, 2012). Rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, talking circles are an open, discussion-based methodology that centers storytelling (Kovach, 2009) and can be used for discussion, problem-solving, decision-making, and data collection. The "basic purpose of a talking circle is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion" (Winters, n.d., p. 1). As Chilisa (2012) explained, there are many occasions to form a circle, including around a fireplace, during celebrations when people form circles to sing, play games, etc. (p. 181). It was an honor to host seven circles within my research, and I am thankful that you, as the reader, decided to learn more about talking circles and how researchers can use them to diversify and Indigenize their research.

Literature Review

Talking Circles

The talking circle is a symbol promoting sharing of ideas, equality, respect for each other's ideas, togetherness, and continuous and unending compassion and love for one another (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). Brown and Di Lallo (2020) utilized talking circles in place of focus groups for evaluation, and Tachine et al. (2016) used sharing circles to replace focus groups for

research. Talking and sharing circles are equity-centered as the process is based on equality among participants (including the facilitator, often called the circle keeper) and sharing power with each other (Winters, n.d.). Every participant is given an opportunity to speak and can share what they want, remain silent, or choose to skip their turn (Winters, n.d.) thereby giving participants agency to engage however they wish.

Circles are based on Indigenous knowledge systems and values and focus on sharing stories as a means to support the values of knowledge sharing, because everyone has knowledge to share, interconnectedness, and responsibility to the community. The Anishinaabeg have a deep connection to circles and specifically draw upon the Anishinaabe Seven Sacred Teachings: wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, and truth (Winters, n.d.).

Waterman (2019) contended that sharing circles are an example of how Indigenous knowledge systems can be applied to research. Tachine et al. (2016) argued that talking or sharing circles are an excellent replacement for traditional focus groups given the disadvantages of the latter. Focus groups can silence people (Tachine et al., 2016), limit the sharing of alternative opinions (Babbie, 2007), restrict individuals from sharing personal information (Liamputtong, 2011), limit the opportunity for storytelling, and do not provide for an in-depth discussion of personal experiences (Hopkins, 2007). A key element of circles is interconnectedness and the importance of relationship building, which addresses power and privilege and yields deeper responses from participants (Archibald, 2008). Circles as an assessment or evaluation method “increases voice, decreases invisibility, and does not privilege one worldview or version of reality over another” (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020, p. 367). In addition, circles can increase validity and ensure that findings truly represent the voices and experiences of participants (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020).

While circles are based on Indigenous values and knowledge systems, non-Indigenous practitioners can use this approach. Still, circle keepers and participants must always acknowledge and respect the origins of circles to ensure the process is not culturally appropriated by using cultural artifacts without permission or making explicit the Indigenous history (Waapalaneexkweew, 2018).

To begin, the circle keeper creates a circle of chairs, ideally with no barrier such as a table, for themselves and the participants. An object such as a stick or rock is identified as the talking piece. During the circle, when participants receive the piece, it is their opportunity to share whatever they would like related to the topic of the circle with no limits on time. When the participant is done sharing, they pass the talking piece to the next person who shares their story. Since only one person talks at a time, the one holding the talking piece may speak, and all others must listen. The one challenge with circles is that because everyone is given an opportunity to speak for as long as they would like, circles can be longer than traditional focus groups. Tachine et al. (2020) utilized a sharing circle for research with Indigenous students and had some circles last as long as 4 hours. However, they noted that students chose to keep the circle going for this long and were fully engaged. Tachine et al. (2020) suggested that a circle keeper could remind participants to be mindful of the time, if needed.

Winters (n.d.) provided eight guidelines for implementing talking circles:

1. Respect the talking piece so the person who has it can convey their full message without interruption.
2. When you do not have the talking piece, listen respectfully, and reflect upon, consider, and honor the meaning of what others say, so you can build on the conversation.
3. You can pass if you need to. Nonverbal communication and silence sometimes say more than words.

4. Mute your cell phone and computer devices so as not to interrupt others.
5. Speak for yourself and from your own experiences and perspectives. Use “I language” and not generic “people think . . .” or sweeping generalizations, like “students want . . .” language.
6. Be courageous, honest, and open with your own stories. Speak your truth from your heart and be open to hearing others’ truths.
7. Listen from the heart, allowing what others say to move you. Bear witness but do not provide advice or argue with others.
8. Honor what others say with confidentiality and integrity, sharing only with context and in relevance to your own life and learning, not as gossip. (p. 6)

Winters (n.d.) described four components or phases in the circle process. The first phase is building connections which occurs at the beginning, which would be akin to the opening and introduction sections of focus groups. During this phase, the circle keeper explains the circle's purpose, may implement a relationship-building activity, and introduces the talking piece. Piercing the surface is the second phase during which participants discuss their connection with the topic and is similar to the transition portion of focus groups. During the delving deeper phase, which is analogous to the key questions portion of focus groups, participants share stories regarding the topic. Reflecting and learning is the final phase of the circle where synthesis across participant knowledge sharing is made.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a method of qualitative research in the form of small groups of people who provide opinions and other information about a particular product, issue, or topic (Morgan, 1988). Focus group participants typically have some similar characteristics or interests so its members can serve as representative samples of a particular demographic, or section of society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups were developed in the years following World War II

(Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) described a focus group as interviewing a larger group instead of one person. They continued to state that focus groups are a common form of data collection for qualitative data. When using a focus group format, there is typically an interviewing protocol with structured or semi-structured questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From an equity perspective the data collected can be diversified, if the interviewer ensures that they are including all voices and creating a diverse participant selection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morgan, 1988).

Focus groups start with a predetermined group of people focusing on a specific topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morgan, 1988). Participants have an interactive discussion, and, thereby, a focus group discussion. The method may be described as an interactive discussion between six to eight pre-selected participants led by a trained moderator (Hennink et al., 2011). Focus groups typically last between 60–90-minute periods and in an environment where people feel free to express themselves (Hennink et al., 2011).

Storytelling

Storytelling as a research tool has been increasingly popular either as complementary to the classical research of qualitative methods or as a research inquiry in its own right (Lekoko, 2007). Storytelling is a potent research tool even if it does not complement but stands alone from classical inquiries, as its strengths lean more on its nature as an integral element of day-to-day communication of Indigenous communities (Lekoko, 2007). Many Indigenous researchers already mentioned believe this tool represents a different way of learning about the world, no less valuable than classical research inquires (Lekoko, 2007). Lekoko (2007) described storytelling as a “vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts” (p. 84). Storytelling is also a powerful research paradigm because all communities have stories (Maines, 1992). Some of the reasoning why I used storytelling as a research tool is described by Lekoko: (a) its potential to bring researchers and community members together to dialogue

about social problems in a free and entertaining way; (b) its problem-solving orientation; (c) its participative, interactive, and persuasive nature; (d) its comprehensive structure allows for a serious exploration of community interests and opinions; and (e) its narrative fidelity and respect of culture of Indigenous communities. Lekoko (2007) said, “great stories provide us with a road map or treasure map, which outlines all of the actions and tasks we have to accomplish in order to complete the journey successfully” (p. 86).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Storytelling puts the researcher in the participant’s environment so they can better understand the data. The storyteller, which is the participant, paints a picture book that brings the listener into their world and the moments that researchers are currently researching. I believe it is a beautiful and sacred thing to listen to stories all around us. As researchers capture these stories, they are in a ceremony together with their participants. What I mean by this is that research is a ceremony. In Wilson’s (2008) book, *Research is Ceremony*, he discussed people’s relations with the environment and land. Wilson (2008) wrote, “Oscar and Ray write about the pedagogy of place, that the environment is the knowledge” (p. 86). Wilson explained this quote acknowledges knowledge itself is held in relationships and connections formed with the environment surrounding us. From this connection with the environment, Wilson (2008) created a concept of the connection in linking the space between people with the relationship they share. By reducing the space between objects, people, and things, one is then strengthening the relationship they share and bringing them together, so they share the same space; this process is what ceremony is all about (Wilson, 2008). A second concept outlined by Wilson is there is no distinction between relationships made with other people and those made with the environment. Wilson also quoted his friend, Jane, who stated, “When you talk about the land and people and community, everything is related in that way. The

only difference between human beings and four-leggeds and plants is the shadow they cast" (p. 87).

A Study Using Talking Circles

There were two purposes for this study. First, I explored the characteristics of creating a space in an environment to promote a sense of belonging. Second, I explored students' sense of belonging to certain spaces where they feel like they belong. For example, this included classrooms, campus unions, residence-halls, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) pride center, multicultural center, etc. Another purpose was to understand how students describe these spaces, such as what the space looks like, feels like, sounds like, what is in that space, and who the contributors are helping to create the space.

Research Questions

My research study addressed three questions:

- What are the spaces where college students feel like they belong?
- How do students describe those spaces?
- Why do students feel like they belong in those spaces?

As a researcher, I hoped to understand students' needs and wants when creating a sense of belonging in a campus community and develop strategies for college administrators to create a sense of belonging for all students.

The Process of Circles

For my dissertation study, there were a total of 51 participants. Twenty-one participated in in-person interviews, and 30 participated in one of the seven talking circles. I increased the number of talking circles and interviews one by one until saturation was met. Originally, I was going to have six to eight participants in each circle because I thought if there was less there would be less data collected. The result was the exact opposite. I conducted a talking circle with only two participants and found more data than my biggest circle, which had seven. I did not

have taking circles that included more than seven participants, as I was concerned the conversation might get out of control and silence participants in the group. Students had the opportunity to participate in either an in-person interview or a talking circle. Both opportunities were provided so people who felt more comfortable one-on-one could do so, and those who wished to engage in a group conversation could as well. The value of using talking circles is the synergistic effects of the group process to yield information, provided participants feel free to engage with other members of the group (Brandenburger et al., 2017).

During talking circles, it is common for a sacred object to be used, such as a feather, shield, stone, basket, etc., passed from speaker-to-speaker (Chilisa, 2012). I used a sacred spirit stone (asin), which is almost perfectly smooth and round. I found the asin on the banks of Lake Superior on the reservation of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of the Chippewa Nation with my twin sister. This rare rock formation is sacred and kept secret by the Ojibwe people and is still used in ceremonies today. When the speaker is holding this object, the speaker is not to be interrupted as the group listens silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished (Chilisa, 2012). After my graduation, I will go back to Lake Superior to return this stone and thank the creator for giving me this opportunity and for this journey.

There is a specific reason why I chose to use this spirit stone. I found this stone with my twin sister on the banks of Lake Superior on our reservation. We both found these stones together, but it was as if these stones found us. I use my stone in times of need such as inspiration, strength, and praying. When I was writing my dissertation and deciding how I would incorporate talking circles, I thought about the ceremonial object, and when I did this, I was holding onto my stone. At that moment, it was like something came over me, and by the time I looked down, this previous section was written, describing how I would use this stone. This is a special moment I cherish. As Anishinaabe, we believe these stones and rocks hold our ancestors. We call them our grandfathers. When this happened, I went to an elder, and they

said our ancestors were communicating with me, and I should follow them through this journey. I hesitated about putting this story in my dissertation, because it is so personal and emotional to me but I did this to connect with others who have had similar moments and to acknowledge that our ancestors are still with us, guiding us, and we need to listen to them: *All my relations (Niinwendimaaginaatok).*

The purpose of using talking circles in a research setting is to gain knowledge through discussion (Lavallée, 2009). The benefit for conducting these talking circles was that they created wiisokotaatiwin (a purpose to tell their stories), and debwewin (truth telling), and for them to build off each other's energy. It was special to be a part of, and I thank my participants for sharing their stories with me and their peers. Before each circle, I prepared asemma (tobacco) bundles to give to each participant as an offering for their participation. After this, I offered smudging and explained what I would be doing, and asked if anyone would not wish to smudge.

Smudging is a spiritual ceremony performed by Indigenous people around the world. For the Anishinaabeg people, smudging is the burning of the Four Sacred Medicines: tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweet grass. These Medicines are represented in the Medicine Wheel, which is a circle separated into four quadrants, with layers of significance and cultural meaning. The smoke of these sacred plants purifies the air, spirit, mind, body, and energies in the space the ceremony is performed. Many Anishinaabeg people smudge on a daily basis, and it is generally used to open meetings or sessions to set a tone of gratitude and positivity. One participant declined smudging during this study. During each step of the smudging process, I explained the reasoning for each action I took to engage with participants, educate them, and make them comfortable. I also explained the expectations of the circle. If at any point a participant did not feel like answering a question or sharing something, they did not have to.

The appropriate number of talking circles to conduct can vary by study; however, a typical amount used to reach saturation is three or four (Brandenburger et al., 2017). I originally set out to conduct three talking circles. However, I conducted seven talking circles with a total of 30 students who participated. Two circles were from the fraternity Tau Kapp Epsilon (TKE). One TKE circle had four participants, and the other had seven participants. A circle in the campus center had two students. Six students participated in a talking circle in the Multicultural Center. Four people participated in a talking circle in the campus sports lounge. A group of three participated in a talking circle at the campus grill. The last talking circle was a group of four participants in a campus center. Each circle conducted took about 40 to 90 minutes, depending on the number of participants, as I needed to give enough time for everyone to tell their story.

Just like the interviews, for accuracy purposes, all talking circles were recorded and transcribed through a software called Otter. I was the only one conducting the circles. The questions asked during the talking circles were open-ended, and I used follow-up prompts to keep the conversation moving forward. However, these talking circles are unstructured. The questions I asked included:

- Can you please tell us what space you feel you most belong?
    - What are some words you use to describe this space?
- Can you please tell us how this space came to be the space you feel like you belong?
    - What was it like to find your space?
- What are the characteristics of this space that makes you feel like you belong? Is it people, location, objects in the space?
    - What would this space be like if you took one or a few of these characteristics away?
- What does this space mean to you?

    - What if this space was taken away? What is the impact?
- How does your space make you feel?
    - What was the feeling like when you first stepped into your space?

Throughout the study the following questions were added:

- Do you see respect in your space?
    - In what form?
- How is your space relevant to you?
- Do you see relationships in your space?
    - If so, how?
- Do you give something and get something in return in your space?
    - If so, please explain?
- How do you see responsibility in your space?

A benefit of only having prompts prepared in advance and not having preselected questions was to gain more knowledge and to hear participants' stories on how they would like to tell them. Prior to data collection, just like in interviews, I used a digital information form, which they received ahead of time. This form helped gather demographic information before sampling and interviewing. The purpose of this was to ensure my participants were diverse in their social identities. It is essential to have a diverse sample because if the study is overrepresented by folks of a certain race, gender, socioeconomic class, or other demographic, one cannot accurately apply the results to the rest of the population. The questions that were asked were: (a) age, (b) classification (year in school), (c) ethnicity, (d) race, (e) gender, (f) academic major, and (g) sexual orientation. I collected signed research participant consent forms after a description of the research protocol was read and explained to the participants.

The Differences of This Study

This study differs from other studies because it used an Indigenous way of being and thinking using an Indigenous paradigm and Indigenous research methods, such as talking circles. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to the community, participants shared power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they wanted in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. The talking circles changed the dynamic of data collection in ways that focus groups never could. They changed the dynamic by giving me the opportunity to join together into something bigger than us, be in a ceremony together, I was able to better connect with participants, which helped me understand their stories more clearly.

In the setting of the study, the participants enjoyed talking circles as a method of collecting their stories. Students noted that “this was a fun way to share my story with my peers in a welcoming environment.” Students also commented on being able to learn about a different culture from their own. For example, a student stated, “It was fun to be part of a ceremony different from my own culture but that I could participate and learn.” Another student said, “My dad conducted talking circles and smudged a lot. It was good to be part of something like this that reminded me who my dad is and my own roots.” As the researcher, it was enjoyable to conduct these circles and see compassion, joy, reflection, etc. These talking circles were emotional at points where some students were brought to tears in their reflections about finding where they belong. For example, a student said with tears in their eyes,

> I never felt like I genuinely belonged until finding a space like this [the multicultural center]. It is something I will be forever grateful for. I never had a home or a family until this space and the people that fill it. It is my true home compared to the other spaces I have been.

Another example that reflects the special nature of the talking circle is from a student who commented on the impact of the circle. The student said, “This talking circle helped me realize how important spaces are to me. I have never been in an environment like this that has been so [emotionally] moving and fostered critical thinking about who I am as a person.”

Talking Circles vs. Focus Groups

One of the main reasons why I decided to use talking circles instead of focus groups was because of my Indigenous paradigm, but I also chose talking circles because I believe they have the capability of being more valuable than focus groups. For example, talking circles break down post-colonial ideas, they have a natural way of collecting stories, and they foster a sense of connection and respect for participants and the researcher (Brandenburger et al., 2017; Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Another reason I used talking circles instead of focus groups was because they break down post-colonial ideas. Chilisa (2012) explained that post-colonial Indigenous research teachings include a process of decolonizing the conventional interview technique using Indigenous interview methods, such as talking circles, and involving indigenous knowledge to inform alternative research methods compatible with the worldviews of colonized others. Chilisa described decolonization as a process of conducting research in a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference. Using talking circles also creates space of other types of research within academia. By doing this, it diversifies studies, creates equitable practices, and may encourage other researchers to bring in their authentic selves into research. Research is personal, as it is something one devotes much time toward. This is why, when appropriate, because it may not always be, researchers should be encouraged to connect their research to their identities. Research is never neutral, as even the research questions we pose are informed by who we are and how we see the world.

Who Can Use Talking Circles and When to Do It

Throughout this journey, many people asked me, “Who can conduct these circles?” Can I use talking circles if I do not identify as Indigenous?” or “When can I use talking circles?” For me, talking circles and qualitative research are all about connecting, relationships, and storytelling, which is why I believe talking circles are for everyone to use, if they are being used respectfully. I know there are individuals who may disagree with me stating that circles are for all, but my family and tribe promote sharing knowledge. My cousin was once down in Florida, participating in a sun dance. When she was there, she found that these southern tribes had some of our language [northern Wisconsin tribe] within their sacred songs. She told me this as a reminder that we are a people of sharing our knowledge. This shows that we have been sharing stories, knowledge, ideas, etc., for hundreds of years and we should still continue this today. By creating circles, we are creating equity-focused research.

Talking circles promote equity-based practices and showcase diversifying our research, which breaks down a Western idea of research. By anyone using a talking circle, it creates space for more Indigenous practices, shows folks that our Indigenous communities still exist, and creates an understanding to folks about different ways of thinking, doing, etc. I would encourage anyone to use talking circles, but I suggest to anyone looking into conducting a circle to consider three things. First, understand the purpose of a talking circle. This should include extensive research on how to conduct one, the history behind them, and the benefits of using circles. Second, ask why one wants to use a talking circle. Is it for personal gain or for giving something in return, such as research to the world that will help in a positive way? Third, ask how to respect the Indigenous way of being. This is understanding the Indigenous culture and the mindset that research is ceremony and is sacred, so it must be treated with respect and kindness. Lastly, ask, when. It is important to understand when a good time would be to conduct talking circles.

Talking circles can be conducted at various times. Remember, a talking circle will elevate the discussion and has power. This should be considered when the time is right. Talking circles should be used in research when researchers are looking for data revolving around diversity, equity, inclusion and/or belonging, trying to connect with participants on a deeper level, when the researcher wants participants to collaborate together, and when the researcher is looking for deep, meaningful, extensive qualitative data. Talking circles can also be conducted outside of typical research. For example, my team at work finished an extensive project together that was emotional, life changing, and impactful and because of this, I decided that my team needed to break down what they were feeling. We did this by centering ourselves in a talking circle. This created an opportunity for the team members to understand what they were feeling, discuss this journey together, and bring our team closer.

Conclusion

Talking circles are a unique way of bringing people together to discuss events, ideas, stories, etc. They bring researchers extensive data that is powerful because of how it was collected. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to community, participants share power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they want in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. Talking circles should be celebrated and utilized throughout our society. By doing this, researchers and organizations will be able to collect meaningful data in a sacred and special way.

Indigenous knowledge and way of being is something that has been misunderstood for decades (Wilson, 2008). However, over the past 3 years, I have learned how to express myself and connect myself to my Anishinaabe and Menominee culture. For this reason, I will always cherish my doctoral journey for what I have learned about myself along the way, the connections I have made over the past three years with other Indigenous scholars and relatives,

and for understanding the relationships that are all around us. I never thought I would be a researcher because I never saw myself in research, and because of this, I lacked confidence in academia. I see now that I am a researcher, and I am forever grateful for the research process that allowed me to come to this realization. By putting my Indigenous teachings, like talking circles, into practice, I hope that Indigenous ways of being in research can flourish and be better understood. I also hope other Indigenous people will pick up the torch as well and practice their teachings. As Indigenous people, we are still here and deserve to be in academia. On June 20th, 2023, during my dissertation defense, Denise Henning of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, told me, “You [Benny] have a gift. It is a gift the creator gives to show others that we exist and teach non-Indigenous people a new way of being and going about things.” I hope to honor this gift to make my ancestors and relatives proud.

By completing my research, I have shown myself that a connection to our Indigenous roots in research is not just another paradigm or another way of going about research but is connected to a way of life and is sacred. I hope that this article and my research will inspire other Indigenous people to lean into academia in their own way, as I did. It was horrifying at first, but once I started, it created a fire in me that burned only brighter after each page was written and made me stronger. I believe my ancestors pushed me to be the very best and showcase that we are Anishinaabeg and still strong. I challenge you as the reader to now lean in and explore other ways of doing things in research and all around us. Remember that life is a ceremony, and it is a ceremony well worth living.

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Appendix

Talking Circles Guide

Greeting:

- Boozhoo kina wiya. Hello everyone, my name is Benny Rieth, and I am a member of the Bad River Band of the Chippewa Nation. I am in the Educational Leadership Studies doctoral program at New England College, where I am studying spaces in college environments and students' sense of belonging. Miigwetch. Thank you for being part of this journey with me. I hope that this research identifies what characteristics a space needs to help foster a student's sense of belonging, aid college professionals like me in creating these spaces, and that students always find a space on their campus where they are welcomed and belong.
- Prior to coming today, you should have signed a consent form and filled out an information form. Has everyone filled both these forms out?
- Though you have signed a consent form already, if at any point you no longer wish to continue with the study, you are able to leave. If this happens, please let me know, and we can dismiss your information from the study.

Talking Circle Overview and Prep:

- Today we will be conducting a talking circle which will take about one to one and a half hours.
- The creation of talking circles has historically been credited to the Woodland tribes in the Midwest, where it was used as a form of parliamentary procedure (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003, p. 39). Talking circles are based on the ideal of participants' respect for each other, so it is imperative that throughout our time together that we do not judge each other's stories, and we listen to each other.
- The talking circle is a symbol that promotes sharing of ideas, equality, respect of each other's ideas, togetherness, and continuous and unending compassion and

love for one another (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). We will sit in a circle that represents the holism of Mother Earth and the equality of all of us. It is common that there is a sacred object that is used, such as a feather, shield, stone, basket, etc., which is passed from speaker-to-speaker (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). I will be using a sacred spirit stone (asin). When a speaker is holding the asin, the speaker is not to be interrupted. The group must listen silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished.

- I will be leading the circle by asking some questions. I will first ask who would like to start. We will then pass the rock back and forth to each participant.
- For accuracy purposes, I will be audio-recording today's circle and transcribing it through a software called Otter. Is everyone okay with me doing this?
- Are there any questions on today's process?
- Before we start, I will be offering smudge. Smudging is a traditional purifying and cleansing tradition that cleanses the mind, body, and spirit. I burn sage, which will help center and prepare ourselves for our conversations today.
- Demonstrates how to smudge

Talking Circle Ceremony:

1. If you could please take a spot in the circle, I will come around to each of you. If you do not wish to smudge, please indicate to me that you would not like it by crossing your arms as if you were giving yourself a hug.
2. I now offer you each asemma. As an Anishinaabe person, we believe that asemma was the first of the four medicines that the creator gave us. It is offered to human beings, spiritual beings, animals, and natural beings as a symbolic representation of respect, gratitude, and to ask for something.
    - Today I am asking for your stories and experiences, which is why I present asemma to each one of you.

3. Hands asemma to each participant.
4. After gifting asemma, join circle
5. The reason why I am interested in a sense of belonging is because, truthfully, there was a time where I felt like I didn't belong, and I found a space that helped in so many different ways.
6. Today I would like to hear your stories and your journey

Questions:

1. Can you please tell us what space you feel you most belong?
    - What are some words you use to describe this space?
2. Can you please tell us how this space came to be the space you feel like you belong?
    - What was it like to find your space?
3. What characteristics of this space make you feel like you belong? Is it people, location, objects in the space?
    - What would this space be like if you took one or a few of these characteristics away?
4. What does this space mean to you?
    - What if this space was taken away? What is the impact?
5. How does your space make you feel?
    - What was the feeling like when you first stepped into your space?

Closing:

- Thank you again for participating in today's talking circle. Each of you will have the opportunity to review your statements once they are transcribed for clarification. Does anyone have anything else to add to today's discussion before bringing our circle to an end?

Thank you, everyone, for participating. Here are a few of my business cards if anyone has any other questions in the future. Miigwetch!