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New Thinking for Intervention: Towards a Culturally Responsive Model of Understanding  
Indigenous Suicide

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**Abstract**

New Thinking for Intervention...Towards a Culturally Responsive Model of Understanding  
Indigenous Suicide

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This dissertation explores the meanings and explanations of suicidal behavior from the perspective of Cowichan Tribes community members. Cowichan Tribes is located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. With the tribal context at the center of this investigation, this dissertation draws on Indigenous methodological approaches and theorizes suicidal behavior by engaging both settler colonial theory and the interpersonal theory of suicide. As a way to conceptualize culturally specific mental health approaches, I present a locally designed approach to assessment that draws on Cowichan's relational and collective formations. In the particular context of the Cowichan peoples, this project speaks back to the pressures of colonialism and the implications of the establishment of settler permanency for Indigenous futurity. Broadly, this dissertation contests individualistic models of suicide and presents the specific need to theorize Indigenous suicidal behavior from a collective orientation.

*Keywords:* Indigenous suicide, settler permanency, settler colonialism, collective, Indigenous futures



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	ii
List of Tables .....	iii
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2. Must Every Suicide “Die Alone”? Individual and Collective Explanations for Suicide .....	17
Chapter 3. Place-ing Relations: Conceptualizing a Place-Based Biopsychosocial Assessment .....	47
Chapter 4. Foreclosing Indigenous Futures: Understanding Suicide in the Context of Settler Permanency .....	107
Chapter 5. Conclusion .....	135
Appendix A, Community Member/Professional Caregiver/Elder Semi-structured Interview .....	141
Appendix B, Youth (10-19) Semi-structured Interview .....	144
Appendix C, Sample Life Stories Art Representation .....	147
Appendix D, Life Stories Workshop Coding Framework .....	148
Appendix E, Matilda’s Biopsychosocial Assessment .....	149
References .....	156

# LIST OF FIGURES

## Chapter 2

<i>Figure 1. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide: Presence or Absence of</i> Constructs (N=21).....	28
<i>Figure 2. Settler Colonial Theory: Presence or Absence of Constructs (N=21) .....</i>	33

## LIST OF TABLES

### Chapter 3

<i>Table 1.</i> Interpersonal Theory of Suicide Coding Framework	26
<i>Table 2.</i> Settler Colonial Theory Coding Framework	27
<i>Table 3.</i> Life Stories Workshop Practitioner Time Commitment	57
<i>Table 4.</i> Six Design Conjectures	60
<i>Table 5.</i> Biopsychosocial: Presence or Absence, Typical Biopsychosocial Data (N=5)	69
<i>Table 6.</i> Supplementary Data: Presence or Absence of Constructs, Designed or Emergent (N=5)	85

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## DEDICATION

### *We Pray for the People*

O Great Spirit, Creator of all things.

We give thanks for this day in the life you have given us.

For all these people joining us in this circle of life.

We give thanks for the four directions and all they represent.

We give thanks for all our children, for their health and well-being.

We give thanks for the food that comes to our table each and every day, as it's needed.

Free my spirit to be with those of all our relations.

Pray for forgiveness by the Great Spirit of all my weakness.

We remember our ancestors, the Stone People.

We remember the four-leggeds, the fish people, the bird people as well as the plants,

all for their food and healing help.

In the name of our Relations, we give thanks.

This dissertation is dedicated to all of those who have experienced the deep pain associated with suicidal behavior and to those who have lost a loved one to suicide.

*It is my hope that this dissertation can shed some light on suicidal behavior  
in a way that expands possible futures.  
Please know that you are not alone; trauma heals in the presence of caring others.*

## Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

*My sister calls late one night. Tragedy has struck. A young man in our community, the husband of my sister's friend, took his own life. "I am walking on eggshells because I don't know what to do. I don't know if I should bring it up or not. If I bring it up, will it make matters worse? I want her to know that I care, that I am here for her." I hear her rushing around gathering things to bring to her friend—blankets, pouches, kerchiefs, water, fish, bread... "What else might the family need?" We tried to recall teachings or stories about suicide but could not. We knew we needed to turn to the elders in our family for guidance. Following this tragedy, I learned of the increase in suicidal behavior in Cowichan. I also learned that many communities experience similar rates of suicide.*

Suicide is a profoundly disturbing occurrence that challenges our assumptions about life and human existence and leaves in its wake an overwhelming sense of agony and confusion amongst survivors of suicide loss. The grief of losing a loved one is devastating, and the loss is compounded by the sudden and unexpected nature of a death by suicide. What makes some people wish to die by suicide? More specifically, what makes some people relinquish their own futures and decide to take their own lives? Suicide is not a reflection of any factor in isolation; rather, it is a final expression of interactions among numerous personal and social mechanisms (Kirmayer, 2007b). Suicide is an individual act, but to what extent does suicide reflect larger social, cultural, or political occurrences?

Suicide impacts Indigenous populations in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia at disproportionate rates (Hunter & Harvey, 2002). In Canada, suicides are a dreadful reality for many Aboriginal communities. Overall, the suicide rate for Aboriginal peoples is approximately two times higher than for non-Aboriginal populations (Kirmayer, 2007b). It is estimated that suicide rates for First Nations' youth is five to seven times higher than that of non-First Nations youth (Kirmayer, 2007b). Across Canada, many tribal youth are at an increased risk for suicide. Recently, the tribal community of Attawapiskat in northern Ontario has declared a state of emergency based on the high rates of suicidal behavior. Over the course of

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

approximately six months, 101 Attawapiskat members (approximately 5% of the tribal community) have attempted suicide (Austen, 2016). Similarly, in the spring of 2012 the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, experienced a surge in suicidal behavior amongst its members (Cowichan Tribes Chief and Council, 2012). While some communities have exceptionally low to non-existent suicide rates, others are placed at high risk. Despite widespread concern about suicidal behavior amongst Aboriginal peoples, there continues to be a lack of understanding about the root causes of suicidal behavior on a collective level. In addition, research has yet to produce effective strategies for reducing suicidal behavior amongst Aboriginal peoples. With a particular emphasis on suicide amongst Cowichan Tribes members, this dissertation project places the study of suicidal behavior in the context of social, economic, political, and historical antecedents. Specifically, this dissertation asks the following questions:

- 1) How do Cowichan peoples explain suicidal behavior in their community?
- 2) What everyday experiences do Cowichan members identify as contributing to or impacting suicide, and how are these experiences characterized?
- 3) How are Cowichan peoples' explanations and experiences shaping possible future identities for themselves and their community?

Suicide has largely been theorized from an individualistic standpoint in mainstream psychological research. That is, models of suicide describe suicidal behavior as a reflection of individual predicaments or mental health concerns. On an individual level, one of the most potent risk factor for suicide is a previous suicide attempt (Van Orden et al., 2010). Other risk factors include family conflict, mental health disorders, physical illness, social isolation, having a friend or family member commit suicide, and unemployment, to name a few (Van Orden et al., 2010). Individual-level risk factors for suicide are no different for Aboriginal peoples than those

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

found in other populations; however, for Aboriginal collectives, risk factors must be understood primarily as a reflection of the history of colonization and subsequent subjugation of Aboriginal peoples.

To understand how Cowichan Tribes members make sense of contemporary and historical experiences in relation to suicide, this dissertation employs qualitative or naturalistic approaches to research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The study aims to highlight the day-to-day experiences, beliefs, and actions of community members that may shed light on the incidence of suicide amongst the Cowichan peoples. In many ways, this investigation concerns the historical processes that continue to impact contemporary experiences as well as a collective vision or pathway forward based on the findings. A qualitative approach assists in understanding the social and cultural contexts in which participants experience and understand their world (Merriam, 2009). This dissertation assumes that ideas and behaviors are influenced largely by the social and cultural contexts in which they find expression. Culture is implicit and embedded in everyday talk, behavior, and tools (Anderson-Levitt, 2006). A part of being human is the necessity of social organization; that is, “we learn to behave in ways that let us survive in the natural world by interpreting and making meaning of our experiences (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 281). Accounting for social and cultural factors in this way, this study explicitly examines the intersections of culture, history, and power relations between Indigenous and settler populations, consciously avoiding what Harding has described as “weak objectivity” (1998). As such, describing and interpreting meanings, and characterizations members make from their own frame of reference allows the researcher to infer cultural experiences of Cowichan peoples and their ways of living (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Divorcing the incidence of suicide from its cultural and social context renders the understanding of the phenomenon vacant

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Culture “is experienced in local, face-to-face interactions that are locally constrained and heterogeneous with respect to both ‘culture as a whole’ and the parts of the entire toolkit experienced by any given individual” (Cole & Engestrom, 1997). Therefore, understanding the issue from the perspectives of community members is a necessary first step to envisioning possible futures for individuals and for the collective.

Qualitative researchers aim to answer how things are or how things came to be. A question from the perspective of the qualitative researcher is dependent on a variety of factors, including the nature of the research issue, the researcher’s personality and positionality, the circumstances that arise during research, the choices the researcher makes, the methodology, and the intended audience (Merriam, 2009). Scientific research, from this perspective, includes an exploration of meaning, not just an exploration of empirically-based concepts and working theories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Eisenhart, 2005). This research approach accepts that one can never abandon his or her interpretive lens; rather, individual interpretations have meanings for a specific time and place (Eisenhart, 2005). Moreover, cultural meanings are a set of shared practices that are held together by consensus. To help answer the question, “What is going on here?” (Wolcott, 1997), my approach involved going in to the field to collect observable, narrative data through direct observation and reflection, asking specific questions, and gathering information from other written texts. The strength of this approach lies in understanding from the perspectives of the Cowichan peoples their stories, values and ontologies in relation to their daily experiences (Becker, 1996). The research question broadly seeks to understand the meanings that tribal members are making of suicide in their community and to interpret their meaning-making process (Brenner, 2006). Wolcott reminds us that “the ethnographer is the research instrument” (Wolcott, 1997). Therefore, it becomes necessary to acknowledge at the outset my positionality

in order to illuminate the bias that my own personal and professional experience brings (LeCompte, 1987). It is necessary to acknowledge that the community of focus is my own community/cultural group, consisting of many members who share similar lived experiences with me.

### **Honoring My Own Experiences**

A cultural teaching that has been passed down to me is the importance of “remembering who you are.” A part of remembering who you are involves honoring your own experiences and respecting your traditional, cultural, and ceremonial knowledge. This study and my ongoing research takes place in the community of the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island. Born and raised within the Cowichan community, I am considered a cultural insider to the group that I am investigating. A large part of who I am is related to the multiplicity of connections I cultivate with other people; with plant, animal, and other natural-world relations; and with my ancestors. My parents and extended family relations shared the importance of knowing our cultural stories: “these stories remind us of who we are and of the responsibilities that we have.” Through oral stories, I learned that our ancestors wanted us recognize the value and importance of our lives. As Hwulmuth peoples, we are responsible for caring for each other and for our natural-world relations. My own lifeworld is, then, the multiplicity of lived experiences emerging from the stories of my community, the cultural practices and values attendant upon such experiences, and the responsibilities embedded within these relationships. While many of my experiences locate me as an insider to the community, others place me as an outsider. Most predominantly, I no longer live in my home community and am not privy to the day-to-day happenings in Cowichan, as I would be if I still lived there. This section aims to position my perspective, experiences, and

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

interpretations of our shared culture in relation to the community, offering investigative insights from the perspective of an insider-outsider.

### **Childhood Memories**

As a young child, my family lived in the mountains on Vancouver Island. Our way of living centered on sustenance practices including hunting, fishing, and harvesting. We did not have running water or electricity, and we lived on a farm with horses, chickens, cows, goats, a pig, and a dog. Our summers were spent picking berries and riding horses, while our winters were spent helping in the kitchen at the Big House. My dad fought for Indigenous sovereignty rights, including the right to hunt and fish for food on tribal land, the right to use traditional methods of fishing, the right to manage natural resources flowing through tribal land, and the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in traditional sustenance practices at will. The importance of community well-being, and more specifically, Indigenous rights to traditional foods and ways of living were predominant concerns of my dad. In 1973, along with other tribal members, my dad built an outlawed traditional salmon weir to challenge the Department of Fisheries and to prove the illegitimacy of such a prohibition. As a result of his and others' efforts, the Cowichan Tribes now have a fish hatchery built on the Cowichan River that is operated by Cowichan people; today, this ensures the supply of salmon for food and provides employment to Cowichan members. As a political activist whose main focus was the well-being of the collective community, my dad instilled in me a commitment to the importance of maintaining Indigenous self-determination through cultural continuance.

My dad had a heart attack and died in 1987. He had suffered previous minor heart attacks and knew that his time on Earth was limited. He knew the moment would come “that Creator would call” and it would be “his responsibility to be returned to the Mother Earth, for it was

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

Mother Earth that provided” for him during his lifetime. He selected a fallen Cedar tree to be made into a coffin and asked my uncle if he’d be willing to construct it. His wish was to be returned to Mother Earth in as natural a state as possible and asked my mom if she would organize an herbal embalmment. My dad viewed the end of his life as a natural part of the life cycle process. This conception of death, from my experience, is a traditional understanding of the natural life cycle framed by humans’ responsibility to Mother Earth and the natural world. My dad’s actions were guided by his beliefs about the nature of human existence. In my work, I, in turn, consider, if a traditional ontological understanding of the human life cycle shapes one’s conception of death, in what way does colonization shift this conception? Is it possible that suicide is a reflection of the colonization of death? While this project does not aim to answer this question specifically, this story provides a glimpse of my own epistemological journey that shapes the contexts, questions, and concerns I attend to, remember, and draw upon.

### **My Epistemological Journey**

Why, exactly, is Indigenous self-determination important? Should people be responsible for the well-being of others or not? What is the importance of cultural and ceremonial protocols? In what ways has our traditional conception of the natural life cycle shifted over time? Why were these things so important to my dad? Throughout my life, these questions have continually informed my intellectual development in a number of roles: teacher, academic, social activist, caretaker, and Cowichan person.

The issue of suicide in my community first became evident when my sister-in-law called me to inquire about our traditional teachings in relation to an incident of suicide. Her friend’s partner had committed suicide and my sister-in-law was unsure how to attend to her friend’s specific needs in relation to suicide loss. The only suggestion that I could provide was to ask the

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

elders in our family because I also was unable to explain how this could have happened. We are Hwulmuth peoples. Our roots and traditions are strongly grounded in ancient practices and ways of knowing that are deeply embedded within the Khowutzun territory. Our stories link us to Mount Swugus and our ancestral relations; our collective strengths are drawn from our sacred places and practices and the relationships inherent therein. Why, then, are some of our people losing their way? I know many people experience terrible hardships such as racism and poverty. I know others struggle with mental health problems. Yet, as explanations, these do not fully answer the question, why? What is going on here? Levinson highlights the importance of allowing the community “to determine the problem needing investigation, and [design] the research accordingly, applying existing theory and fieldwork techniques toward its resolution” (2002). Based on the needs of my Cowichan community, my research interest began in 2012 to focus specifically on the impact of settler encroachment on Indigenous self-determination and has been shaped by the need to understand the alarming rate of suicide amongst the Cowichan peoples, specifically its impact on their current and future well-being.

My life experiences shape my research questions, interpretations and decision-making processes, and the construction of knowledge in relation to my research. My own subjectivity, that is my own externally determined experiences, define the social categories I belong to and the storylines in which I recognize myself, along with the choices that I make in my quest for answers (Davis, 2011). Given the changing nature of my own social and cultural experiences, combined with an attendant shifting self-concept, how does my own experience contribute to research expertise, if at all? Why should anyone believe the story that I am presenting? Behar captures my underlying sense of displacement: “As an ethnographer for whom the professional ritual of displacement continually evoked the grief of diaspora, I distrusted my own authority. I

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

saw it as being constantly in question, constantly on the point of breaking down” (1996, p. 21). Like Behar, my own sense of self-understanding as an ethnographer is constantly shifting and evolving. Research authority, as Behar notes, directly connects ethnographic authority and self-understanding (Behar, 1996). As Behar describes her dilemma, it becomes clear that ethnographic authority stems from self-understanding, but if self-understanding is perpetually dynamic, how does such dynamism affect her research and, thus, her research authority? How, she asks, can competing narratives of self-understanding and ethnographic authority be simultaneously true? (Behar, 1996). Behar’s own exploration of the shifting nature of self-understanding and how it has informed her own ethnographic work led her to abandon concerns for ethnographic authority and established method in favor of alternative approaches to ethnographic writing.

Drawing on ethnographic approaches, this study presents one approach to research that accounts for and responds to such epistemological predicaments in a way that illuminates and remains sensitive to the conditions and concerns of a particular culture. To best understand everyday experiences in a cultural context (Becker, 1996), this study relies upon participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes (Merriam, 2009). My study employs such methods to particularly examine the meaning of human nature in the culture of the Cowichan peoples.

Based on my past lived experiences, I present two main epistemological questions have shaped my approach to research. The first question is related to specific cultural ways of knowing while the second question illuminates varying conceptions of personhood. Questions about human nature can be perplexing or simple. Are human beings similar to other objects in the natural world, or are we different in that we have an ability to comment and reflect on things

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

while doing them? Can interpretations that arise from within the community give rise to valid phenomenological explanations? Roger Smith asks,

Is human nature given to us by physical nature, or does the human capacity for reflection enable human beings to create their own nature? Are the human sciences comparable with the natural sciences or does their subject matter, including reflection and language, require a different conception of science? (1997)

Nature and culture, including reflection and language, are often positioned in opposition to each other. Smith questions whether our capacity for reflection and reason separate us from physical nature (1997). He then asks whether culture differentiates human nature or human science from natural science (R. Smith, 1997). Smith admits, “there is something disturbingly paradoxical about a science that has for its subject the agent that creates the science” (1997, p. 13). What counts as legitimate science, according to Smith, is contested and unsettled. Insisting on recognizing cultural ways of knowing, the research methods selected for this project acknowledge the anthropomorphic perspective taken. Smith’s questions are framed from an anthropomorphic standpoint: he believes that humans hold a special position on account of their ability to reflect on and comment about things as they are doing it. Informed by Smith, my own approach to research includes the conviction that a conscious anthropomorphic approach to research is the most meaningful choice in a context in which the community’s cultural ways of knowing are central and as such, this project highlights an anthropomorphic frame.

The second epistemological question that is important to this body of work concerns human relations with the natural world. Many Cowichan members view themselves as being in relations with plants, animals, and other natural world relations. Embedded within each relationship is an inherent responsibility that human beings have to each other and to our natural

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

world relations. Understanding relationships in this way presents the second interesting epistemological question: If Cowichan people understand themselves and the natural world in this way, then how does research address this way of knowing? LeCompte argues,

We have tended to ignore nonhuman ways of learning and knowing. Since we are not so distant from being nonhuman ourselves, it is likely that were we to look at how animals think and learn, we would gain useful insight into processes of cultural acquisition used by human children and adults (LeCompte, 1987).

Most, if not all, Indigenous communities view themselves in the context of multiple human and non-human relations; yet, suicide prevention researchers have not considered the vast system of relational responsibilities inherent in many communities. LeCompte illuminates the need for knowledge creation to include our human and greater-than-human relations and suggests that human beings could learn from our greater-than-human relations. Can human nature be the same as physical nature or can it be differentiated by culture? Can inquiry in which human nature is differentiated by culture be real science? The question underlines my own understanding of the complexity of studying human beings scientifically. Notably, the debate about how human science stacks up against physical or 'real' science automatically positions human beings differently than any other living being. For me, this positioning is problematic. When we frame human beings in opposition to other natural world beings, we inherently position them in opposition to us. Furthermore, when we position human beings in opposition to the natural world, this provides a framework to conceptualize the earth, land, or natural world as that which can be commodified.

Discomfort with studying human beings scientifically, for me, is related to who gets to determine what counts as real or objective science and for what purpose. The power to make

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

such determinations resides in what gets counted as knowledge. When we debate about human sciences and their levels of objectivity, we are operating under the assumption that human beings create knowledge and that some knowledge is more valuable than other ways of knowing. Can we ever really be separated from our cultural and social ways of knowing? For me, the answer is no because my conception of self is so closely tied to my cultural and social ways of knowing.

My name is Emma Elliott. My great grandparents are Abraham and Ellen Johnny, Charles Rice and Hilda Bob, Joseph Peters and Mary Jane Wise, and John and Emma Lewis Elliott. While I belong to one specific tribal group, there are seven small bands that have merged together to form the Cowichan Tribes. Within the cultural group, there are multiple cultural families. Some families belong to the Long House, while other families are Mask Carriers, for example; the teachings and stories that we carry are within and are a part of the fabric of my being. For me, one cannot be separated from his or her cultural past or previous life experiences, and these experiences differ within and across cultural groups.

This dissertation recognizes varying cultural ontologies and concepts of personhood by privileging the voices of local community members in sharing their own knowledge. Research must remain within the realm of the community and necessarily include voluntary participation and multiple voices (Jacob, 1992). Through qualitative approaches to research, the stories/theories that Cowichan members share will be counted as knowledge, and theory will inevitably emerge from the stories that are shared. Understanding increased suicide among Cowichan First Nations peoples requires an engagement with how individual identities are embedded with individual and collective histories and cultural ways of living. Indigenous social formations, such as cultural, family, or educational practices, provide children with a strong senses of self-identity and belonging (Deloria, 1969). Without these senses of belonging,

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

Indigenous children are tasked with their development in a context where their Indigeneity is not acknowledged or represented accurately.

From my Indigenous point of view, I invite you to read this dissertation and to make decisions for yourself about objectivity. With an emphasis on a tribal context, this project offers Indigenous methodologies and thought as ways to culturally center approaches to understanding suicidal behavior with an complementary approach to suicidal assessment. In the particular context of Cowichan, this dissertation speaks to the pressures of colonialism by engaging the voices of the community to understand the meanings and explanations of suicidal behavior in our community.

Chapter two, “Must Every Suicide ‘Die Alone’? Individual and Collective Explanations for Suicide,” highlights the meanings and explanations of suicide amongst the Cowichan Tribes from the perspective of elders, youth, community members, and professional caregivers. Twenty interviews and one elder focus group were completed, each with an emphasis on understanding the daily lived experiences of each participant in relation to suicidal behavior. Broadly, members were asked about reasons for suicidal behavior, characterizations of suicidal behavior, and appropriate healing and helping practices. Members presented explanations for suicidal behavior at the level of the individual; these explanations have been theorized through the interpersonal theory of suicide. In addition, members’ captured shared or collective experiences related to colonization as reasons for suicidal behavior at the level of the collective; these explanations have been theorized through settler colonial theory.

The third chapter, “Place-ing Relations: Conceptualizing a Place-Based Biopsychosocial Assessment,” presents a complimentary assessment to the customary biopsychosocial assessment. Drawing on Indigenous methodologies, this chapter presents six design constructs as

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

the foundation for designing culturally specific intervention protocols. Designed elements include relational epistemologies, cultural concepts of the person, the collective orientation of Cowichan members, the intergenerational cultural formation of the community, and the importance of Indigenous teaching and learning practices as a means for transmitting knowledge. Five youth, along with multiple members of the community, participated in a Life Stories workshop that included three segments: an instructional launch and nature walk with a First Nations' medicine person, the creation of an art representation, and a narrative interview. Data revealed comprehensive information about youth's social and developmental histories. In addition, rich narrative data emerged that may provide relevant insight for social workers or other practitioners working with suicidal clients.

Chapter four, "Foreclosing Indigenous Futures: Understanding Suicide in the Context of Settler Permanency," aims at understanding the reasons for suicidal behavior in Cowichan. Presented here is a representation of my own theorizing in collaboration with voices from my community to make sense of what is happening from our own perspectives and experiences, in a way that honors our connections to our specific places, lands, and relationships. This chapter frames Indigenous suicide through the lens of settler colonial theory and discusses the consequences of settler intrusion on Indigenous futurity. I argue that specific suicide patterns in settler states can be theoretically understood as a corollary to the establishment of settler permanency. The process by which settlers seek to manifest permanent connections to Indigenous territories and solidify the land as their homeland may help explain suicide rates. Establishing *settler permanency* involves engraving the landscape with cultural, social, political and economic systems that reify and enable settler adaptation to Indigenous land. As a deeply rooted process, the establishment of settler permanency physically alters the landscape and

## NEW THINKING FOR INTERVENTION

organizing structures to secure settler futurity and to erase remnants of Indigenous presence.

These processes ensure the collective capacity of settlers while eliminating Indigenous populations' abilities to adapt their own collective capacities and to self-determine and facilitate their own future livelihood, which contributes to increased suicide rates.

In the final chapter, I provide a broad summary of findings and implications and make recommendations for future direction related to understanding and mitigating suicidal behavior amongst Indigenous populations.



Article 1

**Must Every Suicide “Die Alone”? Individual and Collective Explanations for Suicide**

Death by suicide is a tragedy that occurs across all populations and multiple age groups around the world each year. Suicide deaths are preventable, yet every 40 seconds, somewhere in the world, a person dies by suicide (World Health Organization, 2014). Suicide impacts all ethnic populations, but not equally. Indeed, some populations are at greater risk for serious suicidal behavior. Suicide is most prevalent amongst Aboriginal peoples of Canada, Native American peoples in the United States, Australian Aborigines, and Aboriginal Maori in New Zealand (World Health Organization, 2014). Furthermore, within these groups, young people, especially males, are placed at a higher risk for suicide (World Health Organization, 2014).

Research suggests that, across multiple groups and ages, a previous suicide attempt is the strongest indicator for suicidal risk (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Friend, & Powell, 2009). Other general risk factors include having a family history of suicidal behavior (Hallett, 2005), psychopathology or psychiatric disorders including depression (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003), harmful alcohol use (World Health Organization, 2014), or social isolation (Van Orden et al., 2010). Medicalized models of suicide have largely framed Indigenous experiences as symptoms of individual pathology (Million, 2013) and thereby have placed the locus of responsibility on the individual rather than understand the root causes of many mental health difficulties. Customary mental health diagnostics assume an individualistic or egocentric concept of personhood without taking into consideration collective orientations of Indigenous peoples (Kirmayer, 2007a). To date, scholarship has yet to produce effective strategies for suicide reduction in First Nations communities, and very little research has engaged broader First Nations communities directly to study this phenomenon. This study aims to broaden our

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

understanding of the dynamics of First Nations suicide and contribute to ending the epidemic by asking First Nations peoples themselves, specifically engaging the Cowichan Tribes in British Columbia. Drawing on qualitative research methods, this inquiry presents individual and collective explanations for suicidal behavior amongst the Cowichan peoples from their own viewpoints.

### **Conceptual Framework(s)**

By engaging both the interpersonal theory of suicide and settler colonial theory, this project aims to understand the meanings and explanations of suicidal behavior amongst Cowichan Tribes members from their own standpoints. The interpersonal theory of suicide highlights thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capacity to enact lethal self-harm as three specific concepts that interrelate to help explain why an individual dies by suicide (Joiner, 2007). Because Canada is a settler colonial state, settler colonial theory is necessary to center contemporary Indigenous experiences in relation to historical, cultural, social, and political contexts. In short, this chapter presents individual and collective explanations for suicidal behavior rooted in contemporary and historical experiences, considering how such factors may impact or inform possible futures for First Nations’ peoples.

### **Interpersonal Theory of Suicide**

The interpersonal theory of suicide suggests that individuals develop a desire to die by suicide in the simultaneous presence of both thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (Joiner, 2007). Thwarted belongingness, according to Joiner and colleagues, refers to “extreme feelings of social disconnectedness” (O’Keefe, 2014, p. 62), characterized by an absence of reciprocal caring relationships and feelings of loneliness (Van Orden et al., 2010). The construct of thwarted belongingness refers to an individual’s perception that he or she is a

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

liability or burden on one’s family or others (Joiner, 2007). Nevertheless, on its own, a desire to die by suicide does not place an individual at most risk for dying by suicide. In fact, most who experience suicidal ideation or desire do not die by suicide. Joiner suggests a third integral component: acquired capability (Joiner, 2007). According to this hypothesis, a capacity to enact lethal self-harm must be developed through habituation to frightening or painful behaviors (Joiner, 2007). The habituation process is believed to wear down one’s self-protective mechanism while increasing one’s ability to harm one’s self lethally (Van Orden et al., 2010). Thus, according to the interpersonal theory of suicide, the desire to die by suicide manifests itself through the simultaneous existence of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness; when suicidal desire is coupled with acquired capability, the individual is placed at high risk for lethal or near-lethal suicidal behavior (Van Orden et al., 2010). As a whole, the interpersonal theory of suicide is a model of understanding suicidal behavior from an individual standpoint; however, it does not directly attend to the complex and multifaceted historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples. To address the collective orientations of Cowichan peoples and their shared social and cultural predicaments, this study engages settler colonial theory.

### **Settler Colonial Theory**

Settler colonialism is a form of colonial action premised on the dispensability of Indigenous peoples in a settler colonial context (Veracini, 2010). Settler colonialism operates through a set of narratives, such as the narrative of ‘progress,’ wherein “progress is typically understood as a measure of Indigenous displacement and ultimate erasure” (Veracini, 2010, p. xx). In short, this conception of progress works to actively eliminate Indigenous peoples and their cultural past while denying their possible futures. As a case in point, over the course of 100 years, the Canadian government mandated the removal of 100,000 First Nations children from

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

their family homes to be placed in Church-run boarding schools in order to civilize the children in the name of progress (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000). During this period, over 2000 children lost their lives to disease (e.g., tuberculosis), exposure after running away, and rampant physical and sexual abuse (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015); the residential school system has resulted in a significant loss of Indigenous lives and ways of life (Fournier & Crey, 1997). In this context, categories such as race and religion function as key ideological tools to naturalize the removal and disappearance of Indigenous peoples and to position the settler as normative in newly settled territory (Banivanua-Mar & Edmonds, 2010). Territoriality is settler colonialism’s primary motive, and thus, Indigenous peoples’ existence on the land must be transferred, physically or conceptually, elsewhere. Insisting on assimilation and replacement, settler colonialism works to eliminate Indigenous peoples from existence through a variety of strategies directed at establishing settler permanency.

The establishment of settler permanency involves, in turn, practices that shift the social and cultural formation of the Indigenous collective, effectually disabling its ability to plan and prepare for its own future. To take one example, child removal ensures that Indigenous knowledge systems atrophy; without an ability to nurture and teach subsequent generations the very cultural practices that ensure collective well-being, the entire collective is placed at risk. From this theoretical perspective, physical or conceptual erasure, such as the removal of children from family homes, can impact individuals’ or collectives’ abilities to imagine and plan for their own livelihoods. An inability to locate a personal or collective sense of continuity across time places persons or collectives at risk for suicide (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, Hallett, & Marcia, 2003). I argue that the obstruction of Indigenous lives and lifeways jeopardizes the ability of the

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

community to adapt to their changing needs, placing the entire collective at risk for suicidal behavior (Chandler et al., 2003; Whyte, 2014).

The intersection of the interpersonal theory of suicide and settler colonial theory may provide insight in understanding suicidal behavior from a collective standpoint. Indigenous collectives have endured displacement and dispossession, wide scale child removal, and physical and cultural erasure and assimilation (Kirmayer et al., 2003). The extensive sense of dissolution and disconnection inevitably felt by generations of families and communities on account of government interventions (e.g., residential schooling) may exasperate feelings of failed belongingness. A long history of cultural oppression and marginalization may explicate community-level perceptions of burdensomeness. Finally, the government sponsored physical and psychological violence against First Nations peoples may mediate a collective’s capacity to enact self-harm. The establishment of settler permanency ensured through a variety of structures and practices makes certain settler futurity while simultaneously foreclosing Indigenous futures.

### **Method of Inquiry**

This chapter is a part of a larger ethnographic study that took place amongst the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. A qualitative study was conducted to understand how Cowichan Tribes members make sense of contemporary and historical experiences in relation to suicide. Semi-structured interviews across multiple sub-sets of the Cowichan population, including elders, youth, professional caregivers, and community members were the primary data source for the study. Interviewing allows researchers to enter another’s perspective by capturing participants’ experiences, interpretations, and thoughts associated with phenomena in the community (Patton, 2002). In addition to semi-structured interviews, I drew data from participant observation and field notes (Merriam, 2009). The strength of this approach

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

lies in understanding community concerns from the perspectives of the Cowichan peoples and their stories, values, and ontologies in relation to their daily experiences. The study obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Washington, the Cowichan Chief and Council, the Cowichan Education Committee, and the Cowichan Health Committee.

### **Setting and Participants.**

**Cowichan Tribes.** The Cowichan Tribes community on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, forms the context of this study. Nestled alongside the Cowichan River, the Cowichan Tribes serves over 4,600 members (Cowichan Tribes, 2005). Today, members of the Cowichan community draw strength from many cultural and traditional practices that have been performed for thousands of years. With rich culture and traditions, the Cowichan way of living places great importance on the multiplicity of relations in which members are involved, along with the inherent responsibilities embedded within them. While social and cultural formations have been impacted by colonization, the importance of relational responsibilities continues to inform ceremonial traditions, political practices, and local community planning efforts.

***History of first European contact.*** The exact date of first contact with Europeans for Cowichan peoples is unknown. However, an estimate of first contact can be gleaned from missionary and exploration accounts of baptisms, agricultural practices, and land transfers. Missionaries and initial visitors began documenting their experiences in Cowichan territory in 1850 (Marshall, 1999). Father Lempfrit, a Roman Catholic missionary who provided the first recorded history of European contact, documented performing over two thousand baptisms during his initial visit in April of 1850 (Marshall, 1999). European contact brought the introduction of potato cultivation, which marked a shift for Cowichan peoples in their mode of life, specifically from an active food gathering society to an agricultural society. Before

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

European arrival, food gathering and preparation for the future encompassed the daily lives of Cowichan peoples.

In addition to a significant shift in mode of living, colonial policies designed to enable Euro-Canadian occupation of Indigenous lands have had other substantial and far-reaching consequences for Cowichan and other First Nations in Canada. The Indian Act of 1876 regulated and domesticated social relations in Canada in ways that radically altered the way of life for Canada’s First peoples (Million, 2013). Among many impositions, the Indian Act defined and racialized Indian identity, supported the removal of Indian children from their family homes, altered gender relations, and mandated removal and/or forced sedentarization through the reservation system (Million, 2013).

**Participants.** In the course of the study, 20 interviews were completed across four cross-sections of the community, including: elder, youth (age 10-18), professional caregiver, and other enrolled Cowichan community members. Open enrollment for data collection began in early 2013. The age range of participants was 13-88 years. Participants were recruited through the tribal newsletter, word of mouth, the tribal Facebook page, and opportunistic or snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009). Enrollment continued until an appropriate representation of each cross-section was obtained, as determined by number of participants in each age grouping (Patton, 2002). Participants were selected based on voluntary participation and tribal membership. In addition, participants had either experienced suicidal ideation or attempt or had lost a loved one to suicide.

Over the course of 16 months, the primary researcher spent approximately 12 weeks immersed in intimate study and first-hand participation in the Cowichan community, including a 6-week long stay following three suicides in the community in the spring of 2014 (Merriam,

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

2009). Being born and raised within the community enabled the author and primary researcher to make ethnographic observations and interpretations informed by cultural and social knowledge. Ethnographic fieldnoting captured participant observations and interpretations of the following events: meetings with elders, professionals, and community members; the local youth council and the annual general meeting; a Cedar cording workshop; roles and protocols around a local traditional funeral; and the local screening of *Heliset Hale*, a film created to raise suicide awareness amongst First Nations peoples on Vancouver Island (Wolfinger, 2002). As an enrolled member of the Cowichan community, my approach to research intertwines cultural values, behaviors, and protocols as part of my methodological approach (L. T. Smith, 2012). Some examples of first-hand participation in cultural activities include: participation in the Big House winter ceremonies, naming ceremonies, and mask dance ceremonies.

**Interviews.** The goal of each interview was to understand the individual day-to-day experiences of each participant, perceptions or beliefs related to suicide, and suggestions for community-specific solutions to address the trend in suicide. A semi-structured interview protocol was selected based on flexibility in terms of order of questions and question wording; emphasis during interviews was placed on gleaning specific information regarding members’ lived experiences, understanding of cultural ontologies, and suggestions for community-level healing (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured interviews offered valuable insight into community members’ perspectives regarding historical and contemporary cultural practices, particularly as they relate to the historical development of individuals, family, and community (Merriam, 2009). Sample questions included, “What are traditional core values for your family?” and “What do you think are the reasons for the increase in suicide in the Cowichan community?” (See Appendix A, Community Member/Professional Caregiver/Elder Semi-structured

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

Interview). To capture the unique developmental concerns and experiences of youth participants, a separate semi-structured interview protocol was created (see Appendix B, Youth (10-19) Semi-structured Interview).

**Data analysis.** The interviews have been analyzed first through an inductive approach or grounded theory (Brenner, 2006; Charmaz, 1995), and secondly, data has been interpreted through a deductive approach based on the interpersonal theory of suicide and settler colonial theory.

**Grounded theory.** To understand meanings and explanations of suicidal behavior in the Cowichan community, this project employed grounded theory as a means to provide a conceptual understanding of phenomena, specific to the community (Brenner, 2006). Each phase of data collection was informed by simultaneous analysis documented through field notes and analytic memos (Charmaz, 1995). Each interview transcript was reviewed line-by-line for emergent themes related to everyday experiences in relation to suicidal behavior. Initial categories of the phenomena were organized and categorized. To ensure accuracy of coding and to evaluate the characteristics of each code applied, the author reviewed emergent categories with four additional researchers, each of whom is experienced in qualitative approaches to research. This process resulted in the creation of refined analytic codes developed from the data (Charmaz, 1995). Analytical findings were reported back to each participant for feedback, a strategy called member checking or respondent validation (Merriam, 2009). In addition to ensuring internal validity, this process provides participants with the opportunity to provide clarification, correct errors, and challenge interpretations (Merriam, 2009)

**Interpersonal theory of suicide and settler colonial theory.** Explanations for suicidal behavior in Cowichan can be understood from both individual and collective standpoints. To

MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

interpret suicidal behavior on multiple levels, I’ve created an analytical framework drawing on components of both the interpersonal theory of suicide and settler colonial theory. Table 1 presents the coding framework drawn on the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide.

Table 1. Interpersonal Theory of Suicide Coding Framework.

<i>Table 1. Interpersonal Theory of Suicide Coding Framework</i>
<b><i>Thwarted Belongingness</i></b>
Absence of Reciprocal Caring Relationships
Loneliness
Thwarted Interrelationality
<b><i>Perceived Burdensomeness</i></b>
Perceived Liability
Self-Hate
<b><i>Acquired Capability</i></b>
History of Substance Abuse
Suicidal Behavior
Family History of Suicidal Behavior/Multiple Attempts
Resolved Plans & Preparations
Suicidal Desire & Ideation
Self-Harm
Suicide Attempt
Death by Suicide
History of Violence/Trauma

In addition, table two presents the coding framework drawn on Settler Colonial Theory. Emergent themes grounded across 21 data sets were highlighted and organized in a coding framework that engages both interpersonal theory and settler colonial constructs.

Table 2. Settler Colonial Theory Coding Framework.

<i>Table 2. Settler Colonial Theory Coding Framework</i>
<b><i>Assimilation</i></b>
Education
Governance Structure
Federal/Provincial
Federal/Provincial Policies
Chief and Council/Band/Programming
<b><i>Religion (Not NA spirituality)</i></b>
Syncretism
<b><i>Economic Systems (Introduced)</i></b>

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

Social Assistance
Economic Injustice (Poverty)

### **Findings**

Findings are organized into two sections: The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide and Settler Colonial Theory. Emergent themes in relation to the interpersonal theory include: 1) Loneliness in the absence of reciprocal caring relations, 2) Perceived liability or self-hate, and 3) History of violence, substance abuse, or past suicidal behavior. In relation to settler colonial theory, two broad themes are discussed: 1) Assimilation of education, politics, religion, and economic and food systems, and 2) Relationship to land including implications for food sovereignty.

#### **The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide**

Explanations for suicidal behavior at the individual level were provided in relation to three constructs: “thwarted belongingness,” “perceived burdensomeness,” and “acquired capacity to enact lethal self-harm” (Joiner, 2007). An individual sense of thwarted belongingness was captured when participants expressed feelings of loneliness in the absence of reciprocal caring relations. The construct of perceived burdensomeness was identified through an individual’s perception of liability or self-hate. An acquired capability to enact lethal self-harm was depicted through an analysis of constructs such as individual substance use, past suicidal behavior, and history of violence. Across twenty interviews plus one elder focus group, the construct of thwarted belongingness was present across 21 data sets; perceived burdensomeness was coded across 13 data sets; and acquired capacity was coded across 21 data sets. Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the presence or absence of each construct across 21 data sets (see *Figure 1*). Across all 20 interviews, five participants shared stories related to all six constructs

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

associated with the interpersonal theory of suicide; of these five participants, four had identified a history of suicidal ideation or attempt.

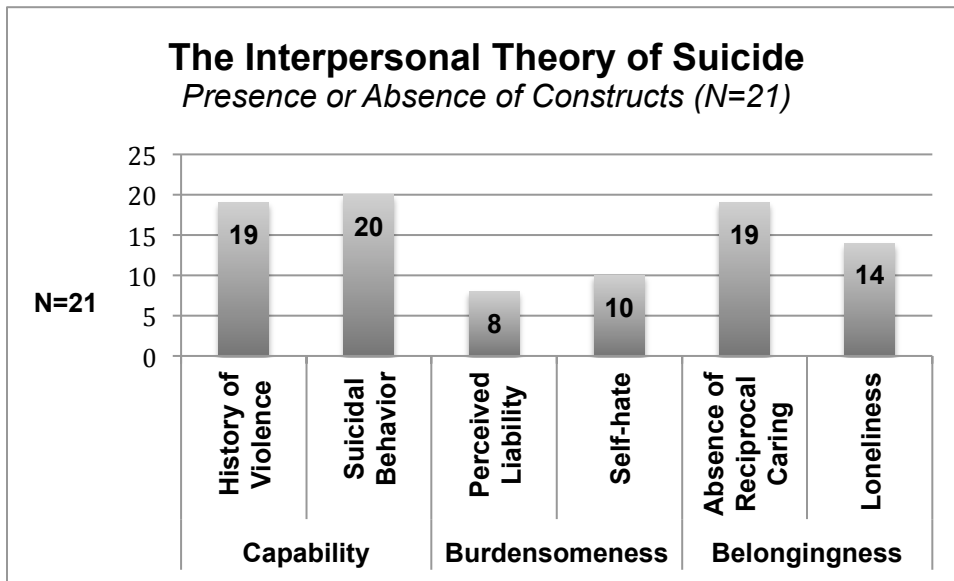


Figure 1. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide: Presence or Absence of Constructs (N=21)

**Loneliness in the absence of reciprocal caring relations.** The need to belong has been demonstrated to strongly correlate with emotional and cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), while a lack of positive attachment has been shown to have adverse impacts on emotional well-being and subsequent human development (National Research Council, Institute of Medicine, & Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood, 2000). Drawing on the research of Baumeister and Leary, Joiner and colleagues isolate loneliness and the absence of reciprocal caring relationships as two interrelated constructs of thwarted belongingness (Van Orden et al., 2010).

The concept of loneliness in the absence of complementary caring relations may be comprehended in the example of Alex, a 23-year-old self-identified male, who has experienced suicidal ideation. Following several confrontations, including physical conflict, with his younger brothers, Alex’s single mother became highly concerned by his behavior. Believing that Alex

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

needed positive male influences in his life, Alex’s mother gave him the choice of moving out of the province to be with his grandmother or moving to Cowichan to be with his father’s family. Alex moved in with an aunt in Cowichan, hoping to spend time with his father. However, Alex’s father struggled with alcohol dependence and was not often present: “I always wanted my dad to stick around...He never would.” Alex describes his sense of loneliness: “That's when my thoughts were coming in when I was feeling alone like that...there were a few times when I was just right there at that low, lonely moment.” In addition, Alex did not feel as if he belonged with his extended family in Cowichan, “I wished for my dad and thought my dad was coming for me. After my mom couldn't turn me into a man, I felt so alone ‘cause I didn't know my family that I was living with at the time.” In this case, Alex experienced a significant sense of displacement, both physically and in relation to his family. In this example, the loss of his parents in his everyday life represents a loss of positive social connections, whereas his father’s sporadic presence led Alex to believe he was not cared about. Together, these experiences led Alex to feel as if he had no one to turn to. Feelings of loneliness in the absence of reciprocal caring relations are associated with an increased risk for lethal or near-lethal suicidal attempts (Van Orden et al., 2010).

**Perceived liability or self-hate.** Human beings have a fundamental need for social competence; simply put, we need to not be a burden on others. In addition to narrations of thwarted belongingness, participants shared perceptions of liability or self-hate as strong reasons for suicidal desire. These concepts are captured by the construct of perceived burdensomeness, the perception that one is a burden on another or multiple others. Associated with lethal suicidal behavior is self-hate and perceived liability; these constructs are characterized by indicators including “low self-esteem, self-blame and shame, and mental state of agitation” (Van Orden et

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

al., 2010, p. 584). Donna, an elder and Cowichan member who self-identified as a woman, has been a victim of domestic violence. She shares her history of suicidal ideation and attempt.

Donna’s sense of self-worth was significantly impacted by violence perpetuated against her:

In the relationship, I didn't know anything about getting beat up or all of the things that I experienced in the marriage. I'd never seen any of that in my entire life. I had grown up with loving parents who were clean and sober from the time my brother was a baby. We belonged to the Shaker faith and that's all I knew. So it felt like it must be me, then. There must be something wrong with me...it took a long time but I got out of it. But the after-effects of that relationship destroyed me.

The repeated exposure to domestic violence left Donna feeling her abuse was her fault and had negative impacts on her own sense of self-worth. Donna shared, "I just felt like I am nothing but a big burden on everybody. I thought, ‘you don't have to worry about me anymore, just be done with it.’” As a victim of domestic violence, Donna’s sense of belongingness to a place and to family were significantly dislocated (Murray, 2008). In addition, Donna’s experience demonstrates that feelings of perceived liability and self-hate emerge through abusive interpersonal relations. Indeed, as the interpersonal theory of suicide posits, when two fundamental needs, belongingness and competence, are simultaneously thwarted, life no longer seems worthwhile, and a desire for death may result.

**History of violence, substance abuse, or past suicidal behavior.** According to the interpersonal theory of suicide, an individual’s capacity to enact lethal self-harm is developed through habituation to repeated painful or provocative experiences, which wears down his or her evolutionary self-preservation mechanisms. Joiner and colleagues suggest that repeated violence or exposure to violence can decrease an individual’s fear of pain, injury, or death (Joiner, 2007).

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

This study did not assess fear of death or levels of pain tolerance, but it did demonstrate repeated experiences of violence in relation to suicidal behavior. Eric, a 38 year-old participant who identified as male and is diagnosed with a mental health condition, described adverse side effects of anti-depressant medication:

They kept me awake for 23 hours a day, basically, for 6 weeks. Then I started blacking out. I'd get to work and I didn't realize [where I was]. One night, I just came to and I was sitting on a beach three hours from home, wondering why and how I got there...I just kind of freaked out and I looked down and I had two razor blades in my hands.

Eric describes another equally provocative occurrence following this incident in which he temporarily lost consciousness: “I came to...but all I remember was there was a huge puddle in the back. I ripped the 220-wall cable out...I had a live wire in my hand and I was surrounded by water.” According to the theory, repeated painful or provocative experiences habituate a person to the fear of self-injury or pain, potentially wearing down an individual’s self-preservation mechanism. When asked if he wished to die by suicide, Eric shared that he did not have the desire to die but stated, “I’m not squeamish under blood or anything.” For Joiner and associates, a diminished fear of death, self-injury, or pain represents an acquired capacity to enact lethal self-harm, which as demonstrated in this case, does not necessarily involve desire to die (Joiner, 2007).

To explain suicidal behavior in Cowichan, Alex, Donna, and Eric identify reasons that include social alienation, supposed burdensomeness, and direct or indirect exposure to pain or violence. Members shared stories of how these themes impact individualized experiences related to the constructs of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and capacity to enact lethal self-harm (Joiner, 2007). The stories presented, although related to community conditions

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

experienced by members, represent an accumulation of the individual factors that contribute to suicide across cultures. Importantly, each participant was asked directly if she or he had the desire to die by suicide, and each shared his or her wish to live. A desire to die by suicide coupled with a developed capacity to hurt one’s self places an individual at serious risk for lethal suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2007). To shed light on the differing meaning of particular historical and contemporary community factors in relation to suicidal behavior, I now turn to discuss the implications of settler colonialism from the perspectives of community members.

### **Settler Colonial Theory**

In addition to individual level descriptions of suicidal behavior, this study provided explanations illuminating the importance of shared historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous erasure. Examples of the erasure of Indigenous social and cultural ways of living were described and coded through the two emergent themes: 1) assimilation of educational, political, religious, economic, and food systems, and 2) relationship to land, including land loss, land ownership, and land management practices. Every data set in this study, including twenty interviews and one elder focus group, included narrations of the adverse implications of assimilation, while a shifting relationship with land was identified as a salient theme across sixteen out of 21 data sets (see *Figure 2* for a comprehensive view of the presence or absence of selected settler colonial constructs across 21 data sets).

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

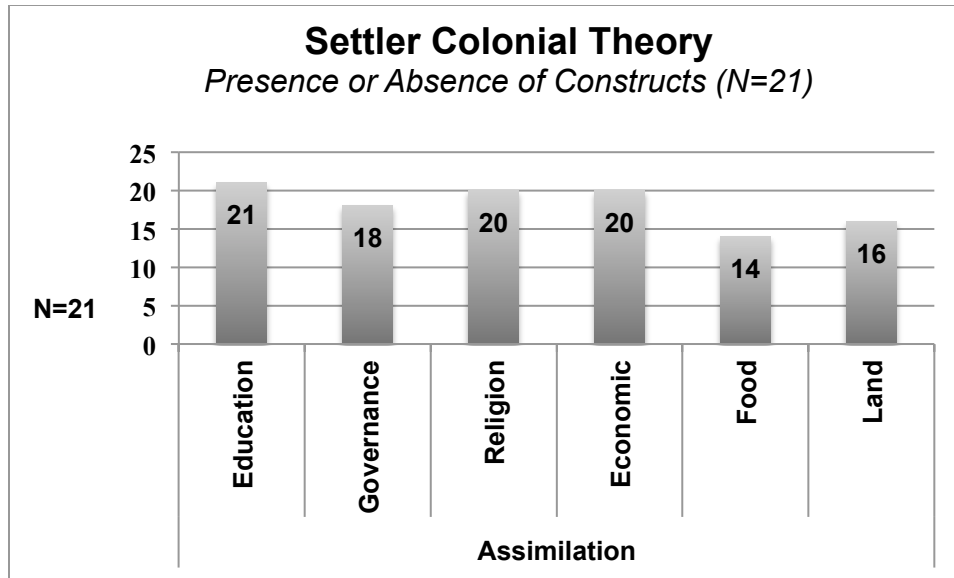


Figure 2. Settler Colonial Theory: Presence or Absence of Constructs (N=21).

Many of the explanations for suicide in the community that community members offered can be understood through settler colonial theory. The dominant feature in settler colonialism is replacement or elimination (Wolfe, 1999). Community members describe multiple historical events and process aimed at settler control of Indigenous peoples and their way of living and point to European encroachment on Indigenous autonomous existence as reasons for suicide in their community.

**Assimilation.** Broadly, assimilation is defined as the process whereby a minority group progressively adopts the mores and mindsets of the predominant culture. In the context of this study, assimilation refers to state-sponsored or imposed assimilation, including introduced education, governance, and religious systems. Introduced education systems include institutions, policies, or practices that are not customary to the Cowichan community; introduced governance systems include all governance structures that are not Indigenous political systems, including the band council system or elected governance; and the introduced religion code includes Catholicism or any other denominational religion not conventional to the Cowichan peoples. Out

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

of twenty individual interviews and one elder focus group, all data sets included narrations of introduced education practices; seventeen out of twenty individual interviews and one elder focus group presented data regarding introduced governance structures; and nineteen out of twenty individual interviews plus one elder focus group highlighted the imposition of religious practices.

***Education.*** Educational experiences were coded across all twenty interviews and one elder focus group in this study. As a policy aimed at the putative civilization of Indian peoples in Canada, the Indian Act of 1876 is a federal document that governs the relationship between Canada and its First Peoples. With the specific intent of dissolving Aboriginal peoples into the larger body politic, the Indian Act took aim at the very social structure that holds communities together, families (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Funded and mandated by Canada’s federal government and implemented largely by the Christian churches, the Indian Act authorized the forced removal of Indian children to residential schools. Viewed as vectors of assimilation, children were removed from the influences of their families, cultural communities, and traditional homelands. The specific repercussions of the residential school policy are complex, multifaceted, and devastating. Kyle, a Cowichan member, explains:

When the kids were taken away, you'd probably be four years old. You don't get them back until they are eighteen or nineteen. So, you never get them back through their learning years. By the time you get them back, they've been raped, they've been beaten, and they've been hurt so badly they have no self-esteem anymore. The only answer is to hope that God does have mercy and let you kill yourself... Today it is no different, when you watch children in schools, you'll see a little Indian boy go running by. The teacher lays the eagle claw grip on the shoulder and says, ‘No running around.’ Slams him up

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

against the wall, nose against the wall; little White boy goes running by doing the same thing, [the teacher] doesn't even notice the little White boy. So we are still treated like prisoners of war today.

In his description, Kyle highlights significant implications for the social and developmental well-being of residential school survivors. Indeed, his description can be understood from an interpersonal theoretical standpoint. Children were removed from their families during one of the most crucial developmental periods in their lives. Separation from family can be characterized as social isolation, a key characteristic of thwarted belongingness. Kyle narrates experiences of rape, physical harm, and pain resulting in a perceived sense of liability or diminished sense of competence. Tellingly, Kyle depicts contemporary experiences of Indigenous subordination as reminiscent of war times. By definition, a prisoner of war is a person held against his or her will during or immediately following an armed conflict. Thus, for Kyle, experiences of oppression and marginalization may be affectively experienced as particularly violent or life threatening. Social isolation may lead a child to develop a perceived sense of burdensomeness, while repeated violence or exposure to violence may result in an acquired capacity to enact lethal self-harm. Through the lens of the interpersonal theory of suicide, the relationship between residential schooling and suicidal behavior is clear. In the context of settler colonial theory, it is equally evident that the erasure or replacement of Aboriginal peoples and cultural ways of knowing through assimilation and replacement impacted both individual residential school survivors and collective tribal communities. This wide-scale disruption of the relationships between children, their cultural practices, and their identities has resulted in the elimination, replacement, or alteration of organizing structures (e.g., families) that ensure the collective's capacity to adapt to change and to facilitate their own future livelihoods.

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

Despite not having attended residential schooling himself, the impact is clearly felt by Kyle today. He equates the abuse children sustained in residential school with the hostile and discriminatory practices of teachers in contemporary classrooms. While White children did not attend residential schools, they seem to have a prominent place in Kyle’s comparison with contemporary schooling practices. For Kyle, the cumulative and compounding experiences of historical trauma, including physical and emotional abuse, coalesce into a mutually reinforcing and powerful set of discriminatory practices against his people. In this example, discriminatory practices such as the teacher’s actions serve as triggering events for Kyle. As he narrates his example, these discriminatory practices become the compounding site for accumulating historical and intergenerational trauma.

***Politics.*** Out of twenty-one data sets, seventeen individuals and one elder focus group identified the notion that the band council structure in Cowichan does not, at large, benefit the majority of its members. Common themes include a concern that the band-council system serves as a mechanism of control by the federal government, an identification of perceptions of inequality between community leaders and community members, and an expressed lack of trust in accessing mental health services. This perception of inequity leads to tension between the Cowichan administration and the community members in general. According to some members, this tension is evident during election times. For example, Donna shares, “You elect the Chief and Council now and that whole process just is ridiculous. The whole process of elections are a method of dividing our people again and the system, it's not taken seriously.” Donna specifically articulates the divisive nature of the introduced governance system. The band council system is a governance structure imposed by the Indian Act and serves as “an important tool in assimilating or subjugating Indigenous peoples in service to the needs of Canadian capitalist expansion”

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

(Alfred, 2009a, p. 46). Donna’s perception of the electoral process depicts her sense of disconnection from the political process in Cowichan at large. She does, however, believe that it is possible to move forward in a good way, “If you get people in there [political office] who really mean it about making a difference in terms of the people, not just for their own personal gain.” As demonstrated by her concern for the ulterior motives of those with political power, Donna highlights her perception of the unequal power distribution in the community between leaders and community members, which may, in fact, impact her sense of belonging in the community.

Similarly, Meyers, an elder and professional caregiver shared how the youth he works with are, largely, disenchanted with the social and political institutions within the community:

They say, ‘You go over there to other resources’...I call it volleyball because you are getting bounced around. What happens when you get bounced around? You get mad, you get frustrated, you give up, or you are found in a tree somewhere or you throw yourself in the river or you jump in front of a car.

While being “bounced around” from one department to the next in search of support is frustrating for anybody, the youth Meyers works with have been placed at risk in various ways, making the frustration they suffer especially concerning. Meyers associates the “volleyball experience” and the related frustration with hopelessness, and ultimately, death by suicide. From an interpersonal theoretical standpoint, hopelessness is associated with an absence of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, two constructs related to the desire to die by suicide (Joiner, 2007).

Donna and Meyers depict the burden of the introduced political and social systems as much more than an exterior conceptualization or theoretical understanding. Rather, for them,

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

structures of settler permanency such as these are felt in the lived experiences of community members as they place limitations on the freedom and ability to self-determine, generating cultural and psychological disruption in the process. In both examples, Indigenous political systems are absent, demonstrating vividly that the band council system and other government-funded service agencies have been designed and structured to serve the interests of the Canadian state (Alfred, 2009a).

**Religion.** An identification of the impact of religion on Cowichan peoples was highlighted across nineteen interviews and one elder focus group. The residential school system in Canada was based on the idea that European progress and Christian religion were superior to Aboriginal ways of knowing. In fact, school missionaries played a most direct role in church-run crusades to prohibit Aboriginal religious practices, such as Potlatch and Sun Dance ceremonies (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). As a mechanism of settler control over Aboriginal land, population management strategies such as religious or educational assimilation served to “civilize” the Aboriginal population, pushing it toward absorption (Alfred, 2009a).. Amid assimilation, religious and cultural ways of knowing shifted. The resulting syncretic understanding of religious practices is exemplified by the views of Sophie, a Cowichan elder and community member who attended residential schooling. Sophie explains the traditional winter ceremonies as

Similar to the Catholic Church practices. [Winter ceremony] has to be over before Easter, before Good Friday. In the winter, they only initiate new dancers right after the leaves and grass and everything outside dies... Then they're out of there by Holy Thursday. In the olden days, that's how they did it.

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

Sophie continues, “The basic teachings come from the Virgin Mary and *He’els* was her son, Jesus. He actually traveled here and he lived here. He gave the teachings.” From her perspective, winter ceremony practices were informed by Catholic religious beliefs. By fusing two different religious systems of belief, her religious worldview is reconciled. However, in this case, Cowichan ways of knowing are amalgamated into Christian worldviews, resulting in the curtailment of traditional practices. Nevertheless, for community members, winter ceremonial practices in their contemporary form continue to function as protective mechanisms by increasing the sense of social belonging and purpose within the community. In these ways, cultural and spiritual practices, redefined by community members, can function as protective mechanisms against the desire to die by suicide.

***Economic and food systems.*** Economic injustice was depicted as a concern across nineteen interviews and one elder focus group while issues of food injustice were narrated across fourteen interviews out of twenty. For Cowichan peoples, issues of economic injustice are closely related to concerns about food sovereignty. Nineteen out of twenty individual interviews and one elder focus group identified economic injustice as a factor in participants’ lives. Fourteen out of twenty community members and one elder focus group identified concerns with food justice (e.g., not having enough food to eat). Economic systems refer to introduced systems. Amongst this sample, eighteen individuals and one elder focus group mentioned concerns of poverty, limited job opportunity, and forced dependency. Donna, for example, provides an example of injustice related to economic insecurity amongst many members:

So it's okay for everybody else to gain benefit and profit from resources that are technically ours and when our people sell fish...to get by, they're penalized for it! Those kinds of laws are put in place according to the...Indian Act and they just solidify that

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

blanket of poverty that is just spread all over our people...It's like, you've got to have your status card before you leave the reserve, kind of deal.

Donna points to the inequity that exists between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. To illustrate her point, she shares her perception that Aboriginal peoples are unequally targeted and penalized for harvesting fish. In Canada, limitations have been placed on Aboriginal peoples in many similar ways. In an effort to replace traditional economic structures, treaties placed limitations on the hunting, fishing, and harvesting practices of Aboriginal peoples, while restrictions in the Indian Act forced Aboriginal peoples to transition from an active hunting and food gathering society to an agricultural society (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In addition to prohibiting cultural activities, the Indian Act empowered Indian agents to implement policies such as the pass system, requiring Indian peoples to obtain a pass in order to leave the reservation (Kirmayer et al., 2003). For Donna, contemporary limitations are analogous to historical limitations, compounding her sense of disenfranchisement. Her experience presents an individually felt experience of subjugation, which has been imposed at the level of collective.

**Relationship to Land.** The importance of Cowichan members' relationship to land was coded across fifteen interviews and one elder focus group. In addition to forced sedentarization through the reservation system, the Indian Act introduced the foreign concept of land ownership. Sophie shares her knowledge of settler expansion in the Cowichan area: “Back in the early 1800s, my Grandma and Grandpa used to tell me ...that when the White man came, they were all given a hundred acres each when they landed here.” Colonial expansion resulted in a significant loss of access to traditional territory and natural resources. The concept of land ownership has divided many families.

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

Kyle explains, “It’s [land ownership] got families fighting over land, [individuals] playing God, and that’s not the way our people were... That Certificate of Possession system has brother fighting against brother.” The concept of land as property has shifted the co-constitutive relationship between some Cowichan people and the natural world. Not only has this resulted in a shift in responsibilities to the natural world, but it has also resulted in a shift in responsibilities to family. Ann depicts the affective nature of land ownership: “All of our energy is inside... So, you are either trying to take over or trying not to be taken over.” While it is much more complex, Kyle suggests, “It is almost like they taught us how to play Monopoly in school. He who dies with the most wins!” The introduction to land ownership has shifted communal modes of living as well family relations.

***Food sovereignty.*** Demonstrating another dimension of losing a relationship with land, Kyle highlights the loss of territory through an illegal transaction associated with the development of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway. He suggests that the E & N Railway Company

put the first scar across the land and I am positive that in the Cowichan Valley rather than fight with the people, they lit the forest on fire. They didn't even harvest it; they burned it so that we didn't have a home. We became dependent on them for everything. They took our housing away; they took our tools away; they took our everything away by burning it.

In his narration, Kyle depicts the destructive effects of settler land development on Cowichan Tribes access to food, shelter, tools, and territory. Cowichan peoples’ social structures, including education, political, religious, economic, and food systems center on relationships with land and natural world relations. Without these components, the Cowichan collective is deprived of the

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

necessary mechanisms to ensure collective living. The advent of European colonization reflects a marked shift away from Cowichan ways of living, often subjugating the collective’s ability to plan, prepare, and determine its own future. It is this deprivation, specifically, that Sophie suggests is the reason for the rates of suicidal behavior, at large, in Cowichan. Sophie asserts, “Suicide starts from the...deprivation of our rights to be with your family, to be the male of the house or the woman of the house...to be deprived of where we get our foods, where we're to live.” Sophie identifies the disruption of family systems, traditional gender roles, and territorial access necessary for food and shelter as reasons for suicidal behavior in Cowichan. The relationship between these constructs and suicidal behavior is reflected in multiple members’ accounts of economic or food injustice, along with residential schooling, as reasons for the increase in suicide amongst Cowichan members. In fact, separation from land is directly connected to food injustice for Cowichan peoples. Cowichan Tribes was rich in natural resources prior to European contact; however, both Cowichan population and access to resources have diminished since European colonization (Suttles, 1987). Kyle identifies the loss of access to and destruction of traditional harvesting sites as damaging factors to food sovereignty in Cowichan today.

Our people are getting in trouble because we have no resource to lean on anymore. We have nothing to sustain us anymore. We had hunting; we had fishing; we had shell fishing. We could go everywhere to get what we needed, all of our foods, all of our medicines, everything was there.

Today, there are multiple barriers to accessing traditional harvesting sites. Kyle is familiar with the natural landscape of the surrounding areas and describes how “Everywhere that we would go to harvest...there is now a yellow gate with a lock on it or

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

a big sign saying, ‘Private Property, No Trespassing.’” Prohibited access to traditional fishing, hunting, and harvesting sites has significantly impacted the economic and food sovereignty of the Cowichan peoples.

Woven throughout multiple narratives is the complex nature of land loss. Members relate land loss to the erasure of boundaries and people, forced sedentarization and its impact on the way of living, and the shift in people’s relationships to each other and the natural world. Indigenous peoples were already on the land when settlers first arrived. With continued Indigenous presence, how do settlers reconcile land theft and continued occupation?

### **Discussion**

By engaging the everyday experiences of elders, community members, professional caregivers, and youth and emerging adults, this study presents multiple explanations for suicidal behavior from the perspectives of tribal members. Addressing predominant reasons for suicidal behavior in the community at an individual level, members described experiences such as removal from family resulting in extreme feelings of loneliness; violence (e.g., domestic violence) resulting in a false belief that one is a burden on others; or exposure to violence (e.g., family history of suicidal behavior) resulting in a decreased sense of belonging and competency. Members’ explanations have been interpreted through the interpersonal theory of suicide, which highlights the fundamental human need for belongingness and competence (Joiner, 2007). The absence of reciprocal caring relations combined with a heightened perception of liability or self-hate leads to the desire to die by suicide. In the presence of an acquired capacity to harm one’s self (e.g., through habituation to pain), individuals who wish to die by suicide are placed at high risk for lethal or near lethal suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2007).

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

In addition to individual level explanations for suicide in the community, members provided interpretations related to shared or collective social predicaments associated with European colonization. According to members, historical and ongoing adaptation or absorption of educational, political, religious, economic, and food systems largely shape the contemporary experiences of many Cowichan members. The participants’ insights demonstrate that the repercussions of colonization are far from theoretical. Indeed, consequences of settler colonialism in Cowichan are experienced in the daily lives of members every time individuals are denied access to equitable services, removed from their family homes, exposed to violence, or forced to deny their own cultural heritage. The origins of suicidal behavior described here emphasize social and political forces that are shared in a collective past and simultaneously experienced, both materially and affectively, in the present-day lives of Cowichan members.

Interpretations of suicide in Cowichan elucidated by this study largely center on the colonially produced disruption of social and cultural formations that support individual or collective abilities to plan and prepare for the community’s future. For example, participants articulated economic insufficiency and lack of employment opportunities for members. In fact, the high school graduation rate for Cowichan members is startlingly low. According to the Aboriginal Community Data Initiative, 13% of Cowichan adults aged 25-64 report having received a high school diploma or equivalent, in contrast to 20% of the Aboriginal population of British Columbia on reservation land at large (Statistics Canada, 2006). In this study, Meyers pointed to the sense of disenfranchisement (e.g., volleyball experience) experienced by youth as they attempt to navigate federally funded service programs and suggested that repetitive limited opportunities for growth (e.g., education or job training) impact youth’s senses of self-competence. Specifically, he identified the experience of limited access to services, which over

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

time may influence an individual’s sense of competence. A vast body of literature points to the correlation between perceived burdensomeness, as indicated by a lowered sense of competence, and suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2007; Joiner, Van Orden, Witte, & Rudd, 2009; Van Orden et al., 2010).

In another crucial disruption, the implementation of the reservation system through the Indian Act led to the Cowichan peoples’ loss of control over land and resources (Tait, 2009). Relocation to reservations and sedentarization has impacted community well-being in a fundamental way. Cowichan peoples once were a community whose way of living was closely intertwined with food gathering, a meaningful and vibrant collective activity. The introduction of land ownership and agricultural practices shifted the Cowichan way of living to “being village dwellers, partially cut off from the land, largely unemployed, and subject to the imposition of alien authority structures” (Samson, 2009).

Broadly speaking, customary explanations for suicide often frame individual pathology as the root cause, yet communal experiences of Cowichan members highlight the need for a model of suicide that acknowledges the collective orientation of the community. As human existence necessarily engages social and cultural ontologies, so does the particular collective orientation of the Cowichan peoples. As such, in order to understand the dimensions of suicide that impact Cowichan peoples and their way of living, intervention and prevention efforts must center voices from the community in order to understand community members’ lived experiences and how they may impact their personal sense of identity, as individuals and as a collective society. The collective orientation of tribal communities necessitates the development of community-based programming that engages families and communities in practices that at once strengthen individuals and the collective. While Indigenous populations in settler colonial

## MUST EVERY SUICIDE “DIE ALONE”?

states have many similarities, there are also many differences across tribal groups. Thus, in order to address suicide amongst Indigenous populations, it is necessary to design strategies that are specific to the unique needs of the community. Towards that end, Kathy Irwin admonishes, “We don't need anyone else developing the tools which will help us to come to terms with who we are. We can and will do this work. Real power lies with those who design the tools — it always has. This power is ours” (as cited by L. T. Smith, 1999, p. 38). Finally, such efforts must also contextualize the historical experiences of the Indigenous peoples to comprehend the continuing impact on their psychological and material well-being.

By engaging the interpersonal theory of suicide, we can begin to understand everyday experiences in relation to suicidal behavior at the level of the individual; through the lens of settler colonial theory, we can start to comprehend that suicidal behavior has deep roots in settler expansion on Indigenous territories. Combining the theories, we can newly explore how suicide for First Nations peoples may be rooted in particular contemporary and historical colonial experiences, and most especially how such experiences may foreclose possible futures for Indigenous peoples. The appropriate next step in addressing suicidal behavior is to conceptualize intervention strategies that reflect the specific social and cultural needs of the community. There is an identified need to highlight practices that generate relations with land and all life forms, to honor the collective and relational orientations of the Cowichan peoples, and to center Indigenous ontologies and axiology's in the conceptualization of suicide interventions in tribal communities. In collaboration with members of the Cowichan community, the next article presents one path to increasing possible futures for tribal members by engaging the necessary social and cultural formations of the community.

Article 2

**Place-ing Relations: Conceptualizing a Place-Based Biopsychosocial Assessment**

Nearly one million people die by suicide around the world each year, and many more attempt to take their own lives, marking suicide as an international public health concern (World Health Organization, 2014). Suicide is a global phenomenon that occurs in all regions of the world; nonetheless, suicide affects some ethnic populations at disproportionate rates. For example, suicide rates among the Inuit youth of Canada are estimated to be eleven times Canada's national average, which is among the highest rates of suicide in the world (Statistics Canada, 2006). In the United States, suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native youth aged 10-34; this rate is 2.5 times higher than the national average for that age group (Center for Disease Control, 2015). Likewise, the incidence of suicide among First Nations youth in Canada is 3 to 6 times higher than for non-First Nations youth (Kirmayer et al., 2003).

Broadly, suicide among Indigenous populations is most often conceptualized in two frameworks: employing a medicalized model or explaining it as a function of distributive injustice. Medicalized models have largely framed indigenous struggles, both contemporary and historical, as symptoms of individual pathology (Million, 2013), placing the locus of responsibility on the individual rather than addressing root causes of their expression. Models of distributive injustice point to wide-scale factors such as poverty or inequality. Indigenous communities across the nation have experienced loss related to relocation and removal from traditional homelands, removal of children from family homes, and forced assimilation policies. According to Evans-Campbell, American Indian and Alaska Native communities experience “some of the highest rates of lifetime traumatic events, including interpersonal violence, child

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

abuse and neglect,” resulting in individual and collective mental health disparities (2008, p. 316). Such perspectives shed light on Indigenous experiences; however, they do not often acknowledge that participants are necessarily engaged in personal trajectories related to structures of social and cultural practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998; Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006).

In many ways, this chapter seeks to understand a psychological conception of personhood in relation to specific social practices and cultural contexts in order to illuminate additional explanations for suicide among some Indigenous populations. Social practices, in any context, are comprised of multiple individual perspectives, understandings, and ways of being, all of which, in turn, impact the social practices of the collective itself (Nasir et al., 2006). In addition, the positionality of individuals in a particular context dictates a diverse range of opportunities that play out differently across contexts (Dreier, 2009). This chapter acknowledges that humans do not live their lives in the milieu of one particular social environment, but, rather, we experience our world across multiple and diverse social contexts in a “comprehensive structural nexus of social practice” (Dreier, 2009, p. 196).

Mainstream psychology tends to approach the study of personhood as it appears in prearranged experimental settings, which has deep implications for understanding psychological phenomena. A systematic analysis of studies of mainstream psychological phenomena yields five profound insights into how knowledge in psychology is constructed in a manner that limits or eliminates particular bodies of experience (Dreier, 2009). First, approaching scholarship in this way compartmentalizes human experience, dividing mind, body, and spiritual knowledge. Because learning is social and occurs through everyday participation in life experiences, abstracting knowledge in this way does not comprehend how individual

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

components of human experience interact in context (Dreier, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1998). Second, Holzkamp (1983) suggests that abstracted tidbits of information separated from social mediation result in an emergent system of expertise that is “‘immediacy-fixated’” (as cited by Dreier, 2009). Third, this approach does not recognize the important interplay between healthy psychological functioning and natural-world presence (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). Fourth, a medicalized model does not incorporate important historical context. And finally, human subjectivity, in the context of experimental situations, is largely orchestrated and interpreted by presumably objective experts (Dreier, 2009). Working beyond such structures in mainstream psychological analysis is critical to understanding that the ways people conceptualize selves in relation to structures of social practice in context is essential to address the disparity in suicidal behavior.

Medicalized models combined with models of distributive injustice provide significant information about suicidal patterns among Indigenous populations, yet, by and large, these approaches do not adequately explain the Indigenous experience. The question remains: “Why do Indigenous populations have higher rates of suicide than other ethnic populations?” This chapter approaches the question from the standpoint of this study’s participants by engaging their real-life social and cultural structures (Lave & Wenger, 1998). In addition, I assume that in order to address the significant disparity in suicide rates amongst Indigenous populations, solutions must be imagined from within the community and based on purposefully designed, community-specific factors.

This project aims to conceptualize an assessment practice and protocol—in place of the customary biopsychosocial assessment—that can be used to gather information from participants in a culturally appropriate way and to provide participants an opportunity to share their “life

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

stories” (McAdams, 2001). A biopsychosocial assessment is an initial written assessment by a clinician to provide contextual information to fellow clinicians, lawyers, and insurance companies, as well as to the clinician (Shea, 1998). Assessments are clinical tools used by social workers and other practitioners in psychiatric interviewing protocols to assess client’s psychological, social, and developmental history. In short, it is a diagnostic tool used to inform diagnosis, treatment and intervention strategies, and to identify goals of therapy for the client. Assessment protocols are customary tools that are shaped by an individual frame, which fails to understand specific shared collective and social formations of Indigenous communities, and more specifically, their unique history in relation to colonization. Thus, the tools social workers use from the very beginning of their relationship with clients centers on the notion of individuality, thus perpetuating irrelevant solutions and interventions, particularly for Indigenous clients. In collaboration with community members, the author of this study designed a workshop aimed at gathering participant data in relation to mental, physical, and developmental health and history. Recounting life stories about one’s own lived experiences typically invokes core cultural values and beliefs (McAdams, 2001), which may inform alternative approaches to mental health treatment. Furthermore, narrating life stories in this way can assist participants to make sense of their predicaments, articulating a pathway forward based on shared collective values. Crucially, this project proposes engaging the therapist/researcher and participants in a creative, physical activity outdoors, intentionally shifting the way the therapeutic relationship is normally cultivated.

Responding to Bang et al.’s 2015 call for axiological innovations in the design and study of learning and research, the assessment protocol presented here includes carefully designed elements proposed to “disrupt historically shaped inequities and cultivate transformative agency

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

from within communities” (Bang, Faber, Gurneau, Marin, & Soto, 2015; Marin, & Soto, 2015, p. 2). Drawing from Indigenous methodologies, this intervention aims to conceptualize a collective and intergenerational therapeutic practice and protocol with three broad, yet equally important aims: to strengthen the relationship between therapist/researcher; to strengthen relations between human and natural world beings (Cajete, 2000); and to strengthen indigenous identity through relational epistemologies and place-based activity (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Kawagley, 1993). Relational epistemologies refers to a conception of reality in which “everything is related, that is, connected in dynamic, interactive, and mutually reciprocal relationships” (Cajete, 2000, p. 75). As a broad Indigenous worldview, relational epistemologies refers to a highly developed sense of social consciousness characterized by inherent responsibilities embedded within each relationship (Kawagley, 1993). An increased sense of social connection combined with a positive sense of purpose and belonging serve as protective factors against the desire to die by suicide (Joiner, 2007). Using relational epistemologies as its guiding concept, this project assumes that strengthening relations with others and with the natural world will increase a sense of social connection and purpose amongst participants. In addition, designing the project to reflect Indigenous pedagogies, including apprenticeship-learning practices, may assist participants in establishing a sense of purpose and belonging—both to each other and the natural world. To create a sustainable reduction in suicidal behavior amongst Indigenous populations, researchers and practitioners must engage across disciplines to design and implement interventions that increase social belonging and perceptions of self-worthiness while strengthening relational responsibilities.

### **Indigenous Methodologies**

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Indigenous methodologies is a solidified set of approaches defined as “research by and for indigenous peoples, using techniques and methods drawn from the traditions of those peoples” (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, & Sookraj, 2009, p. 894). Growing out of resistance to imperial and colonial impositions on indigenous knowledge and indigenous theories, Indigenous methodologies aims to disrupt the unequal power distribution between researchers and researched by engaging theories and practices that confront or oppose the status quo (L. T. Smith, 2012). In “Decolonizing Methodologies,” Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends that imperial and colonial structures have colonized knowledge bases and that the knowledge of indigenous peoples has been subjugated in a variety of ways (L. T. Smith, 2012). Smith aims to disrupt the typical relationship between academic theories and community values, along with reconceptualizing the relationship between institution and community, by engaging specific research practices based on local understandings and cultural practices (2012). Smith contends, as a practice, decolonization must engage imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels (2012). For researchers, Smith reminds, “one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices” (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. XX). Indigenous methodologies highlight values and beliefs while engaging local customs and ways of knowing as important factors to be built into the research protocol. The nature of Indigenous knowledge is more than just a way of knowing, and as such, researchers and practitioners who design mental health interventions must consider the inherent strengths embedded within the collective, its social and cultural ways of knowing, and the place which constitutes and contains its social and material relations (Evans et al., 2009). Conceiving solutions from within the community based on community-specific factors within a broad conceptual frame, I have engaged Indigenous methodologies in an effort to re-imagine an

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

assessment practice and protocol that may strengthen relationships amongst peoples, places, and other natural beings. Specifically, this project proposes and implements six interrelated, theoretically salient design conjectures: the cultural concept of person (Kirmayer, 2007a); relational epistemologies (Cajete, 1994; Kawagley, 1993); the importance of place (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001); the collective social formation; the intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Cajete, 2000); and the importance utilizing Indigenous teaching and learning practices (e.g., story and metaphor) as a means for carrying knowledge (Rogoff, 1991).

The specifically designed assessment of suicide risk presented here attends to the place-based history and context of the Cowichan peoples, the inherent strengths embedded in relational epistemologies and cultural concepts of self, the collective and intergenerational orientation of the community, and the importance of stories and metaphor in knowledge transmission. By designing a place-based biopsychosocial assessment, this research project specifically asks,

1) In what ways can a specifically designed approach to the biopsychosocial assessment provide information about the youth's cultural, social, and emotional experiences?

- a. In what ways did this approach capture typical information about clients' social and developmental experiences and history?
- b. In what ways did this assessment protocol provide additional and relevant data in contrast to a typical biopsychosocial assessment?

While space precludes an extensive discussion of how Indigenous historical experience may place Indigenous populations at risk for suicide, it is important to point out that a strong sense of self in relation to others may protect against social disconnection, while engaging Indigenous teaching and learning practices may reduce one's sense of burdensomeness. In addition, the history of trauma and exposure to violence experienced by Indigenous populations

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

may provide insight into a collective capacity to enact lethal self-harm. Designing approaches to mental health that consider cultural, social, political, and historical factors may shed light on the high rates of suicidal behavior amongst Indigenous populations at large.

### **Methodological Design**

This chapter reports the findings of the first iteration of the Life Stories place-based biopsychosocial assessment workshop, which took place among members of the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in August 2015. The Life Stories workshop was designed to elicit information about the various contexts and relationships in which Cowichan youth are involved. In addition, this project aimed to interpret youth participants' daily experiences within each context. Highlighting relational epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge systems, it is my assumption that a positive, collective experience during this workshop may strengthen Indigenous youth's conceptions' of self in relation to others and the natural world.

### **Cowichan First Nation**

Nestled alongside the Cowichan river near the southern tip of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the Cowichan First Nation serves over 4,600 members (Cowichan Tribes, 2005). With rich culture and traditions, the Cowichan way of living places great importance on ceremonial traditions, extended family ties and respect for all living things. Despite strong cultural values, a significant increase in suicidal behavior amongst Cowichan members between 2007 and 2012 was reported. As a result of the increase in suicidal behavior across all ages, the Cowichan First Nation Chief and Council declared a local state of emergency in May 2012; this state of emergency is still in effect today (Cowichan Tribes Chief and Council, 2012). The University of

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Washington Internal Review Board, the Cowichan Chief and Council, and the local tribal health and education committees have approved this project.

### **Participants**

The participants in the first Life Stories workshop, presented here, are between the ages of 12-67 years, are enrolled as members of the Cowichan Tribes, and have either experienced suicidal ideation or attempt, or have experienced the death by suicide of a loved one. The participants in this study volunteered to participate in the research study to provide explanations and meanings for suicide in their community; thus, youth described here may or may not have experienced a history of past psychiatric illness. Participants received a small stipend for their time. Each youth consented to have a typical biopsychosocial assessment conducted, based on a narrative interview. All identifying information in this study has been associated with pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

**Matilda.** Matilda is a 14-year-old, female Cowichan First Nations student. Matilda lives with her mother, her stepfather, four younger siblings, and two younger stepsiblings on reservation. Matilda is the oldest child in the family. She has experienced the loss of a close friend to a fatal motor vehicle accident and the subsequent death by suicide of her friend's older sister. Matilda's grandfather recently died. Matilda has experienced self-harm (cutting) on two separate occasions. Matilda is in ninth grade.

**Sans.** Sans is an 18-year-old, male Cowichan First Nations youth who has recently graduated high school. He currently lives with his mother, father, and 9-year-old sister. Sans and his family live off reservation. Sans reported experiencing suicidal ideation. However, he does not report a history of suicidal attempt.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

**Maria.** Maria is a 14-year-old, female Cowichan First Nations student and is attending a private Christian school; Maria is in grade ten. Maria reported having suicidal thoughts in her past. However, she has never attempted suicide. Maria's parents separated when she was three years old, and she currently lives with her mother and three younger siblings off reservation. Maria has experienced the death by suicide of a schoolmate.

**Reine.** Reine is an 18-year-old, female Cowichan First Nations youth. Reine recently graduated from high school and is living with her mother, her stepfather, and three younger siblings on reservation. Reine has experienced suicidal ideation and symptoms of depression. Reine's mother has a history of alcohol abuse and suicidal ideation.

**Randy.** Randy is a 12-year-old, male Cowichan First Nations student who does not report suicidal ideation or attempt. Randy is familiar with a student who has died by suicide. Randy lives off reservation with his mother and three siblings. Randy's parents are divorced, and he spends weekends with his father. Randy is in seventh grade.

**Mary (Elder/First Nations' Medicine Healer).** As an elder and healer, Mary has studied the medicinal uses of plants for most of her life. Her lifelong expertise is born out of the close observation of her grandmothers and other knowledgeable elders, as well as through "guided participation" (Rogoff, 1991) in activities to train her in the medicinal uses of Pacific Northwest plants. She is familiar with medicinal uses, plant identification, cultural stories associated with each, local harvesting protocols, and how to make medicinal salves. Mary was invited to engage the youth in a nature walk to learn about Cowichan peoples' relations with plants, to assist with appropriate harvesting protocols, and to provide cultural knowledge and stories associated with plant and natural world relations.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

**Emma (Therapist/Researcher).** The author of this chapter participated in the workshop as a researcher and as an instructor. She is an enrolled member of the Cowichan Tribes and has extensive experience working with early childhood through high-school aged youth. In addition, the author has been trained as a social worker with a specialty in working with children, youth, and families.

### Data Collection

The Life Stories workshop activity yielded audio and transcription of the following events: the Life Stories instructional launch, the nature walk with a First Nations' traditional healer from the perspective of three youth participants, the art project instructional launch and process, narrative interviews of five youth, follow-up/clarification interviews of five youth, and photographs of five youths' Life Stories art representations. Using the data from the narrative interviews, a conventional biopsychosocial assessment was created for each participant. From instructional launch to a complete biopsychosocial assessment for five participants, the Life Stories workshop took approximately 17 hours (see table 3).

*Table 3. Life Stories Workshop Practitioner Time Commitment*

*Table 3. Life Stories Workshop Practitioner Time Commitment*

<u>Phase</u>	<u>Hours</u>
Life Stories Instructional Launch/Nature Walk	1.50
Art Project Instructional Launch/Process/Share-out	1.00
Narrative Interviews (n=5)	8.00
Follow-up/Clarification Interview (n=5)	1.25
Creation of Individual Biopsychosocial Assessment (n=5)	5.00
<b>Total Number of Hours Spent (Clinician)</b>	<b>17.00</b>

This chapter relies particularly on

data obtained from the narrative interviews with five youth participants about their Life Stories art representation. The length of

each narrative interview ranged from 1 to 3 hours. Conducting fieldwork located within and among the community allowed me to participate as a community member in order to get a sense of community concerns about the shared social predicaments and experiences around suicide.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

**Methodological procedures.** To address the six design conjectures, the workshop includes three specific points of data collection: 1) activity launch and nature walk with a First Nations' traditional healer, 2) creation of a Life Stories art representation (McAdams, 2001), and 3) narrative interview based on youth's art representation (White, 2001).

***Phase 1. Nature walk with First Nations' traditional healer.*** A group of 15 Cowichan community members between the ages of 2–67 years participated in a nature walk with a First Nations' traditional healer. The group convened at Bright Angel Park, alongside the Koksilah River. The Koksilah River is a sacred place for the Cowichan peoples, as it is the home to annual salmon runs that have nourished the peoples for millennia. The group convened under a covered picnic shelter to brainstorm the various, dynamic contexts in which the participants were involved. The instructional launch of the activity was designed to emphasize relational epistemologies; specifically, youth collectively identified various relationships in which each was involved and shared a story embedded within each relationship. Once participants identified the people, places, and things they were “in relations with,” they were asked to collect or harvest an item that represents each relationship. The length of time spent on the nature walk segment of the workshop was 1.5 hours.

***Phase 2. Creation of Life Stories art representation.*** From knitting Cowichan sweaters to crafting jewelry to carving canoes from the Great Red Cedar tree, Cowichan peoples have always been skilled in “making” artistic tools and representations. Embedded within the design is the assumption that a relationship founded on activity in a culturally specific place will guide an intervention that is also appropriate and sensitive to healing in an Indigenous context. Guided by both cultural practice and place-based ways of knowing, youth participants were then given the tools needed to create a “Life Stories art representation” that symbolized their life in union with

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

multiple human and non-human relations. The aim of creating a Life Stories art representation was to give youth an opportunity to forge a representation of their multiple relationships through a “making” project. After each youth gathered representations of their relations, they were given tools (e.g., crafting wire, hot glue gun, glue, beads, and a drill) needed to create art pieces that represented their lives in union with the natural environment. Additional crafting supplies were selected because of their prevalence in many contemporary Cowichan homes. Beads, for example, are found in family homes where artists craft jewelry, and hot glue or drills are often found in Coast Salish carvers’ homes. Youth were given the freedom to choose how to represent their relationships in their Life Stories art representations. Working alongside their peers, each youth created an individual Life Stories art representation; the group spent approximately one hour completing individual art representations (see Appendix D, Sample Life Stories Art Representation).

***Phase 3. Narrative interview and follow-up interview.*** Each participant completed a narrative interview describing his or her art representation and one follow-up interview to provide feedback on analysis and/or to provide additional or clarifying information clarifying information (Patton, 2015). The duration of each narrative interview was between 1-3 hours and each follow-up interview was approximately 15 minutes. In total, less than ten hours were spent interviewing five youth participants. The first interview took place in August of 2015. The follow-up interview took place in October 2015. Individual Life Stories art representations were used by the adolescents to tell their life stories and by the therapist/researcher to assess various experiences in context. The goal of each interview was to understand the individual, day-to-day experiences of each participant across various contexts or systems such as family, school, and culture/religion.

**Six Design Conjectures**

Each phase of the workshop was designed with specific attention to the varying cultural concepts of the person, an understanding of relational epistemologies, the importance of place, the collective social formation of the community, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and Indigenous teaching and learning practices. Table 4, Six Design Conjectures, presents a brief description of each design construct.

*Table 4. Six Design Conjectures.*

*Table 4. Six Design Conjectures*

Relational Epistemologies	“Everything is related... connected in dynamic, interactive & mutually reciprocal relationships (Cajete, 2000) Hours
Cultural Concepts of Person	Egocentric/Independent, Sociocentric/Interdependent, Ecocentric, Cosmocentric
Place-based	Physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of ‘Remembering who we are.’ (Waters, 2004). Relationship, responsibility, and participation in the life of one’s people (Cajete, 1994).
Collective Social Formation	
Intergenerational Influence	Knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next.
Indigenous Pedagogies	Apprenticeship learning, stories and metaphor, and cultural practices and protocols (Rogoff, 1991).

**Cultural concepts of the person.** Approaches to mental health are inevitably informed by implicit models of the self, which, in turn, depend on cultural concepts of the (Kirmayer, 2007a). Cultural concepts of the person are dynamic constructs that vary across cultural groups, but also within and across individuals, depending on context or situation. The formulation *model of self* refers to an individual’s inner experience, while personhood refers to their social roles, identities, and interactions (Kirmayer, 2007a). Cultural conceptions of self provide rationale for behavior, inform interpretations and perspectives, and shape pathways for action (Kirmayer, 2007a). Thus, when designing prevention or intervention practices for any community, it is necessary to

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

consider the dynamic range in the ways cultural groups construct cultural models of self or personhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

To illuminate patterns related to implicit models of self, this project engages the following cultural concepts of the person: egocentricity, ecocentricity, sociocentricity, and cosmocentricity (Kirmayer, 2007a). An egocentric orientation reflects a concept of personhood based on values of individualism, autonomy, achievement, and materialism (Kirmayer, 2007a); this theory of self is elsewhere formulated as an independent construal of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A *sociocentric* orientation highlights self in relation to family, clan, lineage, or community and locates value in collectivity, interdependence, and cooperation (Kirmayer, 2007a); a sociocentric orientation may function in a relationship with the interdependent construal of self, integrating elements of “self-in-relation-to-other,” highlighting the role of relations with others in the definition of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 225). A concept of self in relation to plants, animals, and the natural world may be called *ecocentric*, placing emphasis on balance and harmony with the natural world. Self in relation to the cosmos or ancestors is a *cosmocentric* orientation, which values cosmic order and holism (Kirmayer, 2007a). Presented in isolation, these constructs of self can appear hierarchical, but viewing them as a set of interrelated processes shows that individuals hold multiple views of self that shift across time and context. An individual, for example, may have a dominant sociocentric or interdependent orientation when participating in ceremonial events but may demonstrate a dominant egocentric orientation when engaging in talk therapy. Nevertheless, approaches to mental health in the United States are largely conceptualized from an egocentric orientation, which disregards diverse contextual variations and cultural ways of knowing. Implicit models of

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

self vary within and across cultural groups, and as such, this project attends to multiple concepts of the person to illuminate appropriate approaches to healing in specific communities.

**Relational Epistemologies.** Indigenous peoples understand themselves to be a small part of a complex and dynamic living system (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). By paying specific attention to the natural relations and responsibilities inherent in a collective community, professional caregivers can develop an understanding of the daily, lived experiences of Indigenous adolescents' lives. Relational epistemologies refers to the notion that all living beings—humans, animals, plants, and those of the natural world—embody relational characteristics that must be honored (Cajete, 2000). For Indigenous peoples, the relationships we have with the natural world are the foundation of the responsibility we also bear for all our natural-world relations. With particular attention to the orientation of knowledge in relation to historical and cultural identities, relationships with nature, and their links to adolescent well-being, researchers and practitioners can begin to understand the sociocultural contexts of Indigenous adolescent youth in order to expand possible futures for individuals and the collective (Bang & Medin, 2010).

Indigenous epistemology is a complex web of interrelated elements that are built on “relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves” (Wilson, 2008, p. 74). Indigenous knowledge is encompassed within the relationships in the surrounding environment and within the interconnected responsibilities attendant upon these relationships (Wilson, 2008). An Indigenous methodological approach is, then, guided by relationships and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). As human beings, we are deeply embedded within this system of relationships, and if we attempt to exist external to this system, we do not survive (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). According to Shawn Wilson, “Our reality, our ontology is the relationships” (2008, p. 76).

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

By engaging relational epistemologies as a design construct, this study highlights the relational reality of Indigenous communities. What can an understanding of the relational worldview tell us about Indigenous youth's well-being? First, by considering and participating in creative life processes, youths may reflect on and strengthen their own understanding of the roles and inherent responsibilities embedded within their communities. For example, a narration of self-identified relationships inevitably tells us something about a young person's sense of social connection, while an understanding of purpose or role informs one's sense of self-worth. This knowledge has deep implications for the prevention of suicidal behavior and, in fact, provides grounds for a person's desire to live or desire to die. Secondly, by making relational epistemologies central, this project engages important cultural concepts of personhood essential to the collective well-being of the Cowichan peoples. Locating one's self in relation to others, to the natural world, and to the cosmos places youth in the context of multiple support systems, which can expand possible approaches to mental health, encompassing self-care practices or professional mental health services. This approach is exceptionally important because the literature informs us that Indigenous peoples placed at risk for suicide do not always access the services they need. An emerging body of direct empirical evidence suggests that the desire to die by suicide is caused by a simultaneous sense of thwarted belongingness ("I am alone") and perceived burdensomeness ("I am worthless") (Joiner, 2007). Acquired capability, the capacity for lethal self-harm, is developed through habituation and in response to repeated physical pain and/or fear-inducing experiences. Thus, according to this theory, a person who simultaneously experiences a desire to die by suicide combined with the capacity to enact lethal self-harm is considered at serious risk for suicide (Joiner, 2007). Prioritizing the importance of relational

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

epistemologies as a design construct from conceptualization to implementation honors Indigenous ways of knowing as a bulwark against such risks.

**Importance of place.** Closely related to interrelationality are conceptions of being in relation with place. Embedded within place is a deep sense of history, stories, cultural knowledge, and spiritual meaning (Basso, 1996; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Indigenous peoples view themselves as being in relations with particular places. In fact, according to Cajete, a collective culture, including its “ethics, morals, religious expression, politics, and economics” is defined by the collective’s understanding of natural life cycles and the interdependence of all living things (1994, p. 46). Thus, for Indigenous collectives, place represents the embedding of their existential access to their “lifeworld, a vast ocean of direct human experience” from which human knowledge and meaning is drawn (Cajete, 1994, p. 45). Furthermore, as Johnson argues,

“The knowledge we create is inevitably affected by the landscape surrounding us...the landscape we carry within us, continually remembered and retold; the landscape which has played a part in our education, alters how we see the world around us and how we engage in the social production of knowledge” (2012, p. 832).

Indigenous peoples carry an ontological map of reality based on thousands of generations of human experience that informs our physical, cognitive, and emotional orientations to place (Cajete, 2004). Associated with particular places are local wisdom, ways of knowing, and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Being in relations with place, then, provides access to ontological ways of knowing and is crucial in shaping individual and collective futures. Conversely, being removed from place threatens Indigenous peoples’ understanding of human existence and, thus, becomes an existential threat to

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

collective existence. In short, in the context of collective displacement, the meanings of suicidal behavior become especially clear.

**Collective social formation.** The collective nature of tribal communities is seldom taken into consideration when designing approaches to mental health, despite its importance. A large part of the problem resides in the conflicting worldviews between Western organizations and collective orientations. On one hand, Western social structures and practices tend to be specialized, standardized, and compartmentalized; on the other hand, Indigenous collectives place importance on “collective decision making, extended kinship structures, ascribed authority vested in elders, flexible notions of time and traditions of informality in every day affairs” (Barnhardt, 2005, p. 13). As inherently social beings, we are necessarily engaged in social and cultural practices. Living in relations with others is so important, in fact, that our survival as a human species depends on it; Cajete explains, “our physical and biological survival is intimately interwoven with the communities that we create and that create us” (1994, p. 166). As relationships are the cornerstone of community, community is the context in which Indigenous peoples learn about the importance of interrelationality, the inherent responsibilities embedded therein, and practices and protocols for participating in the collective lifeworld (Cajete, 1994). By participating in the lives of others, collectives develop a shared history and identity. It is in what Wildcat terms, the “nature-culture nexus” that hopefulness resides; for him, the nature-culture nexus represents a symbiotic relationship between humans, our natural landscapes and seascapes, and our non-human relations (2010). In tight-knit, collective societies, many individuals share the same social predicaments, and the impact of death by suicide is often felt throughout the community (Kirmayer, 2007a). In fact, some scholars suggest that Indigenous communities are particularly susceptible to suicide contagion or clustering, the phenomenon of

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

several completed suicides from the same community, geographic region, or family within the same period (Bechtold, 1988; Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003). In the context of community-level displacement, Indigenous peoples are removed from the very sources of strength, knowledge, and hope that protect against the impact of death or trauma at the level of the collective. In the context of collective displacement, suicide clustering begins to make sense.

**Intergenerational transmission of knowledge.** Knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next through apprenticeship learning, stories and metaphor, and cultural participation (Cajete, 2000). Indigenous knowledge systems provide a framework for how to live sustainably with our natural-world relations, and this knowledge is transmitted from elders to youth through oral tradition, cultural ceremonies and practices, and family and intergenerational activities. In collective communities, elders are valued as essential keepers of knowledge and are tasked with preparing the younger generations with knowledge of “how to walk in a good way.” A community-based intervention to suicide must engage multiple generations of community members as a way to understand the deeply nuanced and lived experiences of Cowichan youth.

**Indigenous teaching and learning practices.** Indigenous pedagogies, such as stories and metaphor, serve important functions in Indigenous communities. Indigenous stories serve to communicate rich histories while serving as active self-governing creations (Vizenor, 2000). Embedded within Indigenous stories are the metaphors of natural reason and Indigenous survivance. Indigenous stories share histories of place, depict seasonal changes across the temporal dimension, and integrate the sound and motion of the natural world INSERT VIZENOR, 2000. Ideals of Native individual, economic, political or territorial sovereignty can be understood, preserved, and transmitted through Indigenous stories. Embedded within stories are historical accounts of community, cultural teachings including ethical and moral codes, plant

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

and medicine knowledge, and cultural practices to ensure collective strength across generations (Kovach, 2010). Mechanisms for scientific thought and application are metaphorically symbolized in most Native creation or origin stories; thus “Native science is a reflection of the metaphoric mind and is embedded in creative participation with nature” (Cajete, 2000, p. 14). For Indigenous peoples, “our stories are our theories” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 426), and these theories often serve to recreate a sense of identity and history (Ruppert, 2008). According to Wilson, “Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective” (Wilson, 2008, p. xx). Embedded within stories are the cultural, social, political, and historical guides that provide the framework for collective social formation amongst Indigenous peoples (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). It is by engaging Indigenous pedagogical practices that this project seeks to imagine building relations among Indigenous peoples and the natural world in an effort to strengthen participants’ senses of belonging and purpose, while also increasing positive conceptions of self-worth.

**Analytic procedure.** All audiotaped events, including the instructional launch and nature walk, art project process, narrative interviews, and follow-up interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outside transcription service. For this project, the narrative interviews were open-coded by the author to establish general themes in the data (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). General themes emerged from each participant’s narrative interview about his or her various contexts and experiences; next, these themes were categorized as either “typical” biopsychosocial data or “themes not included” in an initial biopsychosocial assessment resulting in two emergent coding frameworks (see Appendix E, Life Stories Workshop Coding Framework for more details) (Patton, 2015). Each transcript was uploaded to Dedoose analytic

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

software for analysis based on both Shea's Initial Biopsychosocial Assessment (Shea, 1998) and the emergent framework (themes not typically included).

Typical biopsychosocial data includes information about the participants' past psychiatric history, developmental and social history, and family history (Shea, 1998). Data from each narrative interview were used to create a biopsychosocial assessment for each participant in order to determine whether or not the study produced typical or expected assessment data based on Shea's Initial Biopsychosocial Assessment (see Appendix F, Matilda's Biopsychosocial Assessment for a sample assessment) (Shea, 1998).

The author examined the emergent themes to determine what, if any, additional and relevant information was obtained in contrast to a typical biopsychosocial assessment. In addition to typical or expected information, additional data emerged that provides information about the participants' values, beliefs, and cultural ontology. Additional and relevant themes include: the importance of relational epistemologies and of attending to cultural concepts of the person; collective and intergenerational influences; religious or spiritual beliefs about afterlife and death/dying protocols; future selves (self or other); and youth voice.

### **Findings**

#### **Typical Biopsychosocial Assessment**

In order to determine the type and quantity of information gathered during the narrative interviews, the author conducted a biopsychosocial assessment of each participant. Presented below are rich, descriptive accounts of youth experience in the areas of 1) history of present illness, 2) past psychiatric history, 3) history of substance abuse, 4) past social and developmental history including family history, and 5) current social history. Table 5 highlights the presence of absence of data necessary for to complete a customary biopsychosocial

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

assessment (see *Table 5*, Biopsychosocial: Presence or Absence of Typical Biopsychosocial Data (N=5)). Data gathered across all five youth participants include current stressors, individual perceptions of current problems and roadblocks to health.

*Table 5. Biopsychosocial: Presence or Absence of Typical Biopsychosocial Data (N=5)*

<u>Presence or Absence of Typical Biopsychosocial Data</u>	<u>N=5</u>	<u>Descriptive Example</u>
History of Present Illness (mental health)	1/5	“I don’t socialize. I don’t even really leave the house.”
Past psychiatric illness/history	2/5	“Everything made me cry...I did not want to be around light, or music, or TV or anything.”
History of substance abuse (alcohol, drugs)	5/5	“People usually take it when they’re trying to handle depression.”
Past social and developmental history (education, family, job)	5/5	“She was really accepting. She has a lot of patience and she didn’t get angry easily. She didn’t raise her voice very often.”
Current social history (family, interpersonal, strengths)	5/5	“I know how I deserve to be treated. When someone does something hurtful or mean or inconsiderate, it doesn’t get to me the way that it used to.”

*Table 5* depicts the prevalence of customary biopsychosocial data across five narrative interviews (n=5) with a descriptive example of each. Areas of categorization include history of present illness, past psychiatric history, history of substance abuse, past social and developmental history, and current social history.

**History of present illness.** The history of present illness code captures critical information for the practitioner to facilitate an appropriate mental health diagnosis; types of data include information about the onset of a mental health condition, social challenges that may exasperate the condition, and symptoms of a mental health condition. Of the five youth participants, one provided relevant information about a present illness. As a coping mechanism for managing symptoms of depression, Reine indicated that she isolates herself from others: “I don't do anything anymore. I don't socialize. I don't even really leave the house. I went camping a few weeks ago, but aside from today, the other day, and camping, I haven't left the house since school ended.” In her narrative description, Reine suggested that she is experiencing a noticeably diminished interest in participating in all, or almost all, activities; a reduction in interest or

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

pleasure in participating in activities is a symptom identified as an indicator of some depressive disorders (Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux, & Macintyre, 2007).

**Past psychiatric history.** Two participants out of five reported a past psychiatric history including self-harm behavior and/or symptoms of depression. Matilda, for example, has experienced symptoms of depression: “I was just really emotional. Everything ticked me off; everything made me cry...I just did not want to be outside. I did not want to be around light, or music, or TV, or anything.” Matilda has engaged in self-harm behavior on two separate occasions. Combined with symptoms of depression, Matilda identifies interpersonal stress as her primary reason for self-harm. She explains, “I’ve only cut twice in my life...it let out a lot of emotion in me. I did it and the next day, I kind of regretted it because I could see the scars on me. Then, I was like why did I do that?” In another example, Reine narrated family discord and intergenerational trauma as reasons for her suicidal ideation: “My mom and [her husband] were fighting a lot...my grandparents were drinking a lot, so I couldn't be over there either. I just didn't feel like I had anywhere to go. I didn't believe in myself...I felt defeated and hopeless. I wasn't doing well in school. I didn't want to go to school. I wasn't taking care of myself either.” While both youth were not directly asked about psychiatric history, they narrated symptoms of depression, hopelessness, and self-harm. In terms of suicidal ideation, four out of five youth stated that they have thought about suicide; however, none of the youth has considered or planned a death by suicide.

**History of substance use.** Substance use disorders are characterized by continued use despite adverse consequence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Substance use is characterized by a basic change in brain circuitry, which may be revealed through repeated relapse, cravings, and impaired control over use (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Substance use was coded to include alcohol use, chemical or substance use, and cigarette use.

Three out of five youth participants have tried alcohol or substances at least once in their lifetimes. However, none of the youth in this study exhibited symptoms of Substance Use Disorder. None of the youth in this study identified personal experience with substance or cigarette use. Youth did, nevertheless, identify a concern about substance use amongst family, friends, or community members, in general.

### **Alcohol or substance use amongst family or friends**

Family or friend history of substance use as a salient issue impacting the youths' lives was identified in all five narrative interviews. Four out of five youth identified alcohol use, specifically, as an impacting factor, while three out of five youth identified chemical or substance abuse and cigarette use as factors in their lives. Common themes emerged in relation to alcohol or substance use amongst family or friends, including the purpose for using alcohol or drugs, general consequences of substance use, and the intergenerational influence of substance use.

*Uses of alcohol amongst family or friends.* Youth narrated reasons for using alcohol or drugs in relation to celebration, social belonging, and coping strategies. Matilda, for example, states, "it's good to drink on special occasions, just not for every special occasion." Matilda identifies social belonging as an explanation for her friends' alcohol use: "They just want to fit in or they just want to try it for the very first time ever. They say they're only going to do it once but then you get attached to it and it becomes your whole life." In addition to using substances for celebration or social belonging, youth identified suggested that others' use of alcohol might be a coping mechanism. Sans explains, "People usually take it when they're trying to handle

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

depression, or just get drunk in general.” In short, youth characterized family or friends’ use of alcohol of substances as celebratory, social, or used to manage stress or difficulty.

***Substance and cigarette use amongst family or friends.*** Three out five youth identify chemical or substance abuse as a concern amongst family or loved ones. Matilda, for example, prides herself on helping or encouraging her friends: “I always just say they should stop because you're too young and you've got a life ahead of you. I have quite a few friends who are already into weed and they're younger than me.” Randy reports that his friends’ parents smoke marijuana: “Their parents...they're smoking illegally.” Three out of five youth identify cigarette use amongst their friends; Matilda states, “I think one of my friends does cigarettes.”

***Addiction in relation to family or friend use of alcohol or substances.*** Youth narrated their perception of the addictive nature of alcohol. For example, when asked if she is worried about alcohol use in her family Reine replies, “Oh, absolutely, even with my mom. She doesn't drink anymore but I know why she doesn't drink anymore. It's dangerous for her. She can't just have one drink or a few drinks. That's not a possibility. She tried.” Reine continues, “She stopped drinking when she was pregnant with me and with my other siblings but the addiction wasn't over. It was just put on pause.” According to Leshner, “addiction is a chronic, relapsing disease that results from the prolonged effects” (Leshner, 1997) on the brain and is shaped by social and behavioral settings; addiction is illustrated by four characteristics, which all depend on the duration of use. The elements of addiction include: compulsion and craving, a loss of control over use, continued use despite adverse consequences, and salience of use (Jackson, 2016).

***Dangers of alcohol use amongst family or friends.*** Across four narrative interviews, the dangers of alcohol use emerged. Common themes included: the dangers of memory loss,

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

physical harm or violence, and accidental alcohol-related incidents. Matilda expressed concern for the patterns of alcohol use among some of her friends:

If they drink too much, they can pass out and could...damage something in their head.

One of my friends, she told me that she passed out and she hit right where your memory thing ... Somewhere in the back of her head, and she lost her memory so she totally forgot what happened until they told her.

Sans identified the physically damaging nature of alcohol use for young people: “It destroys the liver...because it'll lead to further problems with their bodies later on. A young one can't process alcohol the same way an adult body can.” Rich narrative stories of alcohol dangers emerged as youth participants shared stories of alcohol-related accidents or adverse medical conditions amongst family or friends related to alcohol abuse.

### *Intergenerational influence of alcohol or substance use in families or amongst friends.*

A common theme among the four participants that identified alcohol abuse as a factor is the intergenerational influence of alcohol in their families. In terms of their alcohol use, Reine expressed concern for some members of her family: “It's bad in my family. It's bad, the way that they use alcohol. It's really bad. It's really bad for them. My grandpa actually had a stroke when I was a kid because of it. He has tunnel vision. He can barely see. It's like he's wearing sunglasses all the time. He can't feel his left side.” As a result of some family members’ continued use despite adverse consequences, Reine states, “I don't even like alcohol. I don't. I've drank occasionally at social things. I don't think I'll ever like it because of my mom's addiction and because of how it has affected my childhood.” The youth provided detailed accounts of their concern about the intergenerational implications of alcohol or substance abuse.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

**Past social and developmental history.** All five youth participants provided a comprehensive overview of past social and developmental history including education and school experiences; family relationships, social network, and abuse history; employment record; legal record; and religious background.

***Education and school experiences.*** Each youth provided background information about his/her past and current experiences at school including grade, friend and support systems, and perceived strengths. In one example, Matilda shares how she accessed student resources following the accidental death of her friend; she visited a school counselor for grief counseling. Matilda states, “Some counselors could help, it's just to let out all your emotions. I had one for two or three months at school.” By engaging school counselors as a part of her support system, Matilda connected school with helping and healing processes, which increases her access to mental health services.

***Family relationships, social network, and abuse history.*** Data related to family relationships, client's social support systems, and history of abuse were captured for each participant.

***Family relationships.*** Family relationships were identified as the greatest source of strength, support, and social connection in some cases, but also as the main source of interpersonal stress in others.

As a source of strength and support, Reine narrated the unconditional love and acceptance of her late great-grandmother: “It wouldn't have mattered what I did. She would have accepted it and accepted me. She's one of the only persons or one of the only people I've ever met to be that way.” Reine's family provides a great amount of support to her; however, her mother's history of substance abuse has caused her distress: “People that I thought were never

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

going to hurt me did. It's mostly my mom, to be really honest...I never thought we would be close again. Now, my mom is definitely the closest person to me. She may have been a cause of a lot of the pain that I went through, but she was also one of the only people who ever understood that pain and would listen to me and took me seriously.” Thus, Reine’s family context represents both a great source of social support and one of her major causes of interpersonal distress. At one point in her life, Reine could not imagine repairing relations with her mother. Now, Reine reports, her mother is the greatest source of empathy and support. Her example exemplifies the dynamic nature of social support highlighting the shifting nature of belonging, in general.

Matilda draws support from both her mother and her father and, in fact, captured both parents on her Life Stories art representation:

I thought about these shells that represent my mom and my dad. They're two totally different shells. One's really small and that is my dad...He is a big part of my life... If I ever got in trouble, he'd just tell me not to do it again. He'd lecture me the same way...like my mom. I know he just does it because he loves me. The bigger one is my mom because she was there throughout my whole life and she always managed to do stuff, what I wanted to do. She sacrificed a lot for me. She's just a big part of my life.

They're both different but they're both very beautiful. Like a shell, they're strong but they can be weak. They break at some points.

Given an opportunity to self-determine relational representations in her Life Stories art piece, Matilda included both of her parents individually. It is evident from Matilda’s narration that she feels supported by both her mother and her father. Creating a Life Stories art representation provided Matilda with an opportunity to engage metaphoric reasoning, an Indigenous teaching

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

and learning practice. In addition, her metaphor engages her understanding of her parents, and possibly human beings, as fallible. A therapist could use this information to engage Matilda's understanding of human nature, which may help her develop and clarify an individual sense of self in relation to lived experiences.

Maria's family has been both a positive support system and the reason for her interpersonal distress. While she describes not having spent a great deal of time with her father's side of her family, Maria portrays their closeness: "Whenever we're at a family dinner, everyone is doing their own thing like the kids are talking with the aunts and uncles. Everyone is just having a good time and it doesn't feel like there's anything wrong." Interpersonal conflict between her parents, however, is challenging for Maria: "I want to have moments where I can share stuff with both my parents, but I can't. It's stressful in that way. I just want to be able to have my parents sit down and talk about my next birthday party, but I can't because they don't get along. It's frustrating!" When parents do not communicate effectively, or simply do not get along, the children, too, experience the tension. Family conflict is a robust risk factor for suicide; studies document the association between suicide and family conflict, violence, and stress (Van Orden et al., 2010).

Randy's parents are divorced. He feels strongly connected with both sides of his family but identifies parental conflict as a source of stress in his life. Randy harvested a rose to symbolize his family in his Life Stories art representation: "The top (rose) represents the beauty of my family and how they're so nice and loving...the strong shell represents the protecting of our family and how we protect each other." For Randy, his family represents beauty and protection. However, because of conflict between Randy's separated parents, he does not feel like he can visit his father often. As with Maria, parental conflict causes pain for Randy. In the

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

context of familial stress, and in particular, parental distress, children may begin to feel as though they are the problem, resulting in the child developing a perceived sense of burdensomeness on the family (Joiner, 2007). The examples provided here detail a rich description of the familial and social relationships and the interpersonal stresses that some young people face.

*Social networks.* In addition to narrative data about family contexts, the five youth participants provided a significant body of information about their social networks. Friend networks provided an exceptional amount of support and proved, in other cases, to be a great source of contention. Matilda's closest friend, for example, provides support in terms of encouragement and cultural teachings and, at times, functions as her greatest source of pain. Matilda's best friend is also her cousin. Following interpersonal conflict with her best friend/cousin, Matilda states, "It definitely made us stronger. We both learned that we both need each other a lot in our lives and we wouldn't know what to do without each other. I was really lost and I didn't know what to do without her." She continues, "She's helped me through a lot and I help her through a lot." Matilda identifies her cousins as an important part of her social network. Her social network provides emotional and psychological support, cultural teachings about reciprocity, afterlife beliefs, and coping strategies. Matilda's example illustrates the dynamic nature of social belonging and self-worth, two constructs related to the wish to die.

*Abuse history.* Abuse history includes physical or sexual assault, self-harm, exposure to violence, emotional or psychological abuse and invalidation, and childhood maltreatment. Three out of five youth identified a history of emotional or verbal abuse; one out of five participants have engaged in self-harm (cutting) behavior; and one participant reports a history of sexual assault. Emotional abuse was documented when participants identified psychological or emotional invalidation, including messages that they do not belong or that they are a burden. In

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

one example, Reine shared an experience of sexual assault: “I was almost raped. That was crazy. That was a really, really low point for me.” This incident caused significant distress for Reine because it was her mother who invited the perpetrator into the family home; she believes that family members’ misuse of alcohol placed her in this dangerous situation. In this instance, Reine was able to protect herself by getting away and calling the police. Victims of abuse, either sexual or physical, are placed at a higher risk for suicidal behavior (Alcántara & Gone, 2007).

*Employment.* Four out of five youth provided perspectives about employment opportunities or financial concerns. Specifically, two out of five youth have a history of employment, and two youth identified the lack of employment opportunities for recent graduates in the Cowichan Valley. Sans, a recent high school graduate reported, “I can't imagine there's that many jobs in this town that would be anything good. I heard most people are just heading out to Alberta for worthy jobs.” The lack of employment in Cowichan, according to Reine, results in youth renouncing their own desired futures and settling for employment or opportunities that are convenient; they “get into something that they know is practical because they're worried about money.” It seems, from both Reine’s and Sans’s perspectives, that the lack of employment opportunities for youth impact their possible futures and further, may result in youth and emerging adults feeling as though they are a burden on their loved ones.

*Legal record.* A legal record was coded for each mention of any interaction or problem with the law, including involvement with police, court, or juvenile justice systems. None of the participants reported personal involvement with the police or the juvenile justice systems. However, Randy mentioned that his parents were involved in family court. When explaining why he does not see his father often, Randy replied, “I think it's because they [parents] had an

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

argument in court.” An update from Randy’s father indicates that his parents have come to a legal agreement in terms of Randy’s custody and visitation.

***Religious background.*** Four out of five youth identified First Nations’ spirituality as their religious or spiritual background, while one participant identifies as an atheist. Two out of five youth expressed beliefs in both First Nations’ spirituality and Roman Catholic religion. Maria, for example, discusses her existential beliefs around afterlife: “I do believe that there's a heaven and that there's a hell, and that people don't really analyze what could happen after they die or where they go after they die.” In terms of her own religious beliefs, Matilda states, “I somewhat believe in God, and I somewhat don't. He made this world and I think we should respect it because he gave us everything. In return, I think we should respect the world.” While both Matilda and Maria identified a belief in God, they also have strong cultural beliefs about ancestral relations and the importance of the Spirit World.

***Current social history.*** Current social history includes data about family or other interpersonal relationships and participant’s strengths and/or coping mechanisms.

***Family relationships and other interpersonal factors.*** Deeply nuanced information about each youth’s family and other interpersonal factors emerged. Family and friend relationships serve as important support systems for all five youth; conversely, it is their family and friend relationships that also cause a great amount of pain. Each youth defines family to include their parents, siblings, aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins, great-grandparents, and ancestors. In addition, three out of five youth identified friends’ family as members of their own extended family network. In one example, Sans described his friend's grandmother as a part of his extended family network: “She invited me into the family when I first met her. She's like, ‘You can say your grandma is Harriet.’” Sans described visiting his adopted grandmother: “We made

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

fried bread together, we had tea. That makes us family.” For Sans, being welcomed in to the family home, participating in cultural activities, and spending time eating together shape his sense of belonging and increase his systems of social support.

While family and friends provide an exceptional amount of support for the youth participants, they also are a source of distress. Family conflict or violence, bullying, and grief or loss emerged as three salient themes in the lives of the youth participants.

*Family conflict or violence.* Three out of five youth spoke of conflict or arguments among their parents and/or other family members. For example, Reine illustrated how her mother’s struggle with alcohol has impacted her life: “It was difficult. That's why we didn't talk for a year. I couldn't even imagine her being in my life anymore because there had been plenty of times that she had let me down or that she had hurt me with her anger. It was quite damaging.” Two out of five youth articulated feeling “caught in the middle” of their parents’ interpersonal conflict.

*Bullying.* Three out of five youth identified bullying as an interpersonal concern. Peer bullying is any act by a child or youth that engages an unequal power distribution to harm another, either physically, socially, or emotionally (Frey et al., 2005). Reine reports that bullying at school was a primary reason for her own suicidal behavior. In addition to repetitive degradation through text and social media, Reine reports,

I was drinking from this cup...The straw is hard plastic. He comes up to me and he smacks the bottom of it, and the straw cut the roof of my mouth and the skin was hanging down from the roof of my mouth and it was bleeding. He was just laughing. He thought it was funny and everyone else just laughed and went about

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

their way. When I think about it now, I can't believe that I ever put up with that. It blows my mind that I was around someone like that.

Randy also expressed concern about harassment at school. In an effort to combat schoolyard bullying, Randy states, "The first day of school I was acting like a tough guy so I didn't get bullied... For the first couple of years I was just playing by myself, alone. Not alone, just not with other people." Research demonstrates poor outcomes for both those who bully, victims of bullying, and bystanders to bullying (Frey et al., 2005). Furthermore, Kim and Levanthal point out the consistent correlation between being bullied and suicidal behavior (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

*Death or loss.* Four out of five youth have experienced the death of a loved one. In Matilda's case, her close friend was run over by a motor vehicle while crossing a highway, and her friend's older sister died by suicide less than two months later. In addition, Matilda's grandfather, who has played a daily role in her life, died of natural causes. Despite her significant losses, Matilda highlights strengths gained from her painful experiences: "When Talia passed away, I finally learned that friends come and go. They're like visitors. They come in but sometimes you have to let them go... Then, my Papa, when he passed away, I learned how to stay strong and just smile because he's there still but he's not actually there. He's there in spirit." American Indian and Alaska Native children experience repeated exposure to sudden or traumatic losses (Sarche & Spicer, 2008). In one small sample, 28% of adolescent AIAN youth (grade 8-11) experienced the sudden loss of a loved one or witnessed death (Sarche & Spicer, 2008). While death is a natural part of the life cycle, the high rate of unexpected and traumatic loss experienced by AIAN adolescents may impact their sense of connectedness.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Furthermore, multiple experiences of loss may result in the absence of reciprocal caring relationships, which is related to whether or not an individual develops a desire to die by suicide (Joiner, 2007).

***Client strengths.*** Analysis of the life stories narratives shared by the youth highlights personal strengths across all five participants. Information captured about client's individual strengths includes positive social connection through family, social networks, and sports and recreation; positive character or personality traits; and personal descriptions of strengths.

***Matilda.*** Matilda has a vast network of support systems in place including her family, her peers, and her sports teams. When asked specifically what she is good at, Matilda replied, "I always get told I'm a very outgoing person and I'm just there for everybody and anybody, and that I help out a lot." Matilda identifies as a good listener and believes that her strengths are "being somebody that helps people." While she is available to help when needed, she isn't afraid to ask for help when she is in need: "I'll just try to listen to advice and it might work. If not, I ask for a counselor." As the oldest child in the family, Matilda is tasked with multiple household responsibilities including caring for her siblings and participating in household chores.

***Reine.*** One of Reine's greatest strengths is self-reflection. She has used her past traumatic experiences as a means of building strength and resiliency in her life today:

I know how I deserve to be treated. When someone does something hurtful or mean or inconsiderate, it doesn't get to me the way that it used to...I'll only give power to things in my life that are positive. I don't have the patience anymore for people who are interested in tearing other people down or making other people feel small.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

In addition to self-reflection, Reine seeks help when in distress: “I was seeing a counselor... That was nice because there are a lot of people that I've been close with, but couldn't really talk to... They care, but they don't get it. They don't, so it was really nice to have someone to talk to.” Reine narrates resolve in relation to some of those who have hurt her: “I've forgiven him for peace. He doesn't deserve to have this space in my mind, not because he deserves to be forgiven, but because I deserve to have peace.” When asked to express how it was that she resolved some of her past pain, Reine stated, “I started really thinking about what I want... I stopped putting my self-worth and my self-esteem into the hands of strangers. That did it for me. Once I realized that what I think of myself is more important [than what others think of me].”

*Randy.* Randy has positive support systems across both sides of his family. He loves wrestling and football. Randy articulates his emotions well, particularly in relation to his social relationships at school. When asked about specific strengths, Randy states, “I'm good in science and I like science.” Using his Life Stories art representation, Randy narrates a creative and positive self-concept: “Let's start off with the stick I put it all on, that symbolizes my personality and how it's unique and it's different from everybody else's.”

*Maria.* One of Maria's greatest strengths is a growth mindset that shapes her belief in her own capabilities while highlighting possible future directions to get closer to her goals. When asked how she handles adversity, Maria replies,

People aren't always going to listen and people aren't always going to agree with what you have to say, but that's only what makes it better. If they don't listen to you, then you have more time to yourself to think your thoughts over and figure out how to make a bigger impact and make these people realize that you're worth a lot more than they see, that you can do greater things than even you imagined.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

*Sans.* Sans is conscientious about other's thoughts and feelings. In addition, Sans communicates his emotions well: "I'm a very emotional being...I feel like I understand myself more than anything." Sans ability to reflect on his own thoughts and emotions is evident and expressed his own emotional self-regulation process: "I usually tell the other person how I feel...I work through it."

This presentation of data narrated by each participant provides a rich portrayal of individual and collective lifeworlds, including an understanding of each individual's self-identified social contexts. Similar to other diagnostic assessment approaches, these findings present data about each participant's current and past social and developmental history, including information about concerns, hopes, and goals. However, the quality of information about the dimensions presented includes rich, narrative descriptions about each youth's conception of self in relation to multiple others embedded within a specific cultural and social context. For example, youth presented information about family and extended family relations, cultural and social practices that inform their own sense of self, and cultural beliefs about stages of life course development. Emerging from the five narrative interviews with youth are additional and relevant themes that provide deeply rich and contextual information that may inform appropriate approaches to treatment. This project presents six additional themes that were captured using a place-based, culturally responsive, relational approach to assessment.

### **Additional and Relevant Emergent Themes**

This project is about engaging new thinking towards culturally responsive intervention and assessment strategies. Indigenous interventions often involve multiple strategies in multiple shapes across multiple sites, sometimes applied simultaneously in an effort to conceptualize a holistic intervention (Graham Smith, Personal Communication, April 10, 2016). In addition to

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

data obtained for an initial biopsychosocial assessment for each youth, themes emerged that highlight the importance of relational epistemologies and attention to the cultural concepts of person; intergenerational influence; apprenticeship learning practices; cultural values and beliefs about afterlife; future orientation; and youth voice (see *Table 6. Supplementary Data: Presence or Absence of Constructs, Designed or Emergent (N=5)*).

*Table 6. Supplementary Data: Presence or Absence of Constructs, Designed or Emergent (N=5)*

<b>Additional Emergent Constructs</b>	<b><u>Matilda</u></b>	<b><u>Sans</u></b>	<b><u>Randy</u></b>	<b><u>Reine</u></b>	<b><u>Maria</u></b>
Relational epistemologies (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cultural concepts of the person (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Intergenerational Influence (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Apprenticeship learning (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
After-life beliefs (2)	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Future orientation (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Youth voice (5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

*Table 6* depicts the presence or absence of each additional or designed emergent construct across five youth participants.

An understanding of these constructs in a client’s life can help inform assessment and intervention practices and, further, address the specific cultural and collective orientations of the community. To address such orientations, this section captures additional relevant information that therapists may use to inform healing practices that address the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. Before reviewing additional findings, however, it is necessary to reemphasize how each emergent construct can powerfully address suicidal behavior. Employing relational epistemologies as a guiding principle, while attending to the varying cultural concepts of personhood—for Cowichan specifically—honors the broad collective orientation of the peoples. An understanding of diverse cultural concepts of personhood illuminates the multiplicity of possible support systems for each youth, including relationships with one another,

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

family members, professional caregivers, school counselors, non-human relations, and ancestral relations, to name a few. Understanding how knowledge, including healing and helping practices, is transmitted from one generation to the next points to the need for multigenerational approaches to suicide intervention. Apprenticeship learning practices help learners understand and develop their individual affinities, their roles and related responsibilities in the community, and their cultural ways of learning and knowing that ensure individual and collective survival. An understanding of cultural beliefs around life and afterlife may highlight important postvention healing strategies for survivors of suicide. Because many actively suicidal youth are unable to identify their own future selves, it becomes necessary for practitioners to attend to temporal orientations in order to assess suicide risk. Finally, listening carefully to what youth have to share may illuminate appropriate healing strategies while giving ownership to young people in their own treatment planning. Themes related to both the six embedded design conjectures and those emergent from within the community knowledge systems highlight the importance of purposefully designing interventions for specific communities.

**Relational epistemologies and attention to the cultural concept of person.** The Life Stories workshop was designed to highlight notions of self in relations with others. As a collective, the group identified relationships with friends, family, coaches, teachers, animals (e.g., eagles, deer, elk, cats, dogs, and rabbits), plants and trees, sports or recreational activities, and ancestors.

***Growing relational worldview.*** Attending to a relational worldview encompasses recognizing Indigenous peoples' relations among each other and with the natural world while highlighting possible intervention sites and support systems for clients. In two separate examples, Matilda presents an emerging understanding of being in relations with the natural

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

world and the related mutual reciprocity embedded within the cultural concept of self. Matilda selected a Cedar brand to depict her familial and ancestral relations. When asked why, she replied,

It reminds me of the Tzinqwa dancing and the dancing that my dad's side of the family does. At gatherings, and when my grandma got married...she got us to dress up, painted our faces with just two little stripes. We had Cedar around us...I chose that because we were always involved with Cedar. It's all around us. We use it a lot for Cedar hats and the Cedar headbands.

In this excerpt, Matilda narrates her self in relation to Cedar, ceremony or special events, her family, her cultural practice, and her ancestors. Matilda demonstrates that she exists within and is affected by her relations with the natural world as demonstrated by her social, cultural, and metaphysical associations with Cedar (Cajete, 1994). The following descriptive conversation with a friend demonstrates Matilda's growing understanding of mutual reciprocity. Matilda shares, "It feels different getting given to, instead of giving... It feels good in a way...I just feel bad because I feel like I'm taking but she's like, 'No, don't feel like that! You gave a lot to me, now it's my turn to give to you.'" This excerpt exhibits Matilda's sensitivity to relationships and an emerging understanding of responsibilities associated with her relations. A sense of being in relations with multiple others may increase Matilda's sense of belonging, while responsibility to other beings and natural world relations may increase her sense of purpose.

***Cultural concepts of person.*** A traditional assessment protocol does not consider varying cultural concepts of person. To address the shifting nature of self-concept, this project identifies concepts of person across all participants. In relation to suicide, if concepts of self vary cross-culturally, as well as across contexts, then goals and healing strategies must reflect the varying

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

constructions of self. For example, an understanding of how individuals construct senses of self in relation to others, to the natural world, and to ancestral relations may reveal additional approaches to therapeutic change. Overall, the cultural concepts of person codes were applied 148 times across all participants and were distributed in the following ways: egocentric (65), sociocentric (36), cosmocentric (29), and ecocentric (18). In this data set, all five participants narrated egocentric and sociocentric concepts of self; three youth narrated an ecocentric concept of self; and four out of five youth demonstrated a cosmocentric model of self. The youth in this study demonstrate that the notion of self is not a static attribute; rather, implicit models of self vary cross-culturally, as well as across contexts.

*Cosmocentric.* Four out of five youth demonstrated an understanding of self in relation to the ancestral world or cosmos. In her Life Stories art representation, Maria selected a Cedar branch to represent her ancestors: “Our ancestors are important because they helped create the teachings and the culture that we have today. They helped carve guidelines...of how we're supposed to be on a daily basis and throughout our lives.” When asked what it was that our ancestors wanted for us, Maria responds, “A bright future and a long future for future generations, to keep our culture and our way of life alive and healthy.” Maria places importance on honoring her ancestors because “it makes the relationship between us and the past person stronger. Kind of like communication, but also it shows that we still love them and we still know that they're there, that they're not gone and they're not forgotten.” Honoring our ancestors is important, according to Maria, because it is our ancestors who provide spiritual protection for us. Similarly, Matilda identifies ancestral protection as a reason for not being severely injured during a terrible fall. As she fell down a bank, Matilda observed an eagle flying overhead; she described her interpretation of the eagle’s presence: “I think it was just one of my mom's grandparents

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

watching over me [because] when I was little I gave a lot of help...to everybody.” Describing the feeling of support or protection, Maria explains, “I guess just like the feeling that you... I don’t want to say like you feel it in the wind, but it’s just like how it felt before they died... it still feels the same, even though they’re not right beside you.” In these two examples, Maria and Matilda are demonstrating the role that ancestral relations and spiritual beliefs play in their lives. Maria identifies an ability to reconnect with her ancestral relations through cultural and ceremonial practices; both participants identify being protected, both physically and spiritually, by their ancestral relations. Matilda, specifically, correlates ancestral protection with the cultural value of helping others. This correlation highlights her understanding of her responsibilities associated with her relationships; each identified relationship can serve as a potential source of support for a young person in need. Youth narrated ancestral relations and spiritual beliefs as a protective mechanism. While there is importance in recognizing that levels of acculturation and enculturation amongst Indigenous peoples exist on a continuum, practitioners can engage the language and belief systems of their client in order to facilitate healing. In addition, communities designing intervention and prevention strategies may consider using their own cultural and spiritual understandings as a guiding thought for program development.

*Ecocentric.* An ecocentric concept of person defines self in relation to the land and the natural world. Three out of five youth narrated an ecocentric concept of self. For example, when asked about her concerns, Matilda states that she is worried “that the world will end...our world’s slowly breaking down. Why do they disrespect this world? How would they feel if we just walked all over them and just not cared?” She believes that “we don’t treat the world right. They’re cutting down all our trees, slowly so the air will be less light... We’re going to run out of water soon...This world is not made for us to treat it not right.” In this reflection, Matilda

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

highlights her consideration for the natural world and for our collective futures. In addition, by asking how others might feel in this situation, Matilda designates the world as having an affective nature. Finally, Matilda highlights responsibility to the earth, which is a strong cultural value and belief. An understanding of self in relation to plants, animals and the natural world, as demonstrated by Matilda, may have strong implications for decreasing suicidal behavior. For example, narrating one's self in the context of multiple others increases a sense of positive, reciprocally caring relationships. The responsibility instilled in Matilda may inform her sense of self-worth. That is, she narrates herself as a person who has responsibilities to care for something other than self. Positive social connections coupled with a strong sense of self-worth serve to protect against the desire to die by suicide (Joiner, 2007).

*Egocentric.* Each youth in this study narrated a concept of person characterized by individuality, achievement, and autonomy. For example, while reflecting on earlier experiences of bullying, Reine articulates,

I realize that people are really complex, but I also realize that everyone is their own protagonist in their story. I used to really worry if I did something embarrassing or if I did something silly...but people don't even notice...This almost sounds arrogant but I think about myself all the time, and so does everybody else.

By selecting the word protagonist, Reine implies that individuals are their own heroes, which indicates a sense of empowerment. In addition, she engages an egocentric frame to rearticulate her self-concept as empowered as opposed to victimized, narrates her development across time, and points to human social complexity as an explanation for others' bullying behavior. From this conceptual standpoint, Reine also shares her perspective about bullies' affect or emotion:

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

I think a lot of people feel like someone else's success is their failure. They aren't happy for someone else's happiness. If more people knew their own value, they would be more understanding towards other people. They'd be a lot more encouraging and a lot more patient...I think insecurity has a lot to do with it.

The behavior that Reine describes suggests that these students may have lost their sense of relational responsibility insofar as they no longer support the success of others. This fracture in social relations may impact both the bully and the victim's sense of reciprocal caring relations (Frey et al., 2005) and may lead to a sense of thwarted belongingness (Van Orden et al., 2010). The narratives that individuals provide about their own lived experience are complex, dynamic, and at times, contradictory (McAdams, 2001). By narrating and re-narrating their lived experiences, participants reconcile the multiplicity of their selfhood in a way that provides unity, purpose, and empowerment. Practitioners can utilize varying cultural concepts of personhood to identify the shifting conception of individual selves to inform treatment planning.

*Sociocentric.* Five out of five youth narrated understandings of self in relation to family or community with an emphasis on collective relationality. Explaining her choice to select a Cedar bough to represent her family lineage, Matilda elaborated:

Because this is connected to everything on here and I'm connected to all the families that are on here, even if they're passed away. I decided to be the spine because I have so many families around me. I picked one that was not too big and not too small because I'm not related to everybody, but I'm related to a lot. I picked one that was just right.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Thus, Matilda's conception of self is connected to multiple family lines, including her ancestral relations. Understanding an individual's sense of self in relation to multiple others illuminates possible sites of intervention while engaging particular cultural concepts and values. In a separate example, Maria narrates the importance of honoring our elders and "walking in a good way" "To make sure that we listen to what they [elders] have to say and respect what they have to say. If they have something to say about the way we're acting or what we should do, we should listen because they know what to do and what they are talking about." She continues, "We have to respect our elders and our parents and anyone who puts effort into a relationship with us." Embedded within this cultural value of respecting elders are vast bodies of social, cultural, economic, and political ways of knowing. Elders are responsible for transmitting this knowledge from one generation to the next, while youth are tasked with honoring these relationships; the intergenerational transmission of knowledge ensures collective livelihood based on local ways of knowing.

**Intergenerational influence.** Each youth articulated incidences of intergenerational influence. In one such example, Matilda expressed her concern about her father's alcohol use. Her aunt has encouraged Matilda to speak with him about it, but, Matilda states, "I've been trying to build the guts up to say it but I just can't because it's his life and he can do whatever he wants." She was asked to think about what she would say if she had the courage and she replied,

I think I'd take him to the living room and I'd have my papa, my brother, and my sister there. I'd say, "I'd like you to stop drinking, Dad, for the sake of your family. Soon, Papa might leave and when he leaves, you're going to be taking care of the house and you're going to be paying all the bills, so I'd like you to stop smoking and drinking and pay attention to this house and us, your kids. Just

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

help us. We'll help you if you help us. We'll try and give you money and clean the house.

This deeply nuanced construction of a possible future life event provides a great deal of detail about Matilda's social, familial, and cultural contexts. In a particularly difficult moment, Matilda suggested that she would draw on the strengths of her intergenerational family by involving her grandfather and her siblings. In addition, Matilda identified her understanding of life stage developments; Matilda's grandfather recently retired, and she correlated this event with his impending death. Through her description, she demonstrated a sociocentric frame structuring her argument for change and embeds her understanding of relational responsibilities. This is particularly salient in the context of typical reasons to stop drinking alcohol. For example, a similar argument could have expressed concern for her father's medical condition; however, Matilda drew on her cultural knowledge to discuss her desire for his abstinence from alcohol in relation to her own cultural concepts of personhood. These concepts provide insight for practitioners about how to elicit change with clients in a way that affirms varying cultural concepts of the person while honoring specific cultural beliefs and values around roles, responsibilities, and spirituality. At an individual level, an acknowledgement of the intergenerational cultural formation of the community illuminates multiple social and cultural support systems. Elders, for example, are tasked with transmitting cultural knowledge, including traditional healing and helping practices, from one generation to the next. On a broader level, engaging an intergenerational influence ensures the endurance and growth of the Cowichan society today and for future generations. Embedded within the construct, then, are culturally specific protective mechanisms that are rendered invisible through traditional assessment protocols.

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

**Apprenticeship learning.** Examples of Indigenous teaching and learning practices were discussed across all participants. Each young person narrated his or her experience with apprenticeship learning, that is, the active and reciprocal learning of cultural practices shaped by local values and goals through intergenerational transmission of knowledge and close observation of knowledgeable others (Cajete, 2000). Maria, for example, explained how she encourages her peers: “You have to watch other people doing what you want to do, and listen to what they have to say and listen to their stories...you have to understand that it's going to be a lot of hard work.” In another example, Matilda observes her elders to imagine what her future may hold: “My Grandma Mary is always giving, and giving, and giving, so are my Grandma Rose and my mom, so I think that's how I'll kind of be. I'll always be at family gatherings and they'll be there helping somebody.” In one final example, Matilda describes how she and her friends learned soccer drills: “There's this one where we're in a square and we're passing it really fast around... Then, the person that was here goes around the cone and then we pass and it just goes on. We kind of just watched and learned what the older people do.” Both Maria and Matilda discuss teaching and learning practices including close observation of knowledgeable others, listening to elders, engaging oral story, and learning through participation in social or cultural practices. Guided or mutual participation affords youth opportunities to develop and strengthen skills necessary to become skilled practitioners in the cognitive activities of their community (Rogoff, 1991). An integral part of apprenticeship learning practices are roles and responsibilities that inform members' importance and purpose in relation to the community. Thus, Indigenous teaching and learning practices function to increase a participant's sense of purpose and self-worth as a necessary member of the collective, which in turn protects against the desire to end one's life.

**Afterlife beliefs.** Cultural beliefs and values associated with afterlife are relevant to understanding the suicidal patterns amongst Cowichan peoples. Two out of five youth discussed their views of human existence by identifying existential beliefs about their ancestral relations. Matilda asserted that after people die, their spirits remain in and amongst the trees, rocks, and natural world, and “When we say, ‘Our ancestors are always around,’ this is a part of what we mean.” Chandler et al identify the paradox of personal and cultural persistence as a human need to continually change while remaining the same (Chandler et al., 2003). The protective mechanism lies in the ability to envision one’s self or collective in the future. In fact, their work documents that failures to warrant self-continuity are strongly associated with increased suicide risk in adolescence (Chandler et al., 2003). They further suggest that counting one’s self or collective as continuous in time ensures adequate care and concern for individual or collective future selves, thus serving as a protective mechanism on an existential level (Chandler et al., 2003). A belief in a direct connection to ancestral relations, such as the one Matilda expresses, may provide the existential link necessary to protect against suicide.

Matilda presented a further illustration of cultural beliefs about afterlife as a protective mechanism in a story of how her close friend provided grief support utilizing cultural beliefs; she said, “Just look up into the sky and you'll see her eyes. Don't cry because she's watching over you and she's right there beside you whenever you need her. When you cry, she's there. When you're happy, she's there. When you're playing soccer, she's there.” A belief in the continued existence of loved ones after death safeguards against loneliness; loneliness is a manifestation of thwarted belongingness, which is a risk factor for suicidal desire (Van Orden et al., 2010). Matilda describes her belief about a spiritual realm of existence: “It's all connected. It's all just one land. It's not like, here's your room, that's your heaven, stay in there kind of thing. I think it's

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

just one, big land.” Maria articulates similar beliefs about the ‘spirit world’: “They could go anywhere. They could go to outer space. They could fly to a different galaxy. They could stay right beside us and watch over us the whole time.” According to Matilda, death by suicide creates a different future, however: “For suicide, I think you just float around... You don't go to heaven or you don't go to hell... you regret it because you then figured out you can't do anything, you can't go anywhere and you're just stuck in this place with nothing.” Loneliness coupled with a sense of liability to others places individuals at risk for wishing to die by suicide (Van Orden et al., 2010). Ironically, Matilda provides a narrative in which those who die by suicide succumb to an eternal state of loneliness, despite their desire to relieve the pain from loneliness. Meanings and explanations of death and suicide drawn from the local community may highlight specific strategies aimed at protecting life while living in accordance with cultural knowledge systems.

**Future orientation (self or other).** Representations of self in the future are termed possible future selves by Markus and Nurius (1986). Future depictions of self may help determine if and whether young people imagine selves or others as persistent across time (Chandler et al., 2003). A strong sense of self- or collective continuity protects against suicide risk in adolescents (Chandler et al., 2003). A future orientation emerged as a theme across all five narrative interviews. Each excerpt was coded for future orientation; next, such an orientation was categorized as a hope, fear, or goal in relation to the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

*Hope.* The youth identified multiple hopes, including the hope for peace, procreation, travel, and participation in sports, personal development, and health. For Matilda, one hope is in relation to her mother's health: “I think my main wish is that my mom could heal because I know she goes through a lot.” In addition, Matilda considered environmental health: “I hope for this planet to grow healthy again.” She also articulated her desire for travel: “When I get older, I

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

want to go to the main places in the world...I want to go to Rio and Louisville...I want to go to Australia and check out that reef.” For Reine, her hope for the future is related to personal development: “I want to trust people. I almost fully trust people, but not a 100%...I have walls up, but they aren't that hard to break down... I can be really close to people, but I never fully trust them.” Of her future, Reine affirmed, “I want it to be peaceful or at least close to peaceful because, right now, there's a lot of arguing, a lot of yelling and a lot of short fuses. I'm over that. I don't like it.” Possible or future selves are personalized, yet distinctly social (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In addition, they are informed by cultural concepts of personhood and are a reflection of the individual's lifeworld. A depiction of one's self or one's collective points to an inherent protective mechanism against suicide, specifically, the ability to count one's self as continuous in time (Chandler et al., 2003).

*Fear.* Four out of five youth described feared selves; most prevalent were feared selves in relation to alcohol or drug use and self-harm. A second concern expressed across three out of five participants was related to a fear of limited opportunity, particularly a fear of not being able to travel or explore the world. In one articulation, Matilda characterized herself as a helper to her friends and utilizes feared selves as a mechanism of encouragement:

Don't drink...Imagine you had your own kid and imagine if your kid drank and he or she cut or this and that...Imagine you in the future and you have your little girl and you love her with all you got. Imagine her cutting, imagine her starting to drink, and imagine her having her first heartbreak. “How would you feel?” They're like; “I would feel upset because that's my daughter. I don't want her drinking and cutting.” I'm like, “How do your parents feel right now about you doing that?”

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

This quotation illustrates Matilda's understanding of the adverse consequences of alcohol and an identified fear of physical or emotional pain. Broadly, her remark demonstrates Matilda's relational sense of self while underscoring possible feared selves. In another example, Sans narrates a fear of addiction:

If someone decides to try out hardcore drugs they might get addicted, which would not be good...even alcohol. Most kids would grow into being alcoholics. I imagine that wouldn't be that well with the way they develop as a young adult. Because that would lead to further problems with future ... They'd just be angry all the time.

Both Matilda and Sans reveal cognitive indications of fear of pain or emotional suffering, most especially as it pertains to others. Importantly, an understanding of feared selves may shed light on possible or foreclosed futures for self, others, or the collective.

*Goals.* Aspirations for career trajectory and job security emerged as a factor across all five youth interviews. For example, Randy incorporated his future into his Life Stories art representation: "The feather...it symbolizes my future and that I want to go higher and I want to be a professional wrestler in the UFC...because feathers are on birds and birds fly quite high and my dreams are quite high." Maria had similar aspirations for her future: "I'm hoping to have about four [wrestling] title rings and a nice...apartment in New York where they sell \$1 pizza...that's the only thing I see myself doing." Matilda hoped "to either be a secretary or a counselor... something that helps people." Sans had an eye on financial security; he states one goal as, "Getting a job that pays me fifty dollars an hour." Although Reine did not identify a particular career aspiration, she did provide important insight into the messages youth are given about their possible futures in relation to employment:

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

At school, we were told...to be more realistic and that...there was a certain number of paths that we could take, and these were the acceptable, respectable paths... I think being realistic is stupid, not really, but I definitely feel quite invincible and quite unstoppable and, if I wanted to do something, I'm going to do it.

Reine depicted an experience in which she and others' futures were foreclosed; if students did not select the "acceptable" employment or academic path determined by the teacher, then, according to their teacher they would not likely be successful. To suggest that students 'be more realistic' about their aspirations immediately suggests that students are incapable of making decisions for themselves while also dismissing their own possible future. Reine's teachers, who are in a position of power, narrate the impossibility of a hope, dream, or goal, thus, foreclosing possible futures for Indigenous students. Further, to state that there are acceptable paths implies that students' personal visions for themselves are not acceptable. In her experience, messages such as these are commonplace for Reine, yet, she remains steadfast to her vision, despite repeated subjugation. Possible selves are directly related to an individual's motivation to change. The successful completion of goals expands possible futures. For example, imagine a youth whose goal is to make a prestigious soccer team. The successful achievement of this goal is likely to expand possibilities for the individual or the collective, which in turn increases motivation to achieve additional goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

**Youth voice.** While narrating concerns or desires for their own futures, each youth in this study provided essential messages for parents, professional caregivers, or others interested in understanding the experiences of young people. Themes that emerged in relation to youth voice

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

include a desire for positive interaction; social encouragement and support for peers; and the importance of youth contribution.

***Positive interaction.*** Four out of five youth specified a desire for positive interaction with familial and non-familial adults. When asked what adults, in general, need to know about how to help young people, Sans asserted, “That's a difficult thing to say because every situation is different. I'd say just to adapt and read how your child is doing. Read the situation instead of just getting mad... actually talk to them about it and get a further understanding of what they're going through.” Likewise, Matilda suggests: “Don't yell; just don't raise your voice. You just got to calmly ask them; otherwise they wouldn't want to answer if you're yelling at them.” A large part of positive interaction is related to a desire or need to be heard: “They [adults] should give them a chance, listen to what they have to say before they come to a conclusion.” Maria believes that being positively involved in young people's lives includes having an understanding of youth's daily experiences and related emotions. She believes that it is important for parents to be active and present in their children's' lives, to know “What's going on, what did they do every day and...the person who was feeling down, how they were doing?” The youth in this study demonstrate a strong desire to engage in positive communication with the adults and other knowledgeable others, indicating a potential need for programming that centers on favorable communication and parenting styles.

***Social encouragement.*** Youth participants had important messages for peers experiencing suicidal ideation. Matilda suggested, “Just be yourself when it comes to somebody not liking you...they're just one person in this very big world. You don't need that one person to bring you down...move on and don't let it bother you because you have a lot of family and friends that still like you.” Informed by her experiences with peer bullying, Reine adds,

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Don't put your self-esteem in the hands of strangers...A masterpiece is still a masterpiece when the lights are off and the room is empty. Whether anyone acknowledges your value or not, that doesn't mean you're not valuable. Other people's thoughts of you don't change your reality.

Youth have strong encouragement for each other based on their own lived experiences, pointing to the need to co-construct programming for youth with youth.

***Youth contribution.*** Youth narrated a desire to be respected for their unique contribution. In one example, Reine notes overhearing an adult exclaim, “I was so surprised that young person gave that speech and was talking about politics. You rarely see teenagers who care about those kinds of things.” She continued, “It's because of attitudes like that that they [youth] don't want to say anything. They don't think anyone will take them seriously. They're patronized too often for them to want to be a part of that conversation.” Importantly, Reine pointed out that adults often place youth contribution in the future and responded, “I have something important to say right now, not 20 years from now. I'm useful right now.” Randy also wished that adults would consider youth as autonomous contributors to their own well-being: “Children have a mind that their parents don't know about. They have feelings and they have thoughts and they don't want to just do everything that they're told.” The youth identified a communication pattern that forecloses possible youth futures. The strong emergence of the desire to be included in a respectful way suggests that researchers, professional caregivers, parents, and others, must not only include, but also, co-construct mental health practices with youth.

### **Discussion**

By engaging human experience across multiple and diverse social contexts, this study demonstrates a purposely designed approach to a biopsychosocial assessment that yields

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

elaborate data about each participant's' social and developmental history. In addition, I have demonstrated that deliberately designed, community-specific conjectures that attend to local theoretical and moral ways of being result in important and relevant data that may inform approaches to mental health in Indigenous communities. The stories shared by the youth are their experiences and perspectives about their everyday lives. I have included my interpretations of this study, which are by no means comprehensive. It is my hope that practitioners can draw meaning from these stories to inform their own practice in a culturally relevant way.

For the Cowichan community, specific attention must be paid to the importance of relationships and varying cultural concepts of personhood, intergenerational and collective formations, and indigenous teaching and learning practices. In addition, this study demonstrates the importance of youth inclusion at a fundamental level. Finally, this inquiry has highlighted the importance of assessing future orientations as a means to assess risk for suicide. Locating one's self in relation to others, to the natural world, and to the cosmos places youth in the context of multiple support systems, which, in effect, can expand the possible approaches to mental health, including self-care practices or professional mental health services. Indigenous peoples placed at risk for suicide do not always access the services that they may need. In one example, Echohawk demonstrates that across the United States, 1.51 million Native Americans are eligible for health services, yet most Native Americans who die by suicide had no previous treatment contacts of any kind (2006). In contrast, Luoma, Martin, and Pearson (2002) have found that up to 75% of European-Americans who died by suicide had contact with their primary care providers within the year prior to their deaths. Mental health issues and, more specifically, barriers to accessing mental health treatment have been shown to correlate with suicide risk, a fact that emphasizes the

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

importance of identifying culturally relevant support systems that attend to the cultural and social orientations of the community.

In addition to the importance of understanding the relational reality of many Indigenous communities, this study highlights the importance of intergenerational influence in a particular community. In the way that Matilda was encouraged to speak up about her concerns with her father and his use of alcohol, for example, it is evident that she identifies a lack of courage to say these specific words to her father. However, when prompted to imagine a possible future, she included her paternal grandfather, her brother, and her sister, indicating that she draws strength for handling difficult situations from her intergenerational family household.

The use of stories and metaphor yielded rich narrative data about youth participants' lived experiences. According to Cajete, "Language and its oral transmission are the foundations of the sacred traditions that bind them, through breath, to each other, other living things, their Holy Ones, and the world in all its immensity and beauty" (1994, p. 53). Stories serve an important social function. It is the narration of life stories that give youth the platform to position themselves in relation to a larger social context and to narrate an autobiographical account of their experiences. During her school years, Reine experienced bullying. Through the process of sharing her stories, she was able to articulate a strong belief about not allowing others to determine her self-concept; this articulation serves as a protective mechanism, resulting in a strengthened conception of self. McAdams has found that young people begin to join the narrative threads of their lives by connecting their lived past with their present experiences in relation to anticipated or possible futures (McAdams, 2001). In constructing life course narratives, people attend to particular experiences of their past and construct futures in a way that animates and integrates the temporal intervals of their lives in a meaningful way (McAdams,

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

2001). Life stories change with social situations; life stories are an individual's reflection of specific meanings belonging to friends, community, and moments in time (McAdams, 2001). Through the telling of life stories, individuals construct identity by integrating past, present and anticipated future in an overarching narrative of self (Chandler et al., 2003).

In addition to identity development, apprenticeship learning practices have a positive impact on children's cognitive development (Rogoff, 1991). Rogoff explains, "Cognitive development involves guided participation with other people in handling intellectual tools and societally organized goals of their culture" (1991, p. 349). Elders or knowledgeable others provide guidance for how to be in the world, while youth participants gather information through observation and participation. Through mutual active participation, learning is structured by predecessors and transmitted through oral tradition and other apprenticeship learning practices, inevitably shaped by cultural values and goals (Rogoff, 1991). This project presents intergenerational participation as necessary to the development of intervention or treatment strategies.

To address the limitations of an abstracted approach to assessment, this study provided a perspective on the experiences of youth as embodied subjects participating in everyday social practices. This data offers practitioners a sense of how youth interact across generations, in a community, and during everyday practice. As the nature and capacity for self-reflection differs across contexts (Dreier, 2009), this project engaged youth in particular contexts with designed activity in an effort to produce understandings of self more diverse than those which might emerge from a typical therapeutic setting.

### **Implications**

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Guided by Indigenous epistemologies that highlight the importance of relationality across all living beings, this intervention conceptualized a place-based assessment activity to obtain information about young peoples' day-to-day activities and how these everyday experiences expand or limit possible futures for young people. Connecting caregivers such as social workers or youth care workers to young people through culturally based activities may strengthen the relationship between caregivers and youth at the outset of their associations. Moreover, highlighting Indigenous ways of knowing by providing opportunities for acknowledging and representing Indigeneity in learning and therapeutic spaces provides adolescents with positive social experiences that highlight the importance of their ethnic and cultural identities.

This body of work contributes to foundational understandings of learning and development by introducing a new model aimed at assessing suicidal behavior in the Cowichan community. This study finds that this specifically designed approach to a biopsychosocial assessment protocol and practice elicits the expected or typical data for assessment; in addition, this approach provides deeply rich and relevant data that may not be gleaned from current assessment approaches. While this assessment was designed for a specific community, it is assumed that engaging youth in activities that are culturally meaningful while increasing positive social connections and self-worth can be beneficial for any person at risk for suicide. Thus, the approach recommended here can serve as a model for designing interventions that are grounded in local ways of knowing. Designing interventions in this way can, therefore, assist practitioners and researchers to develop appropriate and community-specific interventions to suicide.

The typical therapeutic relationship is imbued with power dynamics that place the therapist in a position of power in relation to the participant. This power dynamic does not always best serve the needs of the client. Therefore, it is essential to design programming that

## PLACE-BASED BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT

intentionally disrupts the typical power relations between therapist/researcher and the participant/client. Furthermore, this process disrupts the typical relationship between the researcher and the researched. By engaging in research practices informed by the cultural and social formations of the local community, this project reconceptualizes the relationship between academic theories and cultural ways of knowing. Finally, by centering local ways of knowing, this project presents a model of assessment that is, at once culturally specific and culturally relevant. To that end, there is a demonstrated need to create practice tools that may assist other communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, in developing appropriate interventions to suicide.

In its contribution to practice, this project opens the possibility of intentionally designed approaches to assessment and intervention. However, to begin conceptualizing tools practitioners need to design for their own spaces, it is first necessary to conceptualize professional development opportunities for practitioners to train in order to implement such approaches in their own practice. Social workers, practitioners, after school caregivers, youth program personnel, and members of other organizations that serve youth should attend to the cultural formations of the person and the social formation of the community, striving to design interventions based on community-specific axiological and ontological innovations. The policy implications of this study suggest that an important, fundamental next step in social policy must be an investment in professional development for Indigenous community practitioners that allows them to address cultural and social formations thoroughly in their work.

Article 3

**Foreclosing Indigenous Futures: Understanding Suicide in the Context of Settler  
Permanency**

Around the world each year, over 800,000 people die by suicide, and many more attempt suicide, making this phenomenon a global public health issue (World Health Organization, 2014). Every death is a tragedy, and every person who dies by suicide dies alone. Suicide however, leaves the living wondering why, feeling as though those left behind are somehow responsible. Those feelings make the tragedy unbearable. Families, friends, and communities immediately feel the impact of suicide, and the loss of life is felt for many years following. However, suicide does not impact all ethnic populations equally. In particular, suicide is most prevalent amongst Indigenous populations, including First Nations peoples of Canada, Native American peoples in the United States, Indigenous Maori peoples of Aotearoa and Australian Indigenous peoples (World Health Organization, 2014).

While there is no single explanation for why people die by suicide, for Indigenous populations, a vast body of literature points to the impact of colonialism resulting in cultural oppression, marginalization, and historical trauma (Evans-Campbell, Walters, Pearson, & Campbell, 2012). Political and economic processes interact in ways that reflect patterns of institutional inequality for Indigenous populations today. An understanding of structural inequality can provide some explanation of why Indigenous peoples suffer higher rates of suicide, but such an understanding does not entirely capture Indigenous experiences. The intrusion of settler colonial structures on collective continuance must also be considered in relationship to suicide patterns. Settler colonialism impinges on tribal nations' abilities to build interconnected societies and to plan for their collective futures.

### **Investigating the Incidence of Suicide in Cowichan**

This chapter examines the meanings and explanations of suicidal behavior amongst members of the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. In May 2012, the Cowichan Tribes Chief and Council placed the community under a local state of emergency in response to the increase in suicidal behavior amongst its members. Drawing on qualitative methodological approaches, this study presents an interpretation of suicidal behavior that considers the collective history, stories, and deep roots of the Cowichan peoples in relation to our traditional territory. Data were collected through interviews, field notes, and participant observation between 2012 and 2015. Twenty interviews, two to three hours each in length, were conducted across multiple subsets of the community, including elders, community members, youth and emerging adult, and professional caregivers. In addition, one elder focus group composed of three Cowichan elders was conducted. Participation in this study was voluntary; each participant identified as a member of the Cowichan Tribes, was between the ages of 13 and 81 years, and had either experienced suicidal behavior or lost a loved one to suicide. Each transcript was reviewed; emergent themes related to a collective history of assimilation and trauma, separation from land, and altered social and cultural practices were identified as explanations for suicidal behavior in Cowichan.

In collaboration with voices from the community, this paper presents an interpretation of suicidal behavior in Cowichan that highlights disruptions of social, cultural, political, and economic formations as reasons for suicidal behavior in the community. This chapter frames explanations for Indigenous suicide through the lens of settler colonial theory and discusses the consequences of settler intrusion on Indigenous futurity. As a starting point, settler colonial theory will be described, followed by an explanation of the establishment of settler permanency,

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

a process that fosters key strategies that structurally ensure settler access to Indigenous land and relations. With a particular emphasis on First Nations peoples of Canada, I will then describe explanations for suicide in an Indigenous context. Finally, the synthesis of settler colonial theory and its implications for Indigenous collective continuance will be hypothesized.

### **Settler Colonialism**

Settler colonialism can be characterized as a system of domination aimed at maintaining colonial power, and it is based on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples' lands and their sovereign authority (Coulthard, 2014). In order to claim space already occupied by an Indigenous population, the colonizing society must disavow Indigenous presence to reconcile the creation of a new society on previously occupied lands (Coulthard, 2014; Rifkin, 2014). Couched in relatively benign sounding policies aimed at Indigenous assimilation, absorption, or protection, settler legislation has sanctioned the abolition of Indigenous language, cultural practices, history, and identities (Banivanua-Mar & Edmonds, 2010). In order to legitimize themselves as rightful occupants of the land, settlers must naturalize the absence or disappearance of Indigenous peoples (Wolfe, 2006, p. 377). Settler colonial strategies of disavowal are enforced through a variety of tactics that are "associated with a particular state of mind and a specific narrative form" (Lake, 2003, p. 348). The goal is to replace Indigenous peoples as the righteous owners of the land while absorbing Indigenous knowledge to ensure settler survival (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). The motivating desire of settler colonialism is the creation of a homeland for settlers, a process solidified through the establishment of settler permanency. The outcome, of course, is the significant and adverse impact on Indigenous nations' ability to self-determine, facilitate adaptation, and ensure quality of life for its members, particularly in the face of rapid change (Whyte, 2015).

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

### **The Establishment of Settler Permanency**

This study proposes that specific patterns of suicide in settler states may be understood as a corollary to the establishment of settler permanency. A vast body of literature describes the settler process, by which settlers seek to manifest permanent connections to Indigenous territories and solidify the land as their homeland (LaDuke, 1999; Maracle, 1996; Veracini, 2010); Whyte names this process “homeland-inscription process of settlement” (Whyte, 2015, p. 15). Establishing settler permanency involves engraving the landscape with cultural, social, political and economic systems that reify and enable settler adaptation to new, often unfamiliar, Indigenous territories. Adaptation, in this sense, is, at its basis, “a process of deliberate change in anticipation of or in reaction to external stimuli and stress” (Nelson, Adger, & Brown, 2007). As a deeply rooted process, the establishment of settler permanency materially alters “origin, religious and cultural narratives, social ways of life, and political and economic systems” (Whyte, 2015, pp. 15-16) in order to secure settler futurity and to erase any remnants of Indigenous presence. Kyle, a 57-year-old participant, explains, “See, those others are wars fighting over boundaries. These people weren't fighting over our boundaries; these people were erasing our boundaries. So if we don't exist, we don't have to deal with them anymore is what they thought.” Kyle highlights the process by which Indigenous ways of knowing, including Indigenous connections to land, are erased or replaced by settler structures. In effect, this process ensures the collective capacity of settlers while eliminating Indigenous populations’ ability to adapt their own collective capacities or to self-determine “their corresponding responsibilities that facilitate the future flourishing of tribal livelihoods” (Whyte, 2013, p. 519). Ultimately, the settler colonial process becomes so deeply entrenched that Indigenous homelands become foreign to Indigenous peoples. While other ethnic populations experience varying levels of

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

acculturation and forced assimilation, the trauma that Indigenous peoples have experienced has been ongoing and is ubiquitous, “making [it] a part of a common experience, subtly shaping the lives and futures of individuals, families, and communities” (Elias et al., 2012, p. 1560). As a set of practices, the establishment of settler permanency ensures the collective capacity of settlers while impairing the ability of Indigenous communities to maintain their own livelihoods. In short, Indigenous populations continue to experience traumatic assaults on their social and cultural formation, which may help explain patterns of suicidal behavior in some communities.

### **Biopolitics**

For Foucault, a “biopolitics of the population” (Foucault, 1979, p. 139) connects the creation of a colonial body politic with the formation of sexualized and racialized selves by subjugating specific bodies and regulating the daily life of certain populations (Stoler, 2001). Hence, gendered biopolitics becomes a primary mechanism of disavowal and regulatory control through discourse on sexual morality (Kauanui, 2008; Stoler, 1995). Through the creation and moral policing of categories aimed at measuring the purity and worthiness of populations based on such manufactured classifications, the colonial body politic can, in essence, control and regulate the people (Stoler, 2001). Governing techniques, such as the “exclusion on the basis of social credentials, sensibility, and cultural knowledge” serve as mechanisms of rejection or denial (Stoler, 2001, p. 832). The biopolitics of a settler colonial state erases Indigenous gender systems and imposes settler forms of patriarchy in its place, resulting in gender displacement.

Gender relations in Indigenous populations were altered significantly by colonization. Prior to European contact, conceptions of gender varied significantly across tribal nations, were located on a continuum, and were defined by concepts such as place, location or role in community, or point in human or social development (Calhoun et al., 2007). Gender and sexual

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

diversity were valued; in fact, non-normative genders were often tasked with sacred and ceremonial roles in the community (Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni, & Walters, 2004). Duncan, a 53-year-old Cowichan man, delineates examples of how gender displacement impacts collective values:

Our men in ancestral traditional times held our women up and loved them and cared for them because they carried a lot of the teachings...Women are the family; they take care of the kids...They are the rock and foundation of who we are. That's the core teaching of sacredness for our community. Systems that were created over 1,000 years ago are now broken. In the span of a couple of hundred years, everything has changed...our roles, the abuses, residential schools...We were introduced to the men's role in the western world through colonization and we picked up all those bad habits and our respect for women has diminished.

Duncan identifies respect for women as an important cultural teaching and narrates how a system of patriarchy has replaced the Cowichan conceptions of gender. In addition, Duncan points to the history of colonization as the reason for the ideological shift in collective values. While the community's vitality was dependent on the prescription and proscription embedded within community roles and responsibilities, for many Indigenous peoples, gender displacement reduced collective ability to build cohesive societies and diminished collective capacity to adjust to changing circumstances. Indigenous populations must assume the consciousness of the settler society by investing power in patriarchal systems of domination, or they disappear all together. In either case, the traumatic consequence of gender displacement is that Indigenous presence on the land is erased, while settler authority is solidified; correspondingly, the collective capacity of settlers is strengthened, while collective continuance for Indigenous peoples is weakened.

### **Explanations for Suicide in an Indigenous Context**

Broadly, explanations for suicide amongst Indigenous populations can be understood as a reflection of the way colonial encroachment upon territorial, political, and economic self-determination effectually reduces the Indigenous nation's ability to maintain collective continuance. In the face of such encroachment, widespread social, cultural, and psychological dislocation of Indigenous peoples has resulted in high rates of suicide and self-injury amongst many Indigenous populations (Hunter & Harvey, 2002). Moreover, in this context, "health consequences of social change are mediated by the way people are incorporated into national and international economies" (Hunter & Harvey, 2002, p. 15). Donna, a 60-year-old woman, explains the importance of social and cultural practice for collective livelihood:

It's part of a connectedness to families in the community and to Mother Earth...Each community member plays a significant role in the survival of our people...Our people were never poor and...all of those [cultural] practices have been taken away, essentially; modern conveniences have replaced all of the valuable ceremonies and practices that helped keep our people strong and alive.

By altering the relations that Indigenous peoples have with each other, the natural world, and their social and cultural practices, settlers can re-imagine or physically alter Indigenous ways of knowing in order to justify the land as permanently settled. Such incidences of cultural oppression, marginalization, and historical trauma among Indigenous populations limit the ability of tribal nations to facilitate their own livelihood.

**Encroachment upon self-determination.** Throughout Canada's history, First Nations peoples have experienced the occupation and theft of their homelands, as well as the destruction of land and place through resource extraction (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009). In one such

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

example, the Cowichan Tribes had a territory base approaching 900,000 acres in size (Cowichan Tribes, 2005). In 1884, approximately 80% of Cowichan territory, over 662,000 acres, was stolen from Cowichan Tribes as a payment for the Southern Railway of Vancouver Island, known locally as the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway or the “E & N Railway” (Suttles, 1987). Today, the Cowichan land base is almost 5,900 acres (Cowichan Tribes, 2005). Prior to European colonization, Kyle explains, “We could go harvest. We didn't need anything or anyone until they came and started claiming the lands...they claimed all the land.” This transaction privatized Crown land by shifting conceptions of land from public property to private ownership and had significant impacts on natural-world relations and natural resources for Cowichan peoples (Suttles, 1987). In addition to facilitating massive land transfers, federal policies define Indigenous identity, impose governance structures, rearrange power relations by legislating and morally policing heterosexual norms, reorganize families and clan relations, remove children, and alter the relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009). In particular, private ownership of land is fundamentally intertwined with the establishment of settler permanency. Land becomes developed and settled; resources continue to be extracted; and settler permanency is “physically engraved and embedded into the waters, soils, air, and other environmental dimensions of the territory or landscape” (Whyte, 2015, p. 16).

In the process, Indigenous food systems are disrupted. Food systems include factors such as soil, weather, and levels of pollution, comprising the interrelated components of food production, supply, consumption, and distribution (Whyte, 2015). A disruption to a collective food supply system not only limits members’ access to food but also restricts the collective’s ability to plan and prepare for its own future. An Indigenous food system is, in fact,

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

an essential collective capacity (Whyte, 2015). Thus, a disruption of an Indigenous food system weakens the capacity of the collective to plan for the future or adapt to large-scale change without adverse results. At 81 years old, Susie remembers when the Cowichan community began to transition from a traditional food gathering society:

There became so very few places to get what we needed. Our mountain berries are now way up in the mountains. Then...the white people started building near the shores and the bay...so we lost our clam digging grounds. Now if we go anywhere to fish for 'skuy muk qum'... our fishing areas are now private property. We can't go there.

A traditional food gathering society places emphasis on living sustainably in the present while planning for the future, ensuring food justice. Susie's recollection illustrates how her families' hunting, fishing, and harvesting sites have been overtaken by settler structures. Without access to food, the collective is limited in planning for its own future while settler futurity is secured.

The very essence of being Indigenous means to live in relations with and to be born of a particular place; that is, Indigenous conceptions of self are strongly rooted in connections to the land and natural world (Jaimes Guerrero, 2003). Likewise, Indigenous ontologies and cultural ways of living are deeply rooted in a spiritual connection to land (Leenaars, EchoHawk, Lester, & Leenaars, 2007). Conceptions of Indigeneity are fundamentally connected to relationships among Indigenous people, with the natural world, with our land/place, and with the ancestral world (Cajete, 2000). Further, Million asserts, "Indigenous peoples believed in their inherent right to self-determination as given in creation" (2013, p. 128). With regulated, limited, and often prohibited access to hunting, fishing, and harvesting territories, the social and cultural ways of living for many First Nations peoples were radically altered, and in some cases, completely

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

erased. In Cowichan, for instance, Kyle describes the creation of the E & N Railway as an early force in the destruction of land and cultural practices:

They were the ones that put the first scar across the land and I am positive that in the Cowichan valley, here, rather than fight with the people, they lit the forest on fire. They didn't even harvest it; they burned it so that we didn't have a home. So we became dependent on them for everything. They took our housing away; they took our tools, they took our everything away by burning it.

As a traditional food gathering society, Cowichan peoples lived in relations with the land, and in return were gifted with a bounty of food, shelter, water, medicine, and tools from the natural world. Territorial, political, and economic encroachment on Indigenous ways of living restricts tribal communities' capacity to maintain collective continuance. What, then, are the implications of such shifts in a collective's ability to maintain the systems of relations and the responsibilities that come with each?

Understanding collective continuance depends greatly on grasping a collective's ability to adapt to the shifting nature of relational responsibilities. Self-determination for the collective is related to the nation's freedom to determine how its members adapt to such changes. To make sense of the consequences of losing the freedom to self-determine, then, it is necessary to understand what it means to achieve or lose the sense of personal or cultural persistence (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). The experience of stable human identity over time entails a conflict emerging from the need to maintain a continuous sense of meaningful self-recognition in the face of significant changes (Chandler & Proulx, 2006). Persistence, either personal or cultural, is defined as the ability to experience one's self as continuous through time, and such a condition is deeply connected to maintaining personhood and culture (Chandler & Proulx, 2006).

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

In such a framework, a person or community may be understood as “continuously linked through processes of historical transformation with an identifiable past or tradition” (Kirmayer et al., 2003, p. 18). At an individual level, the conception of self is related to a person’s formation of how the past has shaped the present and how the present will inevitably shape the future (Chandler & Proulx, 2006). In their suicide research, Chandler and his associates found that non-suicidal participants experienced the conviction that their identities persisted in formations they recognized as stable across time; this persistence evidently shielded them from identity confusion associated with temporal dislocation (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). In fact, 85% of their actively suicidal participants failed to identify any “workable procedural means for justifying a sense of personal sameness in the face of change” (Chandler & Proulx, 2006); In moments when the connection to one’s future is lost, “life seems no longer worth the trouble it costs” (Chandler & Proulx, 2006, p. 4); during this specific point in time, the risk of suicide increases. In short, most actively suicidal youth were not able to identify their own self-continuity and seemed to be at greater risk for suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). Likewise, entire communities that do not own their collective past while securing or rehabilitating their collective future are at an increased risk of their members dying by suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). A loss of self-determination impacts a collective’s freedom to determine how its members adapt to widespread changes. If adaptation efforts are thwarted, the collective is limited in its ability to prepare for its own future. Without a connection to a collective future, the entire community is placed at an increased risk for suicidal behavior.

**Cultural continuity.** All Indigenous communities are not equally at risk. Chandler and colleagues demonstrate significant variability in youth suicide rates as they correlate with levels of community autonomy (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Significantly, they found that 90% of the

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

youth suicides occur in less than 10% percent of the bands, with no suicide occurring in more than 50% of the bands in British Columbia (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). Indigenous communities who have been successful at demonstrating their own ‘cultural continuity’ have lower rates of suicide. Cultural continuity, according to Chandler and colleagues, refers to the measures that a community takes to sustain “responsible ownership of a (personal and collective) past, and a hopeful commitment to the future” (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008b, pp. 3-4), specifically through the preservation and regeneration of their cultural practices while engaging collective civic autonomy. The following factors of cultural continuity, when present in a community, serve a protective function: self-government; community level control over health, education, child welfare, and police/fire services; active efforts to secure treaty rights to traditional land; evidence of community centers for cultural practice; elected band councils with 50% or more women; and higher than 50% share of population with Aboriginal language knowledge (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008b, pp. 3-4). Indications of cultural continuity can also be described as markers of territorial, political, and economic self-determination within Indigenous communities. The main theme in Chandler and colleagues’ work is that any person or collective, “whose identity is undermined by radical personal and cultural change is put at special risk of suicide for the reason that they lose those future commitments that are necessary to guarantee appropriate care and concern for their own well-being” (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 191). At the same time, markers of continuity vouchsafe individual and collective conceptions of self during tumultuous times (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). With a majority of suicides occurring in less than 10% of the bands in British Columbia, this body of work demonstrates that the total number of suicides in a community decreases as the proportion of cultural continuity factors present increases (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008b, pp. 3-4),

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

In the Pacific Northwest, Coast Salish peoples have revitalized their use of a “superb Indigenous technology,” the canoe, for the purpose of promoting cultural continuity across multiple tribal nations (Million, 2013, p. 166). Historically, the canoe was employed for transportation; however, the use of the canoe dwindled with governmental encroachment upon trade and traditional economies, prohibition of cultural potlatch ceremonies, and dispossession of traditional hunting, fishing, and harvesting pathways (Million, 2013). Today, Indigenous peoples from the Alaskan coast down to the Californian coast have participated in “Canoe Journeys,” a gathering of paddlers that travel the oceans together to celebrate Indigenous cultural heritage (Million, 2013). Over the years, Canoe Journeys has included Indigenous peoples from Alaska, Hawaii, and Central and South America (Million, 2013). The gathering is inclusive of native and non-native peoples alike, and all peoples, from the youngest to the oldest, are invited to participate. Traditional practices and ceremonial protocols are remembered and honored throughout the gathering, reflecting positive images of Indigeneity for all participants. Cultural revitalization practices such as Canoe Journeys exemplify the forms of cultural practice that can foster personal continuity within the context of collective continuance.

With personal continuity, we are necessarily committed to our past and our future selves. With the capacity to maintain collective continuance, we are necessarily committed to the system of relational responsibilities inherent in the collective. In both cases, being enmeshed in the relationships to self, other, or future generations is essential to allow these systems of responsibilities to sustain livelihood for the self or the collective. Viewed within this theoretical frame, it is evident that processes establishing settler permanency rearrange systems of relations necessary to facilitate livelihood for Indigenous selves and collectives. These processes limit the ability for Indigenous populations to adapt to large-scale change, including invasions by other

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

populations. The process of permanent settlement itself marks the territory as foreign to the Indigenous peoples, effectively foreclosing Indigenous futures while ensuring settler permanency. As Indigenous peoples reclaim and/or rehabilitate individual and collective self-determination, they become collectively more successful at protecting their people from the risk of suicide. The strengthening of the relations necessary to maintain and adapt to widespread change will inevitably play a large part in strengthening social formation in Indigenous communities.

### **Cultural Oppression, Marginalization, and Historical Trauma**

An exploration of multiple layers of historical context is necessary to understand contemporary suicidal behavior amongst Canada's tribal communities. This section examines a vast body of literature that highlights settler structures, including political, cultural, social, and economic systems mobilized to inaugurate settler permanency on Indigenous land. The process of re-creating Indigenous territory as settler homeland eliminates the system of responsibilities in First Nations communities and curtails collective ability to adapt to extensive change. First Nations peoples of Canada have endured, and continue to endure, a long history of cultural oppression and marginalization (Million, 2013). The principal aim of European colonialism in Canada was the acquisition and management of territory; the primary initiatives that facilitated territorial acquisition included the removal of Indigenous political self-determination, consolidation of Indigenous presence through the reservation system, and assimilation of Indigenous children through forced integration into religious and educational practices (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Federal policies, including the Bagot Commission Report (1844), the Davin Report (1879) and the Indian Act (1876), aim to direct Indigenous peoples toward assimilation through "a policy of aggressive civilisation" (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Within this

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

context, a particularly striking example of how the establishment of settler permanency inhibits a tribal community's ability to maintain collective continuance is the removal of Indigenous children from the community. Over the course of almost 100 years, at least 150,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children were removed from their families and placed in residential boarding schools, with the specific intention of assimilating the children to learn the customs and modes of thinking of white men (Kirmayer et al., 2003). The Indian Act of Canada sanctioned the removal of children, which altered family systems, limited intergenerational transmission of culture and ways of living, and shifted social relations and leadership protocols amongst family and community members toward structures of patriarchy (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These policies have served as organized efforts to extinguish Indigenous peoples and their cultural way of living through dispossession and displacement, forced integration, prohibition of cultural activities, and ongoing racism and discrimination (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011).

Following the recommendation of the Bagot Commission Report of 1879, the federal government instituted the Indian Residential School System, which aimed at conforming Indigenous children by restricting communication with families and prohibiting any expression of Indigenous social or cultural practice (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2012). Over the course of almost 100 years, First Nations children were removed from their family homes and sent to residential schools, located in isolated areas often hundreds of miles from their communities (Kirmayer et al., 2012). A primary goal of early missionaries was to save "heathen souls" through religious salvation, predominantly through a concerted effort to extinguish Indigenous religious beliefs and practices that were "integral to subsistence activities and the structure of families and communities" (Kirmayer et al., 2003, p. S16). By

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

Christianizing First Nations children, the government hoped that the children would become economically contributing members of the greater Canadian society (Kirmayer et al., 2003). In residential schools, children were not allowed to dress in their traditional clothing, speak their native language, or acknowledge their religious practices; the retribution for such behavior was corporal punishment (Grant, 1996; Sellars, 2013). In fact, physical and sexual abuse was commonplace (Haig-Brown, 1988). The impact of residential schooling on the psychological, behavioral, social, cultural, ecological, and historical well-being of Indigenous children has been profound. The structures of settlement forced upon Indigenous peoples, in this case the education and religious system, impacted both the individual and the collective by fracturing the relationships that facilitate livelihood. The impact of residential schools on many survivors and their succeeding generations has been devastating social, cultural, and emotional trauma.

A great deal of literature suggests that Canada's residential school system set in motion a cycle of trauma that persists today. Residential school survivors report prevailing mental health problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, low self-esteem, physical and sexual abuse, and suicidal behavior (Grant, 1996; Sellars, 2013). Tribal elders share narrative stories highlighting the fracture in family relations and the subsequent loss of cultural knowledge as "key remembered pains" (Strickland, Walsh, & Cooper, 2006). A tragic corollary of residential schooling is the assault on Indigenous family and social relations as well as Indigenous child development. Residential school survivors experienced "a loss of culture, language, traditional values, family bonding, life and parenting skills, self-respect, and the respect for others. Their parents, in turn, lost their roles as caregivers, nurturers, teachers, and family decision-makers" (Elias et al., 2012, p. 1561). The basic role of the family in a child's life is to provide the child with a concrete sense of self, as well a sense of belonging, in order to equip the child with the

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

skills necessary to handle adversity and to teach the child responsibilities to self and others (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Parents, elders, and extended family relations teach children culturally appropriate rules and behaviors through Indigenous teaching and learning practices (Rogoff, 1991). Children learn these socially and culturally appropriate ways of being through their experiences as members of the family and the community. Without access to language, elders, and cultural teachings, children do not receive the knowledge and foundational life lessons associated with their cultural and spiritual roots.

While space precludes an extensive discussion of human development, to understand the impact of forced residential schooling, it is necessary to recognize the importance of the interplay between biology and human experience, particularly as it relates to cultural influences, early childhood and adolescent brain plasticity, and the importance of human interaction (National Research Council et al., 2000). Human development necessitates human engagement; to support postnatal development, young people need to be in close proximity of their cultural and social older and/or knowledgeable others if they are to acquire their culture, or situated social practices and processes (Cole, 2006; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 1991). During their formative years, residential school survivors were tasked with managing their own development in a tumultuous environment lacking important early life influences and positive social relationships. The experiences of children early in life interact to lay the foundation for virtually every aspect of human development and set the stage for most, if not all, subsequent human behavior (National Research Council et al., 2000). Residential school played a large part in the early and adolescent years of Indigenous school-aged children; the combination of abuse and emotional loneliness caused by being cast into an unloving environment led many children to forget their earlier years. Moreover, children were not given the opportunity to

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

maintain the system of relationships (e.g., with others, the natural world, or ancestors) necessary to provide the framework of reciprocal responsibility. Such fracturing limits the ability of the self or collective to flourish amid changing circumstance.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care has been termed “the sixties scoop” (Sinclair, 2007). Aggressive efforts to place Indigenous children in non-Indigenous foster care during the 1960s was founded on the belief that Indigenous peoples were not capable of providing adequate homes or care for their own children based on the perceived disorganization of reservation communities (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Much like the experiences of residential school survivors, children who are placed in the care of non-Indigenous foster caretakers do not always have access to their culture, language, or traditional values. Many of those “scooped children” were much younger than those who were sent to residential school. Some were removed directly from the hospital. As a result, many of these children “have experienced problems of identity and self-esteem” reflected in stories of “physical and sexual abuse, emotional neglect, internalized racism, language loss, substance abuse and suicide” (Kirmayer et al., 2003, p. S17).

In contemporary society, the practice of removing large proportions of Indigenous children from their family homes continues. At present, there is a significantly high rate of Native American children removed from their families and placed in non-Indigenous foster homes (Hill, 2007). The removal of children from families ruptures the social and cultural relations for the child, the family, and the community. This devastating cleavage makes it difficult for communities to maintain the relational responsibilities that enable individual and collective livelihood. As the traditional values and teachings passed down from one generation to the next is interrupted, the fracture of social and cultural relations severs the transmission of

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

Indigenous knowledge to succeeding generations. Children who are forcibly removed from their homes do not get the opportunity to be socialized within their own community. This results in devastating losses of language and cultural ways of knowing and has significant impacts on individual and collective identity formation (Fillmore, 2000). When children do not receive cultural knowledge because they have been separated from family, the whole community suffers. Untransmitted knowledge atrophies. Eventually, remembrances die, and with them knowledge perishes.

The interruption of children's socialization is a leading example of the way First Nations peoples have suffered a long history of violence against their physical, cultural, spiritual, and social selves. In the face of European colonization, Indigenous peoples have endured substantial losses of lives, land, and culture (Elias et al., 2012). Brave Heart and colleagues suggest that the legacy of such chronic trauma and unresolved grief, which they term 'historical unresolved grief' (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), results in poor health and social outcomes, including high rates of suicide. The destructive impact of colonialism can be felt across multiple generations: families and communities have been disrupted; parents and parenting styles have been adversely impacted; physical and sexual abuse has been replicated; generations of language, cultural knowledge, and tradition have been misinterpreted or lost; and hurtful "patterns of emotional responding that reflect the lack of warmth and intimacy in childhood" have been reproduced (Kirmayer et al., 2003, p. S18). Furthermore, social and economic deficiency has been associated with higher rates of suicidal behavior (Kirmayer, 2012). The stories of Alex illustrate the intergenerational impact of residential school. Alex is a 23-year-old Cowichan member whose father, grandparents, uncles, and aunts attended residential school. Upon learning about the history of the residential school system in Canada, Alex was deeply troubled. He turned to his

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

grandfather to learn about his experiences in residential school: “He shared ‘cause he was the first one that I opened up to when it was bugging me... He kinda went, ‘Shit, this didn't even happen to you, how many generations ago and this is still fucking us up?’ I was just like, ‘Sorry Grandpa, I don't mean to be bringing it up but all these stories keep popping up to me this past week and a half and I was just going to see how they are.’” The traumatic corollary to such collective attacks against Indigenous peoples has resulted in what Duran and Duran call a “soul wound” (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 24). Despite not having attended residential school, some Indigenous peoples may still experience poor health and mental health outcomes as a result of the trauma that is operating at the level of community (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Suicidal behavior is a reflection of extreme suffering and is best understood as interplay between complex social, historical, political, and psychological factors. Hence, the pain that is felt at the level of community reverberates in the psyche of individuals immediately and for subsequent generations.

In light of the broad, interrelated cultural, material, and historical contexts delineated thus far, this chapter now turns to addressing phenomena most specific to Indigenous suicide in particular cultural contexts. I have theorized that particular elements of settler permanency can explain the disparate suicidal patterns amongst Indigenous populations. Insofar as the structure of settlement engraves the landscape with markers of settler permanency, excluding Indigenous lives and life ways, suicidal behavior features multiple determinants contextualized in the social, political, and economic histories of specific Indigenous communities. First, I will address trends in suicide specific to Indigenous populations. Next, I will highlight community-level circumstances that appear in the Indigenous suicide literature, including: stresses of acculturation/dislocation, cluster suicides, and the importance of cultural continuity.

### **Trends in Suicide Specific to Indigenous Populations**

Indigenous populations in settler colonial states suffer from a higher rate of suicide than any other identifiable ethnic group; specifically, Indigenous youth between the ages of 15-24 are at particular risk (Harder, Rash, Holyk, Jovel, & Harder, 2013). In Canada, First Nations peoples experience youth suicide rates that are 5–20 times their national counterparts (Chandler et al., 2003). Likewise, in the United States, American Indian and Alaska Natives suffer youth between the ages of 15-34 years suffer from suicide rates 1.5 times the national average, and suicide is the second leading cause of death for young AIAN peoples in this age group (Center for Disease Control, 2015). In New Zealand, between 1996–2005, suicide has consistently claimed Maori lives at a higher rate than non-Maori lives (Harder et al., 2013), and when comparing percentage of deaths by suicide, self-inflicted death totaled 4% of all of the deaths amongst the Aboriginal peoples of Australia in 2010, in contrast to 1.6% of all deaths in the general population (Clifford, Doran, & Tsey, 2013). American Indians in the United States bear the highest injury death rate, pointing to the high prevalence of health risk problems for Indigenous peoples (Harder et al., 2013).

**Stresses of acculturation and dislocation.** The history of traumatic experiences for Indigenous peoples can be characterized as large-scale, objectionable changes that have been imposed on societies. Many scholars point to community-level factors such as poverty, discrimination, racism, and the history of traumatic assimilation as reasons for mental health problems, including suicide amongst Indigenous populations (Duran, 2006; Evans-Campbell et al., 2012; LaFromboise, Medoff, Lee, & Harris, 2007). Indeed, distributive injustice is certainly central to the high suicide rates amongst Indigenous populations. Through forced relocation and neglect, starvation, and prohibition of cultural and religious practices, American Indians

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

experienced widespread ethnic cleansing (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004).

Contemporary repercussions of ethnic cleansing can be identified in the continued erasure, discrimination, and oppression of Indigenous peoples (Whitbeck et al., 2004). The World Health Organization cites the stressors of acculturation and dislocation as risk factors to suicide at the community level (2014). Moreover, perceived discrimination directly impacts levels of depression and hopelessness across multiple-age groups of Indigenous peoples residing on a tribal reservation (Whitbeck et al., 2004). Brave Heart and colleagues have identified historical and intergenerational trauma associated with depression and hopelessness as factors in suicide (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), and Duran and Duran discuss how the collective wounding of Indigenous peoples has resulted in internalized and externalized hatred expressed through violence perpetrated against self or others (Duran, 2006).

At the same time, as rapid shifts in socioeconomic and cultural change often serve to undermine self- or collective continuance, in such cases, rapid shifts may threaten individual or collective senses of identity (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Crucially, it is such shifts that Indigenous systems of responsibilities protect against. Chandler and colleagues suggest that in the face of rapid change, Indigenous peoples are not able to connect the narrative threads that run throughout their lives to form a sense of identity and purpose (Chandler et al., 2003); other scholars suggest that a loss of identity can lead to hopelessness and depression (Duran, 2006). It is essential to identify the meaning of such changes at the level of community. A loss of a job, for example, is enough to place an individual at risk, but Chandler and Lalonde ask, “What are the prospects for self-harm when one’s whole culture is officially condemned, one’s religion is criminalized, one’s language is forbidden, and one’s right to rear and educate one’s children suspended?” (1998, p. 200). Without the ability to maintain collective continuance, the tribal

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

community is placed at risk for suicide; the interference in collective capacity to adapt to external stimuli jeopardizes constituents' well-being, disrupts the sense of collective identity, and replaces protective structures with foreign systems that reconcile the land as settler homeland, which strengthens settler prospects at the expense of Indigenous futures.

**Cluster suicides.** Some scholars have identified suicide clustering or suicide contagion as a phenomenon that occurs more frequently amongst Indigenous populations (Goldston et al., 2008). The precise definition of a suicide cluster or suicide contagion varies across the literature (Haw, Hawton, Niedzwiedz, & Platt, 2013), but suicide clustering is generally identified when multiple deaths occur within the same family unit, collective community, or geographical area, and within a specific time period (Gould et al., 2003).

In a collective community, death is experienced at a social, emotional, and spiritual level, and the community can take “on the appearance of a war zone or disaster scene” (Hanssens, 2008, p. 26) following a death by suicide. Following a traumatic self-inflicted death in a tribal community, the whole community is placed at risk for suicide (Hanssens, 2008). Explanations given for the increase in community-level risk vary. Some scholars point to the tight-knit nature of a collective community while others point to media sensationalizing suicide (Hanssens, 2008, p. 26). While the closeness of a community may magnify the destabilizing impacts of bereavement, it is important to note that the same closeness may serve as a protective factor.

In many tribal communities, grief seems to be continual, and the impact of each death is felt throughout the collective community. In general, Indigenous children experience personal loss ranging from the breakup of a relationship or family to the loss of a loved one to natural death or suicide at high rates (Gray & Winterowd, 2002). In their sample, Gray and Winterowd found that 43% of Indigenous children experienced the death of a loved one within the past six

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

months (2002). It is possible that Indigenous children have a higher rate of exposure to suicidal behavior, and this likely leads to trauma associated with grief and loss of social supports (Goldston et al., 2008). Given the high rate of trauma, and suicide in particular, some Indigenous community members are placed at risk from the compounding impact of personal loss (LaFromboise et al., 2007).

It is important to emphasize that suicide rates across Indigenous communities vary significantly. For example, Chandler and colleagues documented that some tribal communities in British Columbia experience suicide rates 800 times the national average, while in other tribal communities, suicide is practically unknown (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). There is significant regional and tribal variation across all Indigenous groups, yet the persistent disparity points to the need to identify other factors that may be operating on a community level (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008a). It is in this context that my study grapples with why such a discrepancy exists amongst those who die by suicide in settler colonial states. I will argue, then, that the settler process of establishing permanent roots on Indigenous territories dislocates the social, cultural, political, and economic systems that maintain Indigenous systems of responsibilities and accordingly, disrupts capacities to protect Indigenous futures. Without a responsible commitment to the future, individuals and collectives are placed at a higher risk for suicide.

**Significance of collective continuance.** Highlighted in this discussion is the devastating impact of colonial imposition upon Indigenous self-determination. In particular, the settler desire to solidify Indigenous land as settler homeland, called here the establishment of settler permanency, has the cumulative effect of reducing Indigenous collective capacity to adapt to large-scale changes. Embedded within Indigenous ontologies is the system of responsibilities inherent in the collective. By emphasizing the relationships to selves, to others, to the natural

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

world, and to future generations, Indigenous communities maintain their ability to plan for the future and adapt to large-scale changes (Whyte, 2014). Without this ability to self-determine how their constituents respond to such changes, the entire body politic is placed at risk. Collective continuance in a tribal community is closely related to a collective's ability to adapt to changing circumstances, which includes the continuation of those specific cultural practices that serve to preserve systems of responsibilities across time (Whyte, 2014). Thus, the importance of collective continuity as it relates to collective self-determination has emerged strongly as a protective factor against Indigenous suicide. The positive impact of collectivism is strengthened as community cohesion increases (Freedenthal & Stiffman, 2004). The very nature of existing in a collective community with extended relations and a vast support system with social, family and community dimensions, can provide strength during difficult transition times (Harder et al., 2013). Moreover, these systems of relationships provide a sense of belonging to and responsibility for self, others, and future generations, serving as a protective mechanism against suicide.

Traditional and cultural practices have been disrupted in many ways; the impact of this disruption points to the importance of rehabilitating Indigenous peoples' relationships with their cultural ways of living. Attention to cultural revitalization as a means toward strengthening individual and collective agency while rebuilding cultural relationships is taking place across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. More specifically, cultural revitalization efforts must include locally defined practices that generate connections with all our relations while honoring the inherent responsibilities embedded within each relationships. Gendered roles in each community must be respected and considered; Indigenous languages must be honored and practiced; and revitalization efforts must center on local ways of knowing. Finally, as our cultural practices are,

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

largely, collective in nature, there is importance in conceptualizing intervention and prevention strategies for Indigenous communities from a collective orientation.

### **Impact of Settler Colonialism on Indigenous Futurity**

This paper highlights suicide patterns amongst Indigenous populations and assumes that particular aspects of Indigenous existence within a settler colonial state that help explain the rates of suicide. Settler colonialism is premised on the dispensability of Indigenous peoples on the land, for it is Indigenous presence that threatens the rationalization of Indigenous land theft. Thus, in settler colonial states, Indigenous peoples experience incidences of Indigenous erasure on a daily basis. The everyday experiences of Indigenous peoples over time can ultimately have a cumulative effect on individual or collective conceptions of self and can limit abilities to anticipate or react to external stressors. The compounding impact of settler colonialism, which encompasses being made invisible or having personal, cultural or collective self-determination infringed upon, may lead individuals or collectives to re-experience historical trauma in their contemporary daily lives. These everyday experiences of dispensability may lead Indigenous peoples to believe that their self or collective is not significant, ultimately threatening individual and collective conceptions of possible futures. Historical and contemporary experiences of physical or conceptual strategies of elimination, or even the threat or fear of being eliminated, may impact beliefs about individual and collective future selves. Hierarchical categories that include some people while excluding others may elicit feelings of marginalization, oppression, or self-doubt and in turn, may remove or limit possible futures for individuals or for the collective. Without land, Indigenous peoples have less freedom to self-determine or plan for their own future. This loss of self-determination and the related inability to maintain a protective capacity to adapt to large-scale change devastates Indigenous communities, particularly in the face of

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

uninvited change. The establishment of settler permanency directly impacts Indigenous peoples' abilities to plan for their collective futures.

At the heart of Indigenous planning is the intention of improving the present and future lives of Indigenous communities and their environments (Matunga, 2013). Matunga describes the preferred outcomes of Indigenous planning as including improved environmental quality and quantity, political autonomy and advocacy, social cohesion and well-being, economic growth and redistribution, and cultural protection and enhancement (Matunga, 2013). In collaboration with community voices, this chapter has provided explanations for suicidal behavior in a way that honors our collective connection to our specific places, lands, and relationships. Cultural protection and enhancement includes a reconnection to intergenerational social practices such as traditional economies of trade, food sustainability and harvesting practices, hunting and fishing practices, governing structures, and family and social relations. In his own words, Matunga describes Indigenous planning as, "Indigenous peoples analyzing their situation, making choices, and implementing decisions about their resources, their land, environments, and places—using their knowledge, values, practices, and approaches to enhance their collective social, economic, and cultural well-being" (Matunga, 2013, p. 27). In other words, Indigenous planning envisions Indigenous peoples free to make their own decisions about the things that matter to them, now and in the future.

Indigenous suicidal behavior does not take place in a vacuum. To strengthen Indigenous communities at large, attention will need to be paid to the complex historical, political, and cultural contexts of Indigenous communities. In settler colonial states, colonization has resulted in historical and intergenerational trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples in such magnitude that the effects continue to reverberate across time and space. As examples, gender displacement and

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

removal of children from families exacerbate the communities' ability to recover, and the danger of further suicides hovers over the community. By and large, approaches to understanding suicide in Indigenous communities continue to frame suicide as an individual issue. Mental health models, for example, suggest that suicidal behavior is located within an individual. This is only a portion of the story. The cluster-effect of suicides indicates that it is not an individual issue. It is necessary to understand Indigenous suicide as a reflection of greater collective trauma that is, at once, historical, contemporary, and community centered.

## APPENDICES

### Chapter 5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation focused on broadening our understanding of the meanings of and explanations for suicidal behavior amongst the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. With specific emphasis on a tribal context, this study offers Indigenous methodologies and theories as a way to understand the everyday experiences of Cowichan tribal members. Over the course of four years (during 2012–2016), data were gathered from the perspectives of members to highlight everyday occurrences that may shed light on the recent trend in suicidal behavior in the Cowichan community. Members were asked to provide their understandings of suicide and their explanations for what was happening in the community.

Embedded within members' talk were deeply cultural and social understandings of the world that centered on the collective orientation of the community and the inherent responsibilities within each relationship. Interestingly, most of the members did not use the word, 'suicide,' nor did they identify the need for 'suicide prevention.' Rather, participants discussed the need for Cowichan members to "remember what our ancestors wanted for us; they wanted us to acknowledge and appreciate the value of life." For example, when asked how to address suicidal behavior in Cowichan, Thomas, an elder, shared, "We sit and we eat together. Our sacred knowledge and belonging are shared at the table. That's when our healing happens." This perspective is informed by a relational worldview. By being present with one another at the table, we demonstrate the importance of our interconnectedness, which informs our existential worldview of our purpose in life. These relationships are imbued with deep relational responsibilities that span human, animal, plant, ancestral, and natural-world relations. Indigenous knowledge systems encompass the beliefs that all of creation is interconnected, that things are always in motion, and that all of creation is animated with spirit (Alfred, 2009b). Cowichan

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

members shared convictions about our inherent responsibility to Mother Earth and indeed, to life itself. Many participants shared their understanding of life as a gift we've been given from Creator and from Mother Earth. Participants acknowledged the gift we've been given and associated it with the inherent responsibilities embedded within this relationship. Indeed, members point to the need to talk about life and human collective responsibilities within. A worldview that is shaped by a responsibility to embrace the sacredness of life is a very different narrative than the prevention account—the dominant paradigm in customary approaches to suicide—that aims to ensure people do not kill themselves. Some participants, such as Kyle, place great importance on helping others understand and appreciate the value of life, as gifted to us by our ancestral relations, Mother Earth, and Creator: “The original message is Mother Earth asked me to help protect her gifts. She asked me to talk to my brother man, not to scold them, but to help create awareness about what is going on out in nature or in the environment.” In this excerpt, Kyle illustrates a deep sense of relational responsibility that extends across all living beings, and indeed, to all of creation.

Drawing on the interpersonal theory of suicide, this dissertation presented individual-level reasons for suicidal behavior. In addition to mental health understandings of suicidal behavior, participants described a variety of everyday experiences that largely center on the implications of settler colonialism for the Cowichan community. To capture explanations informed by shared historical experiences in relation to colonization, this dissertation engaged settler colonial theory. Deeply rich narrative detail was presented about the impact of European arrival in Cowichan. Contrary to a relational ontology, the European worldview holds a strong belief in individuality and the quest for material gain, and in many instances, a quest for domination over land and natural-world relations (Alfred, 2009b). A large part of the

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

relationship between Canada's federal government and Aboriginal peoples in Canada was shaped by the history of colonization in Canada. This dissertation presented the establishment of settler permanency as a primary reason for the policies of assimilation. With a quest for land at its core, the aim of settler colonialism is to erase Indigenous presence on the land in order to establish permanent settler connections to the land. The establishment of settler permanency entails practices that shift the social and cultural formation of Indigenous communities. It is a process that involves inscribing the land with social, cultural, political, and economic systems to ensure settler survival; however, in its wake, the establishment of settler permanency forecloses Indigenous futures by erasing or altering the social and cultural arrangements of the community.

Cowichan members highlighted the need to imagine interventions that address the unique histories of First Nations' peoples in a settler colonial state. In response to the identified need to move from instrumental intervention strategies, this dissertation presented a multidimensional approach to suicide intervention that emerged from the social and cultural practices of the Cowichan community. With a relational worldview as the overarching guide, tribal elders identified specific designed constructs on which to base the intervention: 1) cultural concepts of the person, 2) relational epistemologies, 3) importance of place/land, 4) collective orientation of the community, 5) intergenerational influence, and 6) Indigenous teaching and learning practices. Each phase of the intervention was shaped and informed by the designed elements. The Life Stories workshop elicited rich, narrative data that may inform social workers and practitioners completing initial biopsychosocial assessments and other interventions to suicide. In addition to customary data, this project produced "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) about participants' lived experiences that may inform intervention strategies based on local ways of knowing. Additional themes emerged in relation to designed elements, including the importance of relational

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

epistemologies, varying cultural concepts of the person, the intergenerational influence and transmission of knowledge, and Indigenous apprenticeship practices. In addition to designed elements, relevant themes emerged in relation to youth's existential understanding of afterlife, their orientation to the future, and their strong desire to be heard.

To broaden our understanding of the specific characteristics of suicide amongst Indigenous populations in settler colonial states, the final chapter presented my critical encounter with theoretical approaches in collaboration with the voices of Cowichan members. With land as a primary motivation, settler colonialism aims to erase Indigenous peoples and their cultural and social formations, with the intent to inscribe permanent settler structures on the land. The establishment of settler permanency alters the land with a vast array of social, cultural, political, and economic structures that ingrain settlers' abilities to adapt to wide-scale change, while simultaneously inhibiting Indigenous collectives' abilities to plan and prepare for their own futures. The fracturing of the Indigenous relationship to land and lifeways, deepened through a variety of assimilative processes, impedes the organizing structures that facilitate collective livelihood. Without the ability to plan and prepare for their own future, the collective continuance of tribal communities is threatened.

Findings from this dissertation suggest that the impact of settler colonialism on social and cultural formations in the community is more than theoretical. Rather, the historical and contemporary experiences of community members have resulted in a deep collective affective wound that has reverberated through multiple generations and is felt today amongst many Cowichan members. Current models of understanding suicide are drawn largely from an individualistic standpoint, but the shared history of trauma associated with settler colonization presents the significant need to conceptualize models of understanding suicidal behavior from a

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

collective orientation. The desire to die by suicide emerges when the fundamental human needs of belongingness and competence are thwarted; this leads to difficulty in imagining or conceptualizing a possible future without pain. Thus, practitioners working with suicidal clients must attend to the future orientations of their clients to evaluate suicidal risk. The Life Stories workshop presents a project that disrupts the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched while engaging Indigenous knowledge systems in assessing suicide risk. In the process, the workshop also disrupts the power dynamics between the therapist and the client, altering the way the therapeutic alliance is cultivated.

This dissertation underscores the need to center the voices of the community as a way to understand the multidimensional lived experiences of tribal members. The creation of service delivery programming for Indigenous communities must address the multigenerational needs of the community, the collective orientation of tribal members, and the inherent strengths embedded within cultural practices. Interventions must engage multiple generations, including intergenerational participation in designing service programs. Of foremost importance, youth identified the desire and need to be included in program development as an essential component. Designed interventions must engage practices that generate respectful relations across varying cultural concepts of the person and consider the importance and healing power of being in relations with land and place. In addition, solutions must be imagined from within the community and based on purposefully designed community-specific practices. Finally, this dissertation points to the importance of conducting research with Indigenous communities in a way that engages the historical context of the community from Indigenous ontological and axiological standpoints.

## TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION

Fundamentally, there is a particular need to attend to the relational responsibilities in collective communities in order to understand the lived experiences of community members from their own perspectives. For Cowichan peoples, being in relations with land provides access to ontological ways of knowing and a vast body of local wisdom; thus, being removed from land or place threatens Cowichan peoples' understanding of human existence, posing an existential threat. In the resulting narrowed view of possible futures, epidemics of suicide become a reality. The recommendations presented here are by no means comprehensive. Rather, they represent an accumulation of knowledge shared by participants in this study. To expand sociological and ecological futures and to create a just democracy for all peoples, it is necessary to consider the holistic and multidimensional needs of community members on the most basic level, their daily lived experiences. While relational responsibilities are the fundamental ontological lifeworld of many Indigenous populations, these responsibilities extend to all human beings. After all, responsible relations with the natural world sustain human livelihood, and as such, we are all interconnected in a vast web of life.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Community Member/Professional Caregiver/Elder Semi-structured Interview

##### Nature and forms of cultural artifacts/tools

1. What cultural artifacts do you have in your family? (Masks, totem poles, family crest, Cedar box, Longhouse (hat, stick), bone game, other)
2. For you, what is your relationship to the item? Is it living? Is it a relation? Where did it come from?
3. What significance or purpose do these items bring to your family?
4. What significance do these items bring to our people?
5. What stories do you recall about these items?
6. What happens if we no longer have these items in our daily lives or in our communities?

##### Social relations

1. Are social relationships important to you?
2. What is a family to you?
3. Who do you spend your time with? Do you feel close to any other adults?
4. What is a typical day for you? What do you do on the weekends?
5. Do you spend time with friends? If yes, what kinds of activities do you enjoy?
6. How much partying goes on amongst adults?
7. How much partying goes on amongst young people?
8. Who are we supposed to look after?
9. How exactly do we do this?
10. Is this how our community operates in terms of our relationships and responsibilities today?
11. Do you think relationships have anything to do with suicide rates?

##### Rules

1. What are some cultural rules that you know? Do you follow them? What happens if you do or don't follow these rules?
2. Do you think that these rules vary across families? Are they different from one family to the next?
3. If yes, why do you think this?
4. What are some ceremonial death practices in your family?
5. Why do you think these rules are important to follow?
6. Do you think that youth are following these rules? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think this has changed?
7. Do you know any teachings about what happens after this lifetime?

##### Divisions of labor (household, community)

1. Who is in charge of what in your household? Is the labor divided by gender role? If so, in what way?
2. Do the young ones have responsibilities? What are youth responsible for? How do you make sure they understand this? Why did you choose it to be this way?
3. What do you think responsibility gives to young ones?

## APPENDICES

4. In our community, are certain people responsible for certain things?
5. What is the role of elders in our community?
6. Do you think we are taking care of our elders in the right way today?
7. Trauma care is a tricky situation. How do we handle historical trauma amongst our elders?
8. Do you know what our traditional form of government is?

### Historical development of Individuals/Youth

1. How do you know who you are?
2. What does it mean to be a Cowichan First Nations man/woman/elder/person?
3. Where were you born?
4. How do you know this about yourself?
5. Are the programs (social services, etc.) in Cowichan reaching the youth population? If so, how? If no, what does Cowichan need to do to reach the highest at-risk youth?
6. What kind of career/adult preparation does Cowichan provide?
7. How do these programs follow through to ensure success?
8. How, if at all do youth participate in community decision-making process? If they do not, how do you think they ought to?
9. Do you know any traditional stories of how we transition our youth from childhood to adulthood?

### Historical development of Family

1. Where were you raised?
2. Were you raised with siblings or other children in the family home?
3. Do you speak your Aboriginal language?
4. As a child, did you participate in cultural practices? If so, can you describe them to me?
5. Did your parents (or grandparents) go to boarding schools?
6. Did you go to a boarding school?
7. What are traditional core family values? Do families in Cowichan live these values? If not, what things do we need to do to help others remember these family values?
8. Some families are resilient, while others turn to negativity to handle trauma. What is the difference between these families?

### Historical development of community

1. Do you know our creation story? If so, would you be willing to share the story with me?
2. Who shared this story with you? If no, where might you go to hear this story if you'd like to hear it?
3. Do you know when our community became a federally recognized band?
4. Do you recall what that process looked like?

### Suicide

1. What do you think are the reasons for the increase in suicide?
2. What one thing needs to change in this community to help this situation from your perspective? What one thing is a major cause of this problem?
3. How do we go about making this change?
4. At what age do you think people are more apt to have suicidal ideations?

## APPENDICES

5. Do you think everyone has suicidal ideation at some point in his or her life?
6. Do you think western medication would help with levels of depression? Do you think medicine from our own community or other cultural strengths can help with this problem?
7. What does Cowichan do for families at high risk? Are there individual family trauma plans? What do/should these protocols look like?

### Cultural Continuity

1. If culture is our way of living, describe your way of living to me.
2. What ceremonial events or activities do you participate in?
3. What does this practice give you?
4. Do you think cultural practice is important?
5. In our community, has there been a disruption of cultural practice? If so, how? Why?
6. Do you think it is important for us to acknowledge the history of trauma?
7. How do we do this without causing more pain?

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX B

#### Youth (10-19) Semi-structured Interview

##### Pop Culture:

1. Do you watch television?
2. What is your favorite television show? What do you like about this show?
3. What is your favorite movie? Why?
4. Who is your favorite actor? Who is your favorite actress? What do you like about him/her?
5. Who is your favorite musician? What is your favorite song? Why do you like this musician/song?
6. Do you play video games? What is your favorite game?
7. What sports do you watch?
8. Who is your favorite professional athlete? Why?
9. If you could meet any famous person, who would you choose? Why?

##### School

1. Let's talk about school. Where do you go to school?
2. What grade are you in?
3. What is it like to go to XXX school?
4. Does your school have any native teachers?
5. Does your school have mostly native students? Mostly white students?
6. Tell me about your favorite teacher. Why do you think you liked this teacher so much?
7. Tell me about a time that you had a difficult time with a teacher. How did you handle this situation?
8. What is your favorite subject in school? Why?
9. What is your least favorite subject in school? Why?
10. Describe yourself as a student.
11. Tell me what you are good at in school.
12. What types of books do you read? What is your favorite book? How many books do you read each month?
13. Do you play sports at school? Tell me about that. Do you belong to any type of club or group at school?
14. What activities do you participate in outside of school? Who brings you to these events?

##### Neighborhood:

1. Communities are places where people are connected to each other, like a neighborhood, school, youth or friendship centers, Big House, or church. What places do you go to in your community?
2. What do you like/not like about your community?
3. Describe what it is like to live in Duncan.
4. If you could change anything in your community, what would you change? Why?
5. What is the biggest issue facing your Tribe today?

## APPENDICES

6. What things can you do in your community that will make it a better place? How can you help your community fix these issues?
7. How can your friends support you in maintaining positive community connections?

### Peers

1. Let's talk about your friends. Who do you hang out with the most?
2. What do you do when you are with your friends?
3. What kinds of things are they good at?
4. Who in your group of friends do you admire most? Why?
5. If someone asked you to do something that you did not think was appropriate, how would you handle the situation?
6. Do you know if any of your friends have thought about or attempted suicide?
7. Have you lost any friends to suicide?

### Family/Home:

1. Tell me about your family.
2. What does your family do well?
3. Who in your family (neighborhood or school) do you see doing good things in your community? What kinds of things are they doing?
4. Have you ever spent any time away from home? If so, where did you go and for how long?
5. In your family, who is a role model to you? How does this person inspire you?
6. Do you have responsibilities at home? If so, what are they?

### Religious/Cultural

1. Does your family participate in any ceremonies? Which ones? Describe them to me.
2. Do you believe that there is a Creator, a God, or something greater than yourself?
3. Are you religious? Do you go to church?
4. Are you spiritual?
5. Describe your faith.
6. Do you think our soul/spirit exists before we are born?

### Self

1. What are personal goals that you have for yourself?
2. What steps are you going to take to achieve these goals?
3. What are your strengths?
4. How can these strengths help you achieve the goals that you have set for yourself?
5. What is the most difficult decision that you have had to make?
6. What challenges are you currently working on?
7. What was the happiest day of your life?
8. Describe your greatest accomplishment.
9. What are you most proud of?

APPENDIX C

Sample Life Stories Art Representation



## APPENDIX D

### Life Stories Workshop Coding Framework(s)

Life Stories Workshop Coding Framework(s)

**Typical Biopsychosocial Assessment (Shea 1998)**

**Chief Complaint/Reason for referral**  
**History of Present Illness**  
**Past Psychiatric History**  
**History of Substance Abuse**

Information gathered here includes client's name (if obvious), age, race, marital status; include chief complaint or presenting problem  
 Onset of mental health condition, social challenges that may exacerbate condition, past suicide attempts, symptoms of mental health condition  
 Any mention of past psychiatric or mental health history.  
**Alcohol Use:** Age of first use, frequency, duration, amount, type  
**Substance Use/Chemical Dependency:** Age of first use, frequency, duration, amount, type  
**Cigarette Use:** Age of first use, frequency, duration, amount, type

**Past Social and Developmental History**

**Education:** Graduated high school, GED, grades, educational strengths, educational weaknesses, special education  
**Family Relationships:** marriage, children, dynamics or characterizations of relationships, siblings, children/siblings in family home, role in family system  
**Social Relationships:** Stories or histories involving friends, extended social network, teammates, acquaintances, students from school or other schools  
**Abuse History:** Physical or sexual assault, self-harm, exposure to violence  
**Employment Record and/or Military Record and/or Sports/Recreational Activity**  
**Legal Record:** Any problems with law, any record of drinking while intoxicated, etc.  
**Religious Background:** Religion, Spirituality  
**Family Relationships and Other Interpersonal Factors:** Identify current support systems in family home; other social supports including Rotary Club.  
**Client's Strength:** Social, emotional, cognitive, physical, biological, include interests, positive coping mechanisms, commitment levels  
 Parents living or non-living, parents or grandparents health histories, parents or grandparents mental health history (inc. substance abuse, suicide)  
**Disorders:** physical health history, past or childhood illnesses, frequency, duration, Review of Systems, Medications, Physician, Allergies  
**Review of Systems, Medications, Physician, Allergies**  
 Appearance and behavior, mood and affect, speech and thought process, thought content and perception, sensation, cognitive & intellectual functioning

**Example NOT Included in Typical BPS Assessment**

**After-Life Beliefs**  
**Apprenticeship Learning**  
**Concept of Self**

Understanding of the natural life cycle, stages of aging, beliefs about after-life including existence of heaven or hell, reincarnation, etc.  
 Guided participation; youth active in observation and participation, learning occurs through communication and involvement with more skilled people (Rogoff, 1991)  
 Implicit model of self serves as a cultural concept and value that tells us how the person views notion of self. Understanding the cultural concept of person is important in identifying appropriate therapeutic interventions (Kaminer, 2007).

**Cowichan Values**  
**Cowichan Practices**  
**Future Self**  
**Intergenerational Influence**  
**Rich Narrative/Communication Pattern**  
**Relational Responsibility & Reciprocity**  
**Traditional Healing Practice/Traditional Medicine**  
**Trauma and Loss History**

**Egocentric:** Defined by personal history and accomplishments; locus of agency with individual; dominant values: individualism, autonomy, achievement, materialism  
**Sociocentric:** Defined by family, clan, lineage, and community; Dominant Values: collectivism, interdependence, cooperation, honor, familism; Locus of Agency: group  
**Eco-centric:** Defined by environment, ecology; dominant values: balance, harmony, exchange, amissim; locus of agency: animals, natural elements  
**Cosmo-centric:** Defined by ancestors; dominant values: cosmic order, holism; locus of agency: Gods and spirits  
 Cultural principles, attributes, qualities or beliefs that are considered honorable, worthwhile, or important to Cowichan members.  
 Cultural rules and/or protocols (e.g., death or burial practices); actions of walking in a good way; apprenticeship learning; actions (doing)  
 Yet to come; speaking of self or others in future time period; hopes, fears, dreams, and goals in relation to future vision  
 Support or influence of parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, or extended family relations; including ancestors.  
 Mark when participant share narrative story that demonstrates communication patterns.  
 Understanding one's self as being in relations with others, with natural world, and the inherent responsibilities associated with relational worldview.  
 Long House/Big House, sweatlodge or sweat, Indigenous energy work, smudging (e.g., Gochmeim, sweet grass, sage, cedar); Indigenous roots and teas; plants as medicine  
 Physical assault, sexual assault, domestic violence, participation in war, historical trauma (residential schooling, child removal), intergenerational trauma (excessive alcoholism).

**Reasons for Suicide**  
**Demographics, nature, timeline, gender, age, means**  
**Captures participants beliefs about why people die by suicide**

## APPENDIX E

### Matilda's Biopsychosocial Assessment

**Clinician:** Emma (researcher and social worker)

**Date:** November 14, 2015

**Client:** Matilda, age 14, F

#### I Identification, Chief Complaint, and Reason for Referral

Matilda Johansson is a 14 year old, single, female Cowichan First Nations student. Matilda has experienced self-harm (cutting) on two separate occasions. She has experienced the loss of a close friend to death by accidental motor vehicle injury and the subsequent death by hanging of the friend's older sister. Matilda's grandfather recently died. Matilda has experienced symptoms of depression.

#### II History of the Present Illness

Matilda reported that she has considered suicide but states, *"I never do hurt myself"*. She has a history of cutting on two separate occasions and explains that she was feeling alone and *"didn't have anybody"*. She believes that parents and other caregivers do not respond or do not know how to respond to adolescent suicidal behavior. Matilda experiences nightmares; she describes being chased by clowns.

#### III Past Psychiatric History

Matilda shares stories that suggest that she has experienced symptoms of depression in her past, *"I was just really emotional. Everything ticked me off; everything made me cry...I just did not want to be outside. I did not want to be around light, or music, or TV, or anything"*. Following the death of her grandfather, Matilda states, *"After my Papa passed, I just got a really small appetite"*.

#### IV History of Substance Abuse

**Client's Father HSA:** Matilda's father has a history of alcohol abuse and/or dependence. *"He wants to stop but it's hard for him"*. Matilda's father has shared some of his experiences with alcohol with her stating that, *"It just ruins your whole life and you shouldn't do it. Once you start getting into it, you can't stop"*. Matilda believes that her father is sharing these experiences and words with her because of his own childhood experiences of neglect. She states, *"I kind of get it because his dad was never there for him and his mom was never there for him and I don't want to experience that because both my parents are there for me"*. Matilda indicates that her father may smoke marijuana. If her father is drinking alcohol in the house, Matilda states that she tries *"to get out of the house if he's drinking"* and reports, *"I try and stay safe"*. Matilda seems to understand that there are physical or sexual risks for children when parent/s are drinking alcohol or have friends over who are drinking. *"He always has a couple of friends over and that's when I start getting paranoid"*. Matilda indicates that she would like to talk to her dad about his drinking but states that she has *"been trying to build the guts up to say it but I just can't because it's his life and he can do whatever he wants"*. Matilda's aunt told her to *"try and tell him to stop drinking and smoking, and focus on a life career"*.

## APPENDICES

**Client's Friends HSA:** When asked what she knows about the effects of alcohol, Matilda stated, *"If they drink too, too much, they can pass out and could either damage something in their head. One of my friends, she told me that she passed out and she hit right where your memory thing ... Somewhere in the back of her head, and she lost her memory so she totally forgot what happened until they told her. My other friend was with her and she told me everything"*. Matilda identified alcohol abuse amongst one of her friends yet did not know that the common term for her friend's experience is a *"blackout"*. Matilda further states that she has *"quite a few friends who are already into weed and they're younger than me"*. She identifies a 13 year old, male friend who smokes weed, drinks alcohol, and smokes cigarettes. She believes that people use alcohol and/or drugs because *"they want to fit in or they just want to try it for the first time"* and *"they forget what they are sad about"*. She acknowledges the addictive nature of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes by stating, *"but then you get attached to it and it becomes your whole life"*. Matilda has experienced the devastating impacts of alcohol abuse. In the summer of 2013, one of Matilda's close friends was crossing the highway with her boyfriend during the early hours of the morning and was hit by a motor vehicle and died. *"They were drinking"*.

**Client's Relationship with Alcohol and/or Chemical Substance:** In terms of her own relationship with alcohol or chemical substances, Matilda states, *"I don't really get along with people who get drunk. I always just say they should stop because you're too young and you've got a life ahead of you"*. In a subsequent interview, Matilda admits to smoking marijuana with her uncle.

### V Past Social and Developmental History

**Education:** Matilda just recently began grade 9 at a private Catholic school. Matilda has attended this school since she was in kindergarten. Ninth grade is the highest-grade level that the school goes to. Next year, Matilda is anticipating attending grade ten at the local public high school.

#### Family relationships, social network, and abuse history:

**Client's Mother:** Matilda's mother *"was there throughout my whole life and she always managed to do stuff. She sacrificed a lot for me. She's just a big part of my life"*. According to Matilda, she has *"learned everything from my mom. She's the one that taught me how to ride a bike, how to ride my scooter, how to stay strong"*. In addition, Matilda's mother provides reliable support in terms of transportation (e.g., driving her to soccer practice), taught her how to dress nicely, and keeps her safe. Matilda reports a strong and positive relationship with her mother.

**Client's Father:** Matilda identifies her father as *"really calm and all that and he always just took it calm with me. If I ever got in trouble, he'd just tell me not to do it again. He'd lecture me the same way he does, like my mom. I know he just does it because he loves me"*. She reports that her dad is *"a big part of my life but he's not really there for me but he tries his best"*.

**Client's Family:** Matilda's mother is Sophie and her father is John. Matilda's parents are no longer married. Matilda's mother remarried a man who already had two children. Her stepfather and mother subsequently had 5 children together, making Matilda the oldest of seven children in a blended family. Her family participates in multiple cultural activities that inform her view of

## APPENDICES

the world and her understanding of her self in relations with others, plants, animals, and ancestral relations.

***Extended Family Network:*** Matilda identifies both her maternal and her paternal grandmothers as being a positive support system in her life. In addition, she narrates the role that her uncles and aunties play in her life including caretaking when ill, safety, and support. At the age of 14 years, Matilda has traveled out of the country on vacation without her parents or siblings. She traveled with her best friend Pam and her family. This indicates that Matilda has strong interfamilial support systems. Matilda considers Pam's family a part of her extended family system.

***Client's Best Friend(s):*** Matilda describes her stepsister and her friend Pam as "*both just the sisters I've ever wanted*". "*She's <her step-sister> like a sister though because she's been there a couple of times and she always just makes me happy a lot. She can tell when I am upset and she be's herself. She's really random and weird once she's herself. That just brings up my mood. Pam <her best friend>, she's like a sister because we grew up together and we know everything about each other and we're always there for each other. She just reminds me of a sister*". Matilda values and trusts Pam's opinion. For example, when encouraged by Pam to try out new soccer skills, Matilda describes how her friend encourages her to try new and/or challenging things, "*I tried it and she always wanted me to try it but I always got too scared. She's the one that always tries to get me in to a lot of stuff*", in addition, Matilda describes Pam as "*always there just to teach me*" and further states that, "*We always compliment each other... whenever she's feeling down, I'm always like, 'Pam, you've got the best smile ever. Don't let anybody ruin it*".

### **Employment record and/or Military History and/or Sports/recreational activity:**

***Employment record and/or Military History:*** At the age of 14, Matilda employment centers on babysitting (e.g., helping parents babysit siblings). Matilda's father does not have a permanent, full time job. Matilda views her father always trying his best; Matilda's father apologizes to her for his unemployment, "*He always says sorry that I don't have a job*".

***Sports/Recreational Activity:*** When asked why it is important to include soccer on her Life Stories representation, Matilda replied "*most of my family has played it when they were my age and it's a sport that I love. I've played it most of my life and I am still working hard on it to this day*". Her description suggests that soccer plays an integral role in her family life. In addition, she describes "*working hard at it to this day,*" which may tell us something about her self-identity as a hard worker or may tell us something about what she believes is necessary for success. She identifies herself as a "*careful*" soccer player in contrast to her friends. Specifically, she states "*every single one of my friends got hurt on the turf except for me, which I find pretty funny*". Matilda further identifies soccer as a source of emotional regulation and distress tolerance, "*When I'm angry or upset, or anything like that, like bad emotions, it just takes it all away and it makes me happy again*". She identifies soccer as a distraction from emotional or cognitive pain and highlights soccer practice as a space for releasing physical aggression, "*maybe just kicking the ball just gets all the anger out*". For Matilda, soccer provides positive social relationships with teammates who "*just makes me forget why I'm sad and I just have a good time*". With a strong, supportive network through soccer, Matilda has developed an avenue to regulate her emotions in a healthy and physically productive way.

## APPENDICES

**Legal Record:** Matilda does not identify or articulate any problems with the law.

**Religious Background:** Per Matilda, *“I somewhat believe in God and I somewhat don’t. He made this world and I think we should respect it because he gave us everything. In return, I think we should respect the world”*. Matilda does not know anything about or believe in a ‘Creator’. In terms of after-life beliefs, Matilda narrates a version of re-incarnation, *“When you pass, you go to this God thing...like a long line and we’re all just waiting for our turn to return back to Earth, as an animal or another person. Like, when you die and you’re in this really long line. Then, he gives you this certain person or animal...even a tree or a plant...then you come back down to Earth and you just keep going through that cycle throughout your whole life”*. Matilda states that she kind of believes in a heaven and a hell. *“I think it’s just your own paradise. I don’t think it’s going to be all white. It’s your own paradise”*. Heaven is *“all connected. It’s all just one land. It’s not like here’s your room, that’s your heaven, stay in there kind of thing. I think it’s just one, big land”*. Matilda prays, on occasion while her family prays more often. She identifies the helping nature of prayer when she affirms that prayer helps her family. Matilda believes that her mother prays to those who have passed away including deceased relatives and loved ones.

### **VI Current Social History**

*Family Relationships and Other Interpersonal Factors:* When asked to depict the various people or contexts that she is currently in relations with, Matilda described her blended family including multiple younger siblings, her best friend Pam, sports programs including soccer and canoe pulling, and her ancestors and her family tree (63). Matilda’s mother and father have an individual and *“totally different”* representation on Matilda’s art piece (4).

*Client’s Strengths:* Matilda identifies soccer and canoe pulling as being strong, positive influences in her life. She feels strongly supported by her mother and her father and believes that both of her parents are doing the best that they can. She understands the adverse impact of alcohol or substance use, particularly for adolescents. Matilda’s aunt’s and uncles play an instrumental role in caring for Matilda; for example, they care for her when she is ill or support her when she reaches out for emotional support or advice. She describes her self as a sweet girl who is always willing to help others. Matilda’s social network provides positive support in the form of encouragement, teachings, apprenticeship learning, and humor.

### **VII Family History**

Both of Matilda’s parents are still alive. Her parents separated when Matilda was an infant. Matilda’s mother remarried when Matilda was five years old. Matilda’s stepfather has been a positive influence in Matilda’s life, particularly in terms of cultural practices. Matilda’s father has a history of alcohol abuse. Matilda has experienced suicidal ideation in her lifetime. In addition, Matilda has a history of self-harm (cutting) on two separate occasions.

### **VII Medical History and Review of Systems**

Disorders: Undetermined.

Review of Systems: Family, friends, school, cultural spaces, recreational, religion

## APPENDICES

Medications: Matilda denies taking any medications, “*No, we don’t really take vitamins. When I’m sick, I don’t really go to the doctor, I just take Benadryl or Advil, or something*”. When ill, Matilda does not eat a lot and appears pale in color.

Physician: Data has not been obtained.

Allergies: Matilda does not report any allergies.

### **IX Mental Status Examination**

Appearance and Behavior: *Matilda was dressed in soccer shorts and a warm-up jacket. She wore tennis shoes and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Matilda was dressed appropriately for the weather. She appears her stated age.*

Mood and affect: *Matilda’s affect/mood matched the experience/story that she was sharing.*

Speech and thought process: *Matilda’s speech rate and volume were within expected limits. Matilda’s thought process was tangential and there were no signs of loose associations or other thought disorders.*

Thought Content and Perception: *Matilda does not appear to experience hallucinations and delusions. She has had a history of self-harm (cutting) on two occasions, but denies current suicidal ideation or attempt.*

Sensorium, Cognitive and Intellectual Functioning: *Appear to be of normal range. No disability detected.*

### **XI Narrative Summary and Formulation**

Matilda is a 14-year-old, Cowichan First Nations person. She is an able-bodied, single female interested in boys. Matilda’s mother invited Matilda to be a part of this research project because Matilda has experienced trauma in her life and her mother believes that it would be helpful for Matilda to talk about what she has experienced. She feels that broken social relationships are the reasons for her depressed symptoms. In addition to self-cutting, Matilda has described not wanting to get out of bed in the morning and not being interested in typical activities. In this state, Matilda admits that she uses avoidance behavior as a coping mechanism. Matilda reports past suicidal ideation and self-harm. Matilda has experienced severe stress reactions related to the accidental death of her friend, the suicidal death of her friend’s sister, and the death of her grandfather in a short period of time. Two of the three deaths were violent or accidental, however, Matilda did not directly witness or experience the violence. In addition, Matilda has experienced retraumatizing of the event, however, this has taken place on social media and is excluded. Thus, Matilda does not meet the requirements for Acute Stress Disorder; *Matilda meets the criteria for Adjustment Disorder*. Because of the presence of suicidal ideation and/or thought, she meets the criteria for *R45.851 Suicidal Ideations*. Matilda demonstrates *Z91.5 Personal history of self-harm*. In addition, she meets the criteria for *X78.9 Intentional Self-Harm by Unspecified Sharp Object*. She also complains of significant emotional disruption on account of fractured social relationships. Concerning her suicide risk, I do not feel that Matilda is actually suicidal, as evidenced by her rich descriptions of how she now assists her friends through emotional difficulties, including suicidal ideation. In addition, Matilda adamantly denies having a plan or doing anything to hurt herself. Matilda has not drunk alcohol and has observed the effects of alcohol abuse by witnessing her father’s history of abuse. I will begin treatment by gathering additional information about Matilda’s cultural values and practices, intergenerational influences, understanding of self in relation to others or cultural concept of person, and after-life beliefs. This information would help inform appropriate treatment goals, objectives, and

## APPENDICES

interventions. Matilda would benefit from an increased understanding of how her thoughts, behaviors, and emotions interact and inform one another, and are dynamic. She would also benefit from learning distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and mindfulness or breathing/relaxation techniques to manage overwhelming emotions.

## VITAE

Dr. Emma Elliott is a member of the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Her doctorate is in Education, Learning Sciences and Human Development at the University of Washington. Her dissertation, “New Thinking for Intervention: Towards a Culturally Responsive Model of Understanding Indigenous Suicide,” coordinates the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide with Settler Colonial Theory in a study aimed at understanding the explanations and meanings of suicide in one First Nations’ community. Her areas of research interest include Indigenous adolescent suicide, adolescent development, and future selves. Her work includes identifying traditional healing practices of Indigenous peoples and blending them with best social work practices in order to expand Indigenous possible futures, for self and for the collective.

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