Talking Circles: An Indigenous-centered method of determining public policy, programming and practice

Loretta Dennis, MPA Candidate
School of Public Administration
University of Victoria

August 2010

Client: Mariann Burke, Intergovernmental and Community
                     Relations, Partnerships and Community Renewal Division,
                     Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation

Supervisor: Dr. Catherine Althaus
                     School of Public Administration, University of Victoria

Second Reader: Mr. Kenneth MacIver
                     School of Public Administration, University of Victoria

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to the Indigenous Nations which have much to teach us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Talking Circles: An Indigenous-centered method of determining public policy, programming and practice

SECTION FOUR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Objectives

This project addresses the question: Can British Columbian government agencies better engage Indigenous Nations in British Columbia by participating in Talking Circles?

To answer this question, this study provides a targeted literature review, a jurisdictional scan, a "smart practice" example and informational interview data to cultivate a set of recommendations, specific to the client.

The term "Indigenous Nations" is inclusive of all First Nations Peoples of British Columbia, Métis and Inuit. In an effort of being inclusive through out this report, the term "Indigenous" will be used. This term is recognized by the United Nations to be inclusive for individuals who are of First Nations descent:

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system (United Nations, 2004, page 2).

This project includes a North American focused literature review of Indigenous Talking Circles in contemporary times as a method of problem solving, community building and communications engagement between government agencies and Indigenous Nations. Scholarly and mainstream literature is reviewed.

A jurisdictional scan comprising a review of public organizations is also focused on the North American perspective in order to identify current practices of government participation in Talking Circles as a methodology of shaping policy, programming and practice.

An example of smart practice is presented for this project, based upon the experience of the BC Housing Management Commission (BC Housing) and its experience in Talking Circles with Indigenous Nations in British Columbia. "Smart practice is the application of a successful approach to another situation while at the same time, maintaining the consideration of localized nuances and respecting those unique circumstances" (Bardach, 2005, page 266).The smart practice example provides lessons for government organizations to participate in Talking Circles, with the acknowledgement that there is no single-best way to do so in all circumstances. The rationale for participating in Talking Circles at an organizational level is explained and a brief introduction on Talking Circles is presented.

A series of informational interviews were conducted with individual subject matter experts to determine the current application of Talking Circles within the provincial government, the education system and a number of non-profit communities. A portion of participants disclosed their Indigenous heritage at the time of the interview.

The end result of this combined set of research methods is a series of findings and appropriate recommendations for the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation (MARR). These recommendations are provided for consideration by the client as to the appropriateness to participate in Talking Circles with Indigenous communities in a culturally appropriate and results-oriented manner, which is in step with the Ministry's objectives.

Project Rationale

This project is important to the client as it will bring together an academic perspective, a jurisdictional scan, an example of smart practice and informational interviews to culminate in a series of practical findings and recommendations for improved engagement with Indigenous Nations. Improved engagement will assist MARR in meeting the Ministry's overall mandate of improving outcomes for Indigenous Nations in the province. The project audience is the Executive Director of Intergovernmental & Community Relations in the MARR within the British Columbia provincial government.

The impetus for MARR's effort in engagement is the restored endeavor by government to address historical issues of colonization of Indigenous Nations in British Columbia.

Background

The basis for this project was a Talking Circle initiative undertaken by BC Housing in the autumn of 2007, whereby the Commission participated in a series of Talking Circles with Indigenous groups to listen and learn how to develop a homeless outreach program that would be uniquely Indigenous. At that time, BC Housing had recently ushered in a new department (Aboriginal Housing Services), and as such, had adopted the practice of Talking Circles with stakeholders.

The result of these particular Talking Circles was the Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program and a dedicated program framework. Since the start of the Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program, hundreds of British Columbians who self-identify as being of Indigenous descent have been housed, thus breaking the cycle of homelessness for these individuals and families.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the project, focusing on the use of a literature review, a jurisdictional scan and an example of smart practice analysis along with informational interviews.

The researcher explored a systemic bibliographic search using scholarly literature via the Internet, periodical indexes, databases and library catalogues. Mainstream literature was also examined.

The jurisdictional scan focuses on North American public sector organizations seeking to better serve Indigenous communities. The scan was primarily completed via the Internet and government websites.

The smart practice example concentrates on BC Housing, a provincial Crown agency, where staff participated in a string of Talking Circles to mold Indigenous programming.

Interviews were conducted with government employees associated with the smart practice example and subject matter experts identified by the client and the researcher. Some individuals interviewed self-identified as being of Indigenous descent and a portion had participated in Talking Circles.

The findings and recommendations culminating from these combined research approaches come from a strength-based approach as they seek to optimize the positive efforts of all parties involved with the overall aim of improving outcomes for Indigenous Nations in the province.

Project Results

Upon reviewing and analyzing the material for common themes, smart practice and the ability to replicate in the client's jurisdiction, the project results represent a set of findings and appropriate recommendations for implementation. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations will inform the client in determining the strategic planning process for MARR, and constitute an important element for MARR's future engagement processes with Indigenous communities.

The deliverables for the MARR encompass a two-pronged approach: this report and a final presentation to be made by the researcher directly to MARR through an oral defense of this project.

Researcher's Journal

During the process of this project, the Researcher kept a journal of reflections. This journal is included within the Appendix of the report to provide the reader the perspective of how this project was developed, researched, implemented and drafted. Additionally, the journal is a personal reflection of Talking Circles and government engagement. Lastly, the journal is an individual account of the researcher's journey through the capstone project and impending graduation.

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to address the question: Can British Columbian government agencies better engage Indigenous Nations in British Columbia by participating in Talking Circles? To answer this question, the project explores the notion of smart practices of public sector agencies for participation in Talking Circles with Indigenous Nations in British Columbia. Smart practice is a term developed by Eugene Bardach, an American scholar, and is defined as:

> A practice that takes advantage of some latent potential in nature to achieve a goal at a relatively low cost….this includes a description of the problem…a generic description of the practice, with some attention to interesting or widespread variants…. [the] effectiveness or its capacity to reduce costs with little or no performance cost….the generic vulnerabilities of the practice must be described (Campbell et al., 2006, page 28).

Since the beginning of "this time" (an Indigenous term), Indigenous Peoples have gathered in *The Circle*, a phrase meaning people form a circle for engagement for the betterment of the community to address issues not only of conflict, but also of celebration. The Circle holds significant meaning for Indigenous Nations.

There has been very little research done on the practice of Talking Circles as a vehicle for Indigenous Nations and government engagement. This is particularly troublesome as there is a distinct possibility of the extinction of even more Indigenous culture within the province of British Columbia, further to the eradication that has already taken place due to historical issues of colonization of Indigenous Nations in British Columbia. As such, it is vital for further research and action on the part of the academic community and for government to explore further opportunities that will engage Indigenous Nations to better shape policy, programming and practice. Talking Circles provide one such opportunity.

It must be acknowledged that there is not one single, best way of working alongside Indigenous Nations in British Columbia; there are over 200 Indigenous Nations in the province, each with a distinct culture. However, the rationale for government bodies to participate in these types of Circles is consistent: to provide a paramount level of service to the public in which they are dedicated to serve. Additionally, the effort aims to close the socio-economic gaps while at the same time recognizes the self determination and autonomy of Indigenous Nations.

Historically, in British Columbia, as with other parts of Canada, the relationship between Indigenous Nations and government has been exploitive, oppressive and violent. In the latter part

of the last century, the provincial government made solid steps to address the ills of centuries past and has since developed concrete initiative to move forward with a "new relationship".

It is with great significance in 2005 that the Province and Indigenous Nations crossed the threshold into a "new relationship based upon respect, recognition and accommodation of aboriginal title and rights; respect for each others' laws and responsibilities; and for the reconciliation of Aboriginal and Crown titles and jurisdictions" (MARR, *The New Relationship – Moving Forward into 2008,* 2008, page 1). This was followed up in 2009 with the provincial *Recognition and Reconciliation Act* that outlines the objective of reconciliation and collaboration between all government ministries and agencies and Indigenous Nations.

An example of smart practice is a series of Talking Circles initiated by BC Housing in the autumn of 2007. BC Housing sought to learn from Indigenous Nations how to ensure the effectiveness of a new homeless outreach program dedicated to Indigenous people who are facing homelessness. The Circles resulted in an Indigenous-centered program framework with concrete outcomes.

The goal of the research conducted in this project is in part to discover and outline the smart practices associated with the positive outcomes that are achieved through participation in the Talking Circles.

BACKGROUND and CONTEXT

This project centers on the mandate of MARR and has been inspired by the researcher's professional experience with BC Housing's participation in Talking Circles in 2007.

It was the Talking Circles, which are presented as an example of smart practice case study for this project that fuelled a series of questions for the researcher during her graduate studies and professional career with BC Housing. These questions included: Why doesn't government do more citizen engagement? Policy makers are not necessarily the experts on Indigenous tradition; why don't they ask the experts? How can the public service better serve *all* citizens? How can the public service improve Indigenous relations towards measurable outcomes?

The opportunity to answer some of these questions presented itself as a capstone project for the researcher's graduate work at the University of Victoria, School of Public Administration. The researcher was referred to MARR as a potential client for the capstone as the topic is linked to the overall mandate of the Ministry.

The Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation (MARR)

MARR is the provincial ministry responsible for providing "strategic advice across government and identifies opportunities to work with the Indigenous Peoples to facilitate the removal of barriers and stimulate positive outcomes in the province" (MARR, Service Plan Update 2009/10–2011/12, 2009, page 6). It is because of this mandate and also because of MARR's commitment to community development, that the practice of participating in Talking Circles has been used. A key outcome of such Circles is to bring people of all ages together for the purpose of teaching, listening and learning (Running Wolf, 1999, page 39).

With the introduction of the new relationship, MARR looks to lead all government ministries and agencies in fostering new liaisons with Indigenous Peoples. As such, the mandate of MARR is pivotal as the Ministry not only negotiates treaties and agreements, but also gives example on Indigenous relations to the wider public service and improves social and economic conditions for Indigenous people.

British Columbia is privileged to be "home to over one-third of more than 600 First Nations communities in Canada, comprising the most culturally and linguistically diverse groups of Aboriginal peoples in the country" (MARR, Service Plan Update 2009/10–2011–12, 2009, page 7). However, without strategic and significant collaboration, these diverse Indigenous cultures and languages will vanish.

It is due to such critical risks as the possible extinction of culture that all public sector agencies and ministries must work in new and collective ways with Indigenous Peoples across British Columbia. It is because of this potential that Talking Circles and Indigenous culture as a whole must be studied and considered in more depth by the government and the academic community. It is with a shared vision that issues of reconciliation, improved social and economic outcomes and renewed relationships based upon mutual respect will be addressed and established.

In this context, Talking Circles take on a significant role as a potential means for government agencies to achieve a positive contribution to the development of a shared vision with Indigenous People. It is with this in mind that this project recommends the public sector adopt an Indigenous cultural approach for engagement, based in part, on the smart practices to be achieved with respect to Talking Circles.

An Example: The British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing)

BC Housing, as a provincial Crown corporation is dedicated to the administration and delivery of social housing in the province, and as such operates a relatively new program dedicated to assisting Indigenous people who are facing homelessness though Indigenous-centered social

service outreach programming. A provincial Crown corporation is dedicated "to carry out regulatory, advisory, administrative, financial or other services or to provide goods and services, crown corporations generally enjoy greater freedom from direct political control than government departments" (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2010.).

To ensure that programming was Indigenous based and presented in a respectful manner, the agency participated in a series of Talking Circles. The Circles resulted in the program framework that became the foundation of performance measures. The Canadian federal government defines performance measures as, "Indicators that provide qualitative and/or quantitative information needed to measure the extent to which a project is achieving its intended outcomes. Qualitative data can be expressed in terms of change or comparison between two states, while quantitative indicators can be in the form of a ratio, percentage, comparison, or figure" (Heritage Canada, 2010).

The program from BC Housing is an excellent example of MARR's goals to remove the barriers to Indigenous Nations in society. It improves the social and economic outcomes for Indigenous people by engaging clients 'where they are at'. Additionally, the participation of BC Housing in the Talking Circles is a stellar model of MARR's second organizational goal of developing "respectful and constructive relationships with Aboriginal peoples" (MARR, Service Plan Update, 2009–10/2011–12 page, 6). Thirdly, the resulting program framework and performance measures are a glowing illustration of respectful negotiation of social service agreements under MARR's service plan.

Accordingly, this report presents the BC Housing experience with Talking Circles as an example of a smart practice from which useful lessons can be drawn for future engagement practices by the client and BC government agencies.

SECTION TWO

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The methodology and scope of this project seek to demonstrate the need for government to participate in Talking Circles in such a way as to establish and maintain consequential relationships to meet the goals and objectives of MARR's mandate. An overarching strength-based perspective is adopted throughout the research to represent the vigor of the smart practice that is required to move forward with integrity within the new relationship, and to proceed "in a good way" (Indigenous term meaning in good faith).

To be operating with a strength-based perspective means building upon what is already established and working well, instead of focusing on what is not working well. This researcher has been taught by representatives within the Indigenous community that to proceed in a good way means to do so in good faith.

A qualitative research approach is adopted for the project, focusing on the use of a literature review, a jurisdictional North American scan, an example of smart practice and key informant interviews with participants who are subject matter experts.

Methodology

The methodology of the project is a four-pillar approach: a literature review, a jurisdictional scan, informational interviews and an example of smart practice. The literature review and jurisdictional scan were both conducted primarily over the Internet. The informational interviews were carried out over the telephone and established via electronic mail. The researcher participated in the example of smart practice as part of her duties at BC Housing. The selection of a multi-method strategy was based on a four pillar approach: a targeted literature review, a jurisdictional scan, informational interviews and an example of smart practice. This multi-method research approach provides considerable strength to the rigour of the report because it aids in triangulation of data and in presenting different information facets in response to the research question. A number of strengths and limitations associated with each element of the methodology are provided below.

Scope

The scope of the literature review and the jurisdictional scan is based upon smart practices of engagement with Indigenous Nations and governments within North America. Public sector organizations are the primary source of study, including both federal and provincial or state government bodies. Informational interviews were primarily focused on provincial public agencies, with the exception of one non-profit organization and one representative from the academic community. The specific example of smart practice in this report is focused on BC Housing's experience with Talking Circles, as outlined above.

Rationale for Smart Practice

It is important to distinguish that smart practice differs from the common phrase of "best practice", which "connotes that sets of solutions may be applied from one context to another….Scholars have found numerous examples of cross-national policy problems where problems in one setting have effects on other nations" (Campbell et al., 2006, page 30). Smart practices, on the other hand, provide an example of what works well in one jurisdiction that may be applied to another with the acknowledgement of the unique variable to each circumstance. One must recognize that what works well in one situation cannot be exactly replicated in another; this must also be reflected in practice.

This smart practice rationale is especially applicable to the topic of this report as the public sector seeks to work collaboratively with over 200 unique Indigenous Nations in British Columbia, each with its own distinct culture. Success in one circumstance of engagement with a particular nation does not equal the same success with another. This diversity in outcomes and practices is exemplified in treaty negotiations as some nations have signed these documents while others have not.

Therefore, it is imperative for the public sector to apply a smart practice approach to its use of Talking Circles as there is no such a thing as 'best practice' in terms of engagement.

An Example of Smart Practice

The foundation of the report is an example of smart practice, conducted by BC Housing. The instance presented is an example of smart practice insofar as the elements can be applied to other situations of engaging Indigenous communities, while revering the exclusiveness of each unique condition.

A Literature Review

A strategic literature review was explored within a North American context. The primary source of the literature review is government documents, including legislation and documents from the United Nations. Academic journals and mainstream print media were investigated for this report.

The researcher embarked upon a bibliographic search using scholarly literature via the Internet, periodical indexes and library catalogues including EBSCO and the University of Victoria Law Library. The search terms included: Talking Circles, public engagement and Circle. Mainstream literature was also examined using the same process. The literature is North American in focus, assessing the use of Indigenous cultural practice influencing public sector practice.

A Jurisdictional Scan

A North American-centered scan of government bodies was explored to determine how and if government is participating in Indigenous cultural activities. This includes Talking Circles as a means of shaping policy, programming and practice. The scan was undertaken via an Internet search of websites and government publications. The jurisdictional scan is important as it identifies how other public bodies are engaging Indigenous Nations in a consequential approach. Further, it ensures the opportunity for the application of smart practice within a North American context.

Informational Interviews

Participants for the informational interviews were invited to participate based upon recommendations from a MARR representative. The objective of the interviews was to obtain qualitative insights to supplement the research included in the project. MARR identified individuals from various Ministries who could speak to the current relationship between the provincial government of British Columbia and Indigenous Nations. Additionally, some participants were from the academic community and the non-profit community.

In some situations, the individuals could also speak to the tradition of Talking Circles. Other qualitative insights of the participants included their own Indigenous heritage and personal commitment to improving government and Indigenous relations.

The participant pool comprised 11 individuals, of whom four self-identified as being of Indigenous descent. The total numbers of participants are categorized into three groups:

(1) BC Housing staff who participated in the example of smart practice;

(2) Staff of the British Columbia government or the academic community or the non-profit sector;

(3) Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous descent.

It is imperative to note that those who were interviewed and who self-identified as Indigenous descent were asked to speak to their own personal experience and knowledge of Talking Circles as a point of engagement between government and Indigenous Nations. This is important to mention because the researcher was searching for participants' personalized perspectives; the issue of "relationship" is fundamental to the success of the "new relationship".

BC Housing staff members, also colleagues of the author, were interviewed for this report, having been selected based upon their participation in the smart practice case study associated with BC Housing. An email invitation was sent to BC Housing staff to participate in the project and once accepted, an interview time was established.

The British Columbia government staff who were interviewed, were identified by the project client as being subject matter experts on government and Indigenous relations in British

Columbia. The client provided the researcher with a list of staff names that included email addresses from various Provincial Ministries including MARR. An invitation to participate was emailed to everyone on that list.

Two additional participants were recruited via email from the researcher's professional network.

Stage I: Recruitment and Methodology

The recruitment for the report was based mainly upon referrals from the client. As the participants were from around the province of British Columbia, email and telephone conversations were utilized for all stages of the interviews.

There were 11 individuals who participated in the interviews; four of who identified themselves as being of Indigenous decent.

An email invitation was sent to a list of potential participants from the project client that was established by the researcher (see Appendix). Once accepted by the participant, a follow-up email was sent by the researcher to confirm the date and time of the interview.

Stage II: Verbal Consent

To commence the telephone interview the author read the verbal consent script (see Appendix) to all participants. This would ensure a thorough understanding of the participant's rights within the project under the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board guidelines.

Three questions were asked to confirm verbal consent:

(1) Do you agree to be identified by name and/or organization's name and credited in the results of the study?

(2) Do you agree to have your responses attributed to you by name and/or organization name in the results?

(3) Do you consent to participate in this study?

The verbal consent approval indicated that the participant understood the conditions of their participation in the study and that they had the opportunity to have their questions answered by the researcher. Via email, all participants were provided with the contact information of the researcher, faculty supervisor and the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board. Approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board has been provided (see Appendix).

Stage III: Informational Interviews Outline

A total of nine interviews were completed, each taking approximately 60 minutes. Each participant was asked the same series of questions:

(1) What is your current role and duties as it relates to Indigenous and government relations?
(2) What experience do you have in relation to Talking Circles?
(3) Does your agency participate in Talking Circles between Indigenous Nations and government bodies?

    A) If yes to question 3, what was the expected outcome of doing so?
    ii) What were the factors of this outcome?

    B) If yes to question 3, what is your opinion of the effectiveness of Talking Circles in terms of Indigenous Nations and government relations?
    ii) What were the factors of this outcome?

    C) If no to question 3, why not?

(4) Do you have any further information or recommendations to provide the researcher related to the topic?

A handful of the participants who are government employees self-identified as Indigenous descent. Each spoke of their personal experience, knowledge and insight and not that of their Nation. Some did, however, speak to their experience related to their work within the public sector.

Strengths and Limitations of Methodology

In order to provide a breadth of perspectives on the potential of Talking Circles as a method of engagement between government and Indigenous Nations, the researcher chose to pursue a four-pronged approach for gathering information. This resulted in a multi-faceted perspective and thus, a holistic approach to the research question. A number of strengths and limitations associated with each individual element of the methodology, however, must be noted.

The limits of the literature review include the fact that it was narrowed to North America and that it does not include other commonwealth countries such as New Zealand and Australia, which have documented a significant amount of work on the subject matter. While the experience of these jurisdictions may have been beneficial to the report, the benefits of having such a specific approach are that the literature review lends itself specifically to the Indigenous Nations of North America and includes the appropriate cultural relevance, history and political perspectives.

A similar perspective is appropriate for the jurisdictional scan as it is reflective of the current political and social outlook in British Columbia. The scan also includes the new relationship under the MARR mandate.

The example of smart practice within the project is limited to one recent project. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the long-term effectiveness of the Talking Circles. However, the short-term impacts of Talking Circles have been recognized and are explored.

The limitations of the methodology of the informational interviews include the small sample size, limited participant recruitment and interviews. Additionally, the interviews were conducted over the telephone and therefore it is acknowledged that non-verbal communication was limited.

The strengths of the methodology allowed for personal conversations that revealed meaningful insights and individual expression related to the topic of research. Additionally, the time commitment was flexible for the participants as the telephone interviews occurred at a suitable time and place for each person.

The University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board provided approval for this research study, including the methodology. This document can be found within the Appendix D of this document.

This section outlines the summarized results of the literature review, jurisdictional scan, informational interviews and smart practice example.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher has assumed a specific literature review of Talking Circles in contemporary times as a method of problem solving, community building and communications engagement between government agencies and Indigenous Nations. The literature review is within a North American context and is related to the use of Indigenous cultural practice influencing policy and practice. It is focused on scholarly and mainstream literature. A North American context was helpful to ensure some sense of political and social consistency between the literature and the topic at hand.

In North America there is little academic research related to the use of Talking Circles for the development of public policy. Most published material related to Circle work centers around the use of the Circle for restorative justice and health care, such as Becker 2006, which seeks Indigenous American women's perspective on their own health and wellness as it relates to cancer. This researcher could not find any published research related to government participation in Talking Circles as a means of Indigenous-centered policy, programming and practice.

Five articles on Talking Circles are presented in this literature review. These articles provide the thrust of the main findings on Talking Circles secured to date within the literature and the key findings of each article are detailed below. Overall, the literature presented within this project indicates that although the public sector has sponsored Talking Circles primarily around issues of health care and restorative justice, there has been little public sector participation in Talking Circles and even less written or studied about this opportunity. However, what has been uncovered through the literature review is the recognition of the importance of Talking Circles, not only within Indigenous culture, but also within academic communities as a sound methodology for qualitative study. This is illustrated in further detail with the following works of Becker (2006) and Gray (2007) to which we now turn.

Talking Circles: Northern Plains Tribes American Indian Womens' Views of Cancer as a Health Issue

In the Northern Plains tribes of what is now South Dakota in the United States of America, research has been done by an American academic, Becker (2006) to understand Indigenous American womens' experience related to cancer screening and the cultural significance of cancer. The research included a series of Talking Circles with a purposive sample of 28 women.

It is worthy of noting that Talking Circles were approved as a methodology for research by the researcher's academic institution because "as a cultural strategy, Talking Circles brought forth contextual data via stories of participants to enrich the analytic process and findings" (Becker

Talking Circles: An Indigenous-centered method of determining public policy, programming and practice

2006, page 29). This reinforces the acknowledgement that Talking Circles are a sound methodology for qualitative research.

The Talking Circle and a focus group methodology were supplemented with quantitative data analysis that was utilized to clearly identify trends and themes regarding the relationship between Indigenous culture and western health care.

The Researcher found that the Circles "brought forth conversations and stories about how a participant thinks and feels about negative topics" (Becker 2006, page 29.). Each Circle was led by an esteemed Elder of the community and the primary investigator of the project participated in the Circle.

The primary investigator participated in a handful of training sessions related to the significance of Talking Circles, with a focus on traditional symbolism and communication patterns of the Indigenous participants. "The goal of Talking Circles is to make one's self into a vessel to receive spirit through a series of processes" (Becker 2006, page 29).

In one instance the Circle began with a smudging (a sage burning) to mark the cultural significance and to welcome the Spirits. The Elder also sought the groups' suggestions for guidelines for the Circle to ensure safety for all. The Circle itself took place in the homes of participants to ensure that everyone felt safe in sharing their personal experiences. At the end of the Talking Circle, each participant received a small monetary honorarium for their time and effort by the research team.

The work of Becker (2006) provides an example of how Talking Circles can be a conduit for establishing relationships based upon mutual trust and respect. These elements are clearly identified within the mandate of MARR and are vital for the successful realization of the new relationship between government and Indigenous Nations in British Columbia. The outcomes and process achieved by Becker reinforces the potential of Talking Circles to be a vehicle for the establishment and maintenance of the new relationship.

The Great Circle of Justice: North American Indigenous Justice and Contemporary Restoration Programs

In recent years restorative justice circles have received international attention by not only social movements, but also academia and public policy. Indeed, the power of the Circle has been influential since the beginning of 'this time' for Indigenous people in British Columbia in a myriad of applications.

However, Gray (2007), an American academic and an American Indian, argues that with this approach to justice restoration the practice is often watered down to meet the needs of governments and not those of the people they are to serve. "As the global movement of restoration expands, some programs often include compromises that erode such precision and autonomy, or are co-opted by lawyers or the state" (Gray 2007, pages 215-216).

Gray goes further to recommend that some Indigenous traditions would be appropriate as a smart practice as part of the resolution to creating a fair and sound community. Talking Circles can arguably be included as such Indigenous practices that would be "multidimensional" (Gray 2007, page 216). The Circle can be applied to several circumstances as a smart practice approach, insofar as being inclusive to all participants and traditional to Indigenous culture.

Gray contends that the current system of state structures does not support Indigenous Nations to reclaim their sovereignty and authority. "Many Indigenous scholars challenge the legitimacy of these imposed structures and advocate for the reclamation of power over their cultural and traditional indigenous forms of social control" (Gray 2007, page 216). Public sector participation in Talking Circles as equals for those involved would potentially circumvent the argument of this article and that of some mirroring Indigenous scholars.

To make Talking Circles a meaningful process for Indigenous Nations to support their sovereignty and self-determination, would require the public sector to take part in Circles in good faith as in keeping with traditional Indigenous culture; with respectful and constructive relationships as identified within the MARR mandate under the new relationship. This effort to participate positively in Talking Circles could also increase the social and economic outcomes of Indigenous Peoples insofar as the policies and programs that support them would be influenced directly by the people they are to serve.

Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment, and our Future

Over the past two decades there has been increasing recognition of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) which is "a gift from the Creator and provides instructions for appropriate conduct to all of Creation and its beings" (McGregor 2004, page 389) as it provides direction on how to live within the world and with one another. "Indigenous Knowledge (IK) comes from our relationship with Creation….No short answer exists for the definition of IK. They [the Indigenous Peoples included within the research] question the need for Eurocentric thinkers to define IK. In fact, definitions are often imposed whether Indigenous people like it or not" (McGregor 2004, pages 389-390).

Since IK has several applications including environmental issues, law, social welfare, health care and governance, it is appropriate to consider IK for policy, programming and practice within a public sector perspective.

Further, as IK cannot be separated from the people, non-Indigenous government must engage with Indigenous Peoples' dialogue to listen and learn from IK. Talking Circles, by their very essence facilitates this exchange of knowledge, experience and perspective. This in turn, allows for policy making, programming and government practice that can better serve Indigenous Nations to meet their personal best and that of the province.

"One of the fundamental tenants of IK is relationships: being in them, maintaining them, and acknowledging them" (McGregor 2004, page 405). It is within this ethos, that Talking Circles become the conduit for IK within the new relationship between the provincial government and

Indigenous Nations in British Columbia. It is also important to consider that "Indigenous Knowledge is not simply a product (knowledge) or commodity; it is a process as well" (McGregor 2004, page 391). This process can be facilitated through Talking Circles.

The work of academic, McGregor (2004) articulates the importance of Indigenous Knowledge and the necessity for government to learn from this wisdom. It is this insight that can be shared within Talking Circles as a means to ensure the mandate of MARR under the new relationship, as it influences policy.

Implementing Quality Circles in State Government

Quality Circles were developed in the private sector and have in recent years, been adopted in the public sector as a method to ensure continual quality improvement. This is especially vital as the public sector is under considerable expectation to operate under transparency and accountability.

A Quality Circle is defined as:

> A small group of people who do similar or connected work and who meet regularly to identify, analyze, and solve work-process problems…the circle chooses its own problems to work on and approaches those problems through a structured, problem-solving process (Denhardt 1987, page 304).

Denhardt, an American scholar, examines Quality Circles which can be seen as a western practice based upon the ancient practice of Talking Circles. There have been a series of mainstream media reports and articles that have sung the praises of Quality Circles regarding a number of positive results including: a cost-benefit analysis, improved employee engagement and improved organizational outcomes within the private and public sectors.

It can be argued that the positive endorsements of Quality Circles can also be applied to Talking Circles insofar as both types of Circles bring together individuals to address an issue in a collaborative manner. The Circles also ensure that all voices are heard and respected so that the process is optimistically influenced by all participants; this is an example of the mandate of MARR under the new relationship as it is based upon respect. Additionally, Talking Circles are an effort of quality improvement insofar as the Circle seeks to solidify relationships based upon respect, knowledge transfer and good will.

The Role Played by a Former Federal Government Residential School in a First Nation Community's Alcohol Abuse and Impaired Driving: Results of a Talking Circle

In order to better understand behaviours within an Indigenous community around alcohol abuse and impaired driving through a cultural lens, four Canadian Indigenous researchers participated in an exploratory Talking Circle with 15 young adults. It is worthy to note that all of the participants were of Indigenous descent.

The Talking Circle was held "according to traditional cultural practice" (Rothe 2006, page 348) and was led by an Elder. The group was asked to reflect upon the concerns as it affected themselves, their families and their communities, historically and today.

The study used a Talking Circle as a methodology for the study as it:

> Was consistent with the Indigenous philosophy of sharing, supporting and respecting life experiences through the use of oral traditions, personal interaction and group consensus. Narrative inquiry through Talking Circles has previously been used to document the Indigenous story, teach culture and tradition, promote health, provide spiritual counselling and healing and instill restorative justice (Rothe, 2006, page 349).

This rationale is also applicable to the work with the provincial government and the appropriateness for Indigenous-centered approaches to engagement.

The protocol for Talking Circles included an opening prayer, a smudging ceremony and the presentation of tobacco pouches as a gift of appreciation. The researchers were trained in traditional Talking Circles to ensure that the process was culturally relevant and sincere, and that it was not restricted by contrived limits.

Participants also signed an informed consent that outlined the purpose of the Talking Circle as it was an exploratory research methodology. This consent included a confidentiality clause and declared that the process was voluntary.

The Circle was asked three opened-ended questions and participants gave a detailed response in relation to their personal experiences. Participants were selected using a criterion sampling insofar as each had a personal encounter with the issue at hand. Participants received copies of the data at the conclusion of the Talking Circle for confirmation and further comment.

It was noted that the Talking Circle's approach:

> To research a First Nations community steeped in oral tradition of the people's culture provided in-depth accounts of experiences that would be unattainable in structured one-on-one interviews, or questionnaires….Talking Circles used in this study represents the people's lived experiences in one large First Nations community" (Rothe 2006, page 355).

As a smart practice, this same approach is appropriate for Talking Circles in British Columbia insofar as it meets Indigenous Nations where they are at, as the practice is a cultural norm within Indigenous traditions.

Literature Review Summary

Although the literature review does not include Talking Circles as a method of engagement specifically for the development of policy or programming within a government context, it does identify five key findings:

(1) The methodology of Talking Circles is appropriate within qualitative research as determined in the Becker article.

(2) Talking Circles, if entered into with good faith, have the potential of ensuring an Aboriginal voice in government policy, programming and practice as identified by Gray.

(3) Talking Circles can provide a conduit for a transfer of Indigenous Knowledge as outlined by McGregor.

(4) Circle work has become increasingly recognized in the public sector as a quality improvement vehicle as summarized by Denhardt.

(5) There is a foundation for the development of a basic protocol for Talking Circles that is appropriate for non-Indigenous participants to better understand the process as delineated by Rothe.

Based on these five key findings from the literature, the work reviewed provides a platform for MARR to align Talking Circles as a common practice within policy-making at the provincial level. While there is still much to be researched and reviewed, the current literature provides positive suggestions that Talking Circles can be used to advantage in public sector policy and programming in a government context and the beginnings of specific advice on how to do so.

JURISDICTIONAL SCAN OF SMART PRACTICE

This jurisdictional scan of smart practice provides recommendations for public sector organizations to implement their own series of Talking Circles; acknowledging that there is no single-best way to do so in all circumstances. In making this acknowledgement, the rationale for participating in Talking Circles at an organizational level can be said to remain constant, as the public sector seeks to engage with Indigenous Nations in a fluent approach.

It is with great intent that this project reviews other jurisdictions for smart practice and not for best practice.

> Best practice typically implies that the practice is widely believed to be either effective or cost-effective, and that it holds a place among more than one industry or sectoral high performers….[it] might also imply that it has been tested and found to be reliable and robust" (Campbell et al. 2006, page 29).

These variables are even more likely to diverge within the relationship between government and Indigenous Nations as the associations are between people who are unique. This is especially the case in British Columbia where there are over 200 diverse Nations of Indigenous Peoples. It is because of these distinct circumstances that a smart practice jurisdictional scan has been completed.

Smart practice is defined by Bardach as "an interested idea embedded in some practice" (Bardach, 2005, page 1). Bardach, an American scholar, argues that there is not such a thing as 'best practice' as the circumstances vary greatly and because the author may be bias in the recommendation. Additionally, Bardach expresses concern that such practices do not have sufficient measurements to verify the claims of 'best practice' as they cannot be replicated in other jurisdictions.

Government and Indigenous relations are a fundamental element of several public sector organizations including those dedicated to natural resources, social welfare and housing. Each ministry or agency has their own unique approach to relationships with Indigenous Nations; however, most operate under a similar vision of collaboration and mutual respect.

This effort of a shared vision and a renewed call for collaboration makes for a solid foundation for Talking Circles to move the partnership forward and to do so within the guiding principles of respect and partnership as articulated with the MARR mandate. The following scan provides information on federal and provincial Canadian agencies that currently do acknowledge Talking Circles or reference them in some form by virtue of current practice, recommendations for future use or provide gaps which Talking Circle appear logical to fill.

Government of Canada – Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)

In the early stage of this project, a thorough online search of the Canadian federal government did not find any mention of participation in Talking Circles. However, at the end of the research period, the Government of Canada introduced the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). This Commission is dedicated to the acknowledgement and recording of the Indian Residential School history, the need for healing and the necessity to move forward in a respectful way for both government and Indigenous Peoples.

The government of Canada established the Commission in part, to record the historical actions during the period in which the Residential Schools in Canada operated; from 1870 until 1996. The recording of these facts are currently underway. The recordings will create a historical account. The Commission will also establish a national research centre dedicated to the understanding of the Indian Residential School tragedy, so that a similar catastrophe will never happen again.

In order to capture the history of the Indian Residential Schools and to thus meet its mandate, the use of Talking Circles has been seen to be appropriate as it is the traditional methodology of communication. As individuals share their experience, it is heard not only by those present, including government, but it is also recorded forever so that others can share in the experience:

> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission uses Sharing Circles to gather public statements. The Circles are typically hosted by the TRC Commissioners. Participants share their Indian Residential School experiences. Up to 20 people can participate. As these

events often attract large audiences, participants may only speak for a limited amount of time (approximately five minutes). (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, via email).

The gathering of these statements from individuals and families who have been impacted by the terrors of the Indian Residential Schools is an example of Indigenous Knowledge (McGregor, 2004) because it ensures the sharing of Indigenous Knowledge using traditional methods. These methods include the oral traditions that comprise the practice of Talking Circles and the formation of the Circle itself.

Government of Canada – Indian and Northern Affairs

The federal government of Canada recognizes the self government of Indigenous Nations and as such, this declaration of self government is protected within the Canadian Constitution. Due to the fragmentation of colonization, Indigenous Nations are forced to re-establish themselves as individual Nations. It is the role of governments, both provincial and federal, to assist in this transformation.

The Canadian government has confirmed Indigenous Nations as being distinct, while at the same time, has acknowledged the devastating actions of past governments. Moving forward with the shared desire towards a mutual relationship based upon respect, governments now seek to assist Indigenous Nations in meeting their individual best. This objective is similar to MARR and the other BC provincial government bodies insofar as both seek to improve the lives of those of Indigenous descent.

Just as within the British Columbia provincial government, the Canadian federal government is aiming to restructure the relationship between Indigenous Nations and the government based upon mutual esteem. As respect is a paramount principle within Talking Circles, it is appropriate for both the provincial and federal government to participate in good faith. This participation in Talking Circles puts into practice the desire of shared respect within the new relationship.

It is only within a harmonious relationship that the tangible objectives of Indigenous self government, cultural sustainability, treaty negotiation and social and economic development will flourish. It is important to acknowledge that Talking Circles are only one tool of many that can be applied as a smart practice to reach these objectives. Other possible tools that can compliment Talking Circles include Indigenous Self Government which reflects traditional Indigenous culture within the public administration of natural resources, family law and justice. Talking Circles can be implemented in the practice of Indigenous Self Government insofar as they are a traditional cultural custom.

Government of Canada – Fisheries and Oceans Canada

The federal ministry responsible for Fisheries and Oceans has developed an Integrated Aboriginal Framework that outlines the mutually agreed upon vision for Indigenous Nations and Canadian government relations.

The objective of the framework is to be a tool for government staff as they establish and maintain positive working relationships with Indigenous Nations and other key stakeholders under their mandate that provides the management and protection of Canada's aquatic resources. The framework is also to guide future policy and practice in a strategic direction that reinforces a collaborative point of reference with Indigenous Nations. However, there is no mention about the participation of Talking Circles in the development of the framework, nor in the effort to maintain positive relations between government and Indigenous Nations.

The document identifies a vision of:

> Supporting healthy and prosperous Aboriginal communities through: building and supporting strong, stable relationships; working in a way that upholds the honour of the Crown; and facilitating Indigenous participation in fisheries and aquaculture and associated economic opportunities, and in the management of aquatic resources (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2006, page 3).

The framework document does not indicate if it was developed in consultation with Indigenous Nations. It does, however, speak to a plan to realize the vision with seven key strategies. These include building relationships with Indigenous Nations along with Indigenous capacity as it relates to the aquatic sector, while at the same time building capacity of the Department of Fisheries to serve Indigenous groups.

In order to meet the vision of the framework and sequentially achieve the outlined strategies the application of Talking Circles as a method of engagement would seem appropriate. However, it is not currently identified as such within the *Integrated Aboriginal Policy Framework* of Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

The British Columbia Treaty Commission
Our Sacred Strength: Talking Circles Among Aboriginal Women

The Treaty Commission is an independent organization responsible for the facilitation of treaty negotiations between Indigenous Nations in British Columbia and the provincial and federal governments. It does not negotiate treaties as it is not a form of government, but instead assists the process. In 1999, the Commission brought together 11 Indigenous women from throughout the province to "identify the information needs of Indigenous women and appropriate delivery systems" (BC Treaty Commission, 1999, page 5) as the Commission noted the under-representation of women in the process.

The focus group of women "urged the Treaty Commission to facilitate a series of 'talking circles' where women could voice their concerns and dreams for the future of their communities" (BC Treaty Commission 1999, page 5) during the treaty process. This in turn, would ensure more women's voices are heard during the route through treaty negotiations and to address issues such as health care and child care, in addition to the male-dominated issues of land and resources.

In addition, the focus group recommended that the Commission organize Talking Circles with women to share their vision for the future within the treaty process, along with identifying the challenges and opportunities along the way.

With the assistance in the form of a grant from the Minerva Foundation of British Columbia, the Treaty Commission published a film of a handful of Talking Circles involving Indigenous women across the province, sharing their perspectives on the journey. The goal of doing so was to empower Indigenous women to participate in the treaty process. An additional product of the Talking Circles is a set of guidelines to arrange a Talking Circle.

These guidelines include: providing a safe location, a leader with good facilitation skills, ensuring diverse participants and to provide concise and timely follow-up. These guidelines form the foundation of smart practice for public sector agencies, each identified by Indigenous women themselves.

Jurisdictional Scan Summary

The jurisdictional scan found that both the provincial and federal levels of government in Canada are making genuine steps towards establishing innovative relationships with Indigenous communities. This includes, in part, a meeting in the middle for both parties whether it is through the treaty process or Indigenous fishing. Talking Circles are an example of a method of doing just that; meeting respectfully 'in the middle'. In fact, the women included in the Treaty Commission's focus groups outlined in "Our Sacred Strength" (Treaty Commission) specifically requested government participation in Talking Circles within the treaty process.

The innovative participation of Talking Circles by government with Indigenous Nations is just beginning and the outcomes have yet to germinate within systemic public policy, programming or practice. However, as the TRC is committed to ongoing public education, acknowledgement and consultation about the Indian Residential School legacy, the opportunity to shape policy with Indigenous voices is growing.

It is in the best interest to the state of knowledge, society and government itself to pursue the opportunity of publishing the existing and informal practice of Talking Circles. Further, it is vital for government to build upon the momentum established under the new relationship and within the TRC in order to actualize the objectives of both the provincial and federal governments.

EXAMPLE OF SMART PRACTICE

The example of smart practice for the report is the initiative undertaken by the BC Housing Management Commission (BCH) in the autumn of 2007 to participate in a series of four Talking Circles in British Columbia. BCH sought to learn from Indigenous Peoples how to ensure that a new homeless outreach program would be uniquely Indigenous.

From a statistical analysis based upon regional homeless counts, it was clearly determined that Indigenous people are overrepresented among the homeless population.

> Based up the Metro Vancouver Regional homelessness count in March 2008, Aboriginal people represented 32% of the homeless population in the Metro Vancouver Region; Aboriginal people only make up 2% of the overall population (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 3 Ways to Home Executive Summary, 2008, page 4).

Equipped with statistics similar to those identified within the homelessness count in the Metro Vancouver Region, BC Housing and the government of British Columbia identified the need to establish an Indigenous-centered outreach program for Indigenous people who are facing homelessness across BC.

However, BC Housing wanted to ensure that the new program would appropriately meet the needs and abilities of this population. The Crown corporation sought the assistance of Aboriginal non-profit housing providers to host a series of four Talking Circles with a handful of Indigenous Nations represented.

The day commenced with an opening prayer, which often included a smudging ceremony, to ensure that the Circle was initiated in a 'good way'. A smudging ceremony involves the burning of sage to cleanse evil spirits away so the gathering can proceed. From there, while sitting in a circle, participants would state their name and indicate what Nation they were from, including who their ancestors were and what their totem is. Non-Indigenous participants were encouraged to share their name and any information they were comfortable sharing. There was on average, 10 individuals present, including three BC Housing staff for each Circle.

As eating meals together is important to Indigenous Nations, the group participated in a 'feast' after the Talking Circle. Food at the feast tended to be of western culture and just as with many cultures, within the Indigenous Nations the breaking of bread is of great significance. It reinforces the sense of collaboration, respect and commonalities for all present.

After the meal, a discussion was initiated with a question: 'How to make the Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program uniquely Indigenous?' It was BC Housing's role to listen as the

participants shared their thoughts and recommendations on the topic. BC Housing asked open-ended questions and paraphrased what they heard to ensure a consistent and correct understanding. Staff also took short notes that were supplied to the participants to further ensure clarity.

The Circle ended within two hours, concluding with a closing prayer and a declaration of appreciation by both BC Housing and the Indigenous participants. A small honorarium was provided to Indigenous participants by BC Housing as a token of appreciation for the sharing of their experience and knowledge.

It is because of these Talking Circles that today there exists the Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program with its distinctive program framework, performance measures, service agreements and mandate.

The Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program and the Homeless Outreach Program has housed over 9, 800 individuals since 2006 (BC Housing Management Commission, Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness, page 2). BC Housing has continued to nurture relationships with Aboriginal service providers who deliver the outreach program by hosting semi-annual gatherings to ensure the program is indeed meeting the needs of Indigenous individuals and families who are facing homelessness.

Most importantly, there is an Indigenous-centered government program that was determined by the Indigenous community through the active participation of government in Talking Circles. It is this approach, application and outcome that is a smart practice; it can be replicated in other jurisdictions based upon the need to engage with Indigenous people in a meaningful way. Also, it presents with tangible outcomes that meet the government's overall objective of a new relationship.

INTERVIEWS

Informational interviews were conducted to better understand the current operationalization of Talking Circles in the BC provincial government. Although very little has been published related to the practice of Talking Circles, the practice is presently taking place through a number of projects, including the development of cultural awareness within MARR, capacity building within the public service as it relates to Indigenous relations, and in some Indigenous youth leadership initiatives including the Unified Youth Collective. Informational interviews were conducted with members of the public service, BC Housing staff, educational leaders, non-profit leaders and self-identified members of the Indigenous communities.

The interviews with participants identified a handful of clear and consistent themes of how Talking Circles have been applied within the public sector. These three overarching themes consist of (i) Roles and Responsibilities associated with the Circle; (ii) Experience within the Circle; and (iii) Organizational Experience within the Circle.

Roles and Responsibilities

All participants were employed in the public sector either directly or indirectly through the BC public service, academic institutions, Crown corporations and non-profit agencies. The Provincial Ministries represented included: The Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, The Public Service Agency, Public Safety and Solicitor General, British Columbia Association of Friendship Centers, Camosun College and BC Housing.

Their work as it related to Indigenous and government relations included policy development, treaty negotiation and closing the gap on the socio-economic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Other duties included: improving relationships between the Crown and Aboriginal Nations and implementing the *Transformative Change Accord* (A tripartite agreement with the Province, the federal government and the First Nations Leadership Council representing the Indigenous Nations of British Columbia to close the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous Nations and other British Columbians, and to reconcile Indigenous rights and title with the Crown).

Within the Circle, all participants are equal. It is important that although their duties may be what brought the individuals to the Circle, it is very much a personal experience for the individual as they share their own perspectives.

Participants in this project shared that they welcomed the opportunity to share their individual experiences and that it allowed them to establish interpersonal relationships with others within the Circle. Interpersonal relationships are the foundation of the new relationship between Indigenous Nations and government.

Some Non-Indigenous participants stated that at first they did not feel entirely comfortable speaking from their own experience in the Circle as it is not customary in the government. However all stated that once the Circle progressed they felt welcomed and comfortable in the setting.

Personal Experience within the Circle

Not all participants who were interviewed had experience with Talking Circles in a formal way. However, nearly everyone had the personal benefit of participating in elements of Talking Circles during their professional careers; as an opening prayer before a meeting, for example.

Most participants had some experience in different types of Circles, typically around Learning Circles and some Restorative Justice Circles. Topics included how to enable urban Aboriginal economic development, increasing the public service's capacity to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities, restorative justice and peacemaking, and healing circles around the ramifications of residential schools.

One of the participants from the Public Service Agency of British Columbia is a Circle Keeper and is also a Cherokee/Choctaw descendant. She shared her lengthy experience from leading over 200 Circles and called it her "calling". The Circle Keeper identified a list of potential circumstances where a Talking Circle could be utilized.

Others have participated in Circles or have taken elements from the Circle process to inform policy and strategy development. Circles have also been a part of direct client services such as youth and halfway houses. Most of the work focused on restorative justice, education, peace-making and healing circles.

A handful of participants spoke about a particular Talking Circle in which they participated, where senior members of the public service gathered for a two-day meeting that included a blend of western and Indigenous practice and tradition. The Circle work was described as "life affirming", "relationship building", and as being able to "break down barriers" between government and Indigenous Nations.

This process was identified as having the potential to raise awareness within the public service on the new relationship and about the strategic policy to develop the internal capacity to better serve Indigenous populations. To do so, those involved must enter the process in good faith and be open to mutual learning to understand the unique needs and abilities of all Indigenous Nations.

One participant eloquently described this importance as "laying down the shield, let the head take a rest and share from the heart". It is obvious from this quote, that the Circle has especially personal impacts on participants. Further, the Circle encourages self reflection and consensus building.

All participants stated that their personal experience within the Circle served them well in their professional duties within the public sector insofar as it allowed them to better understand the

Indigenous culture. Additionally, a common theme was that the Circle encouraged participants to see situations from different perspectives and it provided for an education in Indigenous culture for Non-Indigenous participants. This education reinforced the appreciation and respect of Indigenous culture outlined within the MARR mandate and the new relationship.

Organizational Experience within the Circle

A common thread throughout the interviews was that most had participated in some sort of Indigenous cultural tradition, mostly involving the Circle. However, the work is not officially recognized within the public sector as being helpful to the objectives under the new relationship. It is anticipated that as the new relationship is in its infancy and as there has been very little empirical evidence on the subject, that there is not an official recognition of Talking Circles in the public sector.

A major finding of this report is the fact there is not an official recognition of Talking Circles within the provincial and federal governments.

Another universal comment about Talking Circles was the importance of sharing stories to establish respect within the new relationship as the stories made for "intense learning experiences for staff". Again, the significance of developing the internal capacity of the public service was acknowledged as being vital to carry out the mandate of the *Transformative Change Accord* and *the Métis Relationship Accord.*

A common theme through out the Interviews for this project, participants mentioned that currently there is a lack of capacity for stakeholders and government alike, to share their stories of policy, programming and practice. Therefore, within a Talking Circle practice, an opportunity to do so is presented.

Almost all participants spoke of the need to develop some type of protocol for public service employees to build internal capacity to better serve Indigenous Nations. One referenced the Asia-Pacific Training protocols within the provincial public service as an example for an Indigenous Training protocol. This would facilitate staff to be confident working "in two worlds", as one interviewee reflected. Other participants mentioned that having specific instructions about how to participate in a Talking Circle would be of particular help.

As there is the need for the public sector to be accountable and transparent, especially when fostering relationships within Indigenous Nations, there is a need to establish expected performance measures. This is a difficult task, as Talking Circles are focused on trust and relationships. There is an obligation for outcomes to be flexible to achieve the desired results.

To remedy this, some participants presented the idea of establishing measurements that are open and mutually designed; not biased by individual timelines or interests. Methodologies could include a Talking Circle debrief or anonymous surveys to determine if the process left people feeling respected, helped establish new relationships and assisted in developing a mutual understanding. This is truly the blend of two worlds, which one interviewee spoke of.

SUMMARY OF FOUR RESEARCH APPROACHES

From the four pillar approach of research for this project, some common themes are identified, although through varying degrees.

One of the most profound findings is that the women in the Sharing Our Strength Circles requested government participation in Talking Circles. Also, there wasn't any published academic material where government agents were full participants in Talking Circles, as most Circles were financially sponsored or witnessed by the public sector.

The literature review and jurisdictional scan did identify the germination of Talking Circles as a valid method for consultation with Indigenous Nations. Further, the example of smart practice presented the mainly untapped potential for measurable success with Talking Circles in the development of policy, programming and practice.

The informational interviews were particularly fruitful as they articulated the current situation within British Columbia related to the topic. Additionally, the interviews provided the insights of public sector employees who all articulated the interest in Talking Circles. Thus proving that now is the time for the provincial government to pursue the potential of Talking Circles as a logical methodology for shaping policy, programming and practice.

SECTION FOUR

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project aims to address the question: Can British Columbian government agencies better engage Indigenous Nations in British Columbia by participating in Talking Circles?

Based upon the literature review, jurisdictional scan, the example of smart practice and the informational interviews, four key findings and recommendations have been identified to answer the research question. They are presented for the client's consideration in order to inspire the client to develop more concrete actions relating to the use of Talking Circles in BC government practice.

> **Key Finding #1:** McGregor (2007) states that Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has several applications including environmental issues, law, social welfare, health and governance. It is then appropriate for government to utilize IK to better serve Indigenous Nations.
>
> **Recommendation #1:** Indigenous Nations have tremendous knowledge to share with government with regards to the development of policy, programming and practice. In order to meet the mandate set before government under the Transformative Change Accord, government must tap into the deep knowledge of the Indigenous Nations (IK) to meet this transformation. Therefore it is recommended that the Province of British Columbia formalize the participation in Talking Circles as a method of engagement. Talking Circles, by their very essence, facilitate IK transfer insofar as Talking Circles are the exchange of knowledge and experience in the oral tradition of Indigenous Nations.

> **Key Finding #2**: The literature review research for this project related to Talking Circles focuses on health care and restorative justice. However, no research could be found related to public sector participation in Talking Circles for other issues including the treaty process, housing and natural resources.
>
> **Recommendation #2:** Further research on the participation of government staff in Talking Circles within a British Columbian context would be of tremendous benefit to the provincial government as a public sector leader for Indigenous reconciliation and relations. It is recommended MARR inject funding within the academic community to secure targeted research on this topic which meets the BC Government's needs.

Key Finding #3: Government has not highlighted or published the participation of Talking Circles as a point of engagement between government and Indigenous Nations. Nor is there a formal protocol to support government staff to do so. A key finding from the interviews identified that there was very little consistency within the public sector related to the practice of Talking Circles. However there was a very clear desire to explore participation by establishing a formal procedure and a protocol geared towards and shared outcomes based upon the informational interviews.

Recommendation #3: It is recommended that the British Columbian government to establish a protocol for the public service to assist in the participation of Talking Circles for a point of engagement as a smart practice to shape policy, programming and practice. This protocol should be based on the further research proposed in Recommendation #2 and be completed by the 2014/15 fiscal year. The protocol should be monitored and administered by MARR or another appropriate public agency.

Key Finding # 4: Talking Circles take time to complete and at times there is competing agendas which are surrounded by expectations. Additionally, in order for Talking Circles to be effective in shaping policy, programming and practice there must be concrete performance measures.

Recommendations #4: The role of the government is to develop and implement a succinct project plan to insure the Circle's effectiveness, to manage expectations and to achieve consensus.

CONCLUSION

This project answers the question: Can British Columbian government agencies better engage Indigenous Nations in British Columbia by participating in Talking Circles?

Based upon the targeted literature review, the jurisdictional scan, and the example of smart practice and the series of informational interviews the answer to this question is simply: yes.

There is caution regarding the government participation of governments in Talking Circles:

1.) Talking Circles take time.
2.) It is difficult to manage stakeholder expectations once consulted.
3.) It can be challenging to achieve performance measures through a consensus based methodology like Talking Circles.

Through comprehensive planning all three issues can be remedied. An inclusive project plan which acknowledges the importance of Indigenous voices through Talking Circles along with concrete performance measures, timelines and action items circumvent these potential pitfalls of Talking Circles for government.

Further, government must consider in what circumstances it is appropriate for public sector participation in Talking Circles during the policy making process. This question is best answered by Indigenous Nations themselves as Talking Circles is their traditional cultural practice. Also for consideration, is the process for government participation in Talking Circles. Both of these questions are the natural progression for further research with MARR based upon this report, as related to Recommendation #3.

The Transformative Change Accord ushered in an opportunity for meaningful change within the new relationship between Indigenous Nations and government. It is time to build this relationship on a foundation of trust. To do so, government must be prepared to walk in the Indigenous world just as the Indigenous Nations have walked in the western world for over 300 years. To echo again the reflections of one research participant, there must be the "laying down the shield, let the head take a rest and share from the heart".

The literature review of the project indicates there is a need for recognition and transfer of Indigenous knowledge and for the overhaul of the historical system of government placed upon Indigenous Nations. As this is acknowledged within the mandate of MARR and the Transformative Change Accord, Talking Circles are a natural fit to facilitate this significant change.

Further, based upon a scan of smart practice within other public sector organizations, literature reviews, information interviews, and the example of smart practice it was found that there are already elements of Talking Circles within the government and Indigenous Nations relationship. However, this varies greatly from having government agents observe Talking Circles to full government participation.

Talking Circles are a smart practice in the development and maintenance of the new relationship, as the Circle is dependent upon the trust of all participants in order for the group to move forward in good faith, as equals and with clear, intended outcomes. Additionally, Talking Circles are a culturally relevant and strength-based Indigenous tradition. As the mandate of MARR is to close the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Peoples and other British Columbians, it is important to also establish that mutually agreed upon outcomes are fundamental to success.

As identified earlier, there are currently several elements of Talking Circles in practice within the BC public service. This speaks to the true commitment of staff to serve Indigenous Nations to the best of their ability. Staff articulate that they are prepared not only to enter into Talking Circles in a "good way", but that they are also ready to listen. This is the foundation of the provincial government and Indigenous Nations engaging positively in the new relationship.

APPENDIX D - Ethics Proposal

Principal Investigator: Lori Dennis

APPENDIX A- Recruitment Materials

Referral for Participants

Standardized Script for email, telephone and in-person referrals:

Dear Colleague,

As you are aware, I am currently completing my Masters in Public Administration from the University of Victoria. For my final research paper, I will be conducting a study of the *Talking Circles: An Indigenous Centered method of determining policy, programming and practice.*

The purpose of this study is to identify smart practices within the public sector and to conduct a narrow literature review. Recommendations will then be provided to the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation based upon the findings.

I am asking for your help, as I begin to collect my data. If you know of any individuals who can speak to their experience related to Talking Circles or government and Aboriginal relations related to policy, programming or practice, would really appreciate if you can put us in contact through an introduction or referral.

Commitment on the part of the participant will be a 60 minute interview with the possibility of follow-up questions and/or interviews.

I will be conducting research from January-May, 2010, and would therefore appreciate if you can refer to me any suitable individuals by February 15, 2010.

Thank you for your support in this endeavor.

With much appreciation,
Lori

--
Lori Dennis
MPA Candidate, University of Victoria
Email: ladennis@uvic.ca
Tel: 604-469-0057

Invitation to Participate

Standardized Script for email, telephone and in-person Invitations:

Dear [name],

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Talking Circles: An Indigenous-centered method of determining policy, programming and practice,* that is being conducted by myself, Lori Dennis

I am a Graduate student in the department of Public Administration at the University of Victoria and am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Public Administration.

The purpose of this research project is to provide recommendations to the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation related to Talking Circles. The research seeks to identify smart practices for government agencies to participant in Talking Circles as a method of engagement with Indigenous Nations.

Research of this type is important for theoretical and practical reasons. Currently, there has been very little academic research in the area of Talking Circles related to government policy, programming and practice. Additionally, research will better insure Indigenous-centered public programs and policies. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are knowledgeable about Aboriginal and government relations.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a brief telephone interview approximately 60 minutes long, with the possibility of follow-up conversations. Interview times will be held based on your preferences and availability.

The research will be conducted between March-May, 2010; therefore if you are interested in participating in this study, I would appreciate a confirmation by February 28, 2010.

Once I receive your confirmation, I will contact you to find a suitable time to have a conversation over the telephone. Compliance of your confidentiality and disposal of data will be explained to you in the interview as I will be seeking your verbal consent to participant in this research, as per the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board guidelines.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Thank you,

Lori Dennis
MPA Candidate, University of Victoria

Email: ladennis@uvic.ca
Tel: 604-469-0057

APPENDIX B- Verbal Consent Script

Before we proceed, it is important that I obtain your consent. I will read to you the consent form, which was emailed to you earlier, and if at any time you have questions or need further clarifications, please do not hesitate to interrupt me.

My name is Lori Dennis and I am currently a Graduate student in the department of Public Administration at the University of Victoria and am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters of Public Administration degree. I will follow-up this conversation with an email with mine, my supervisor and my school's contact information should you need to contact us.

I am conducting a study on the *Talking Circles: An Indigenous-centered method of determining policy, programming and practice.*

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have knowledge and expertise in Talking Circles or Indigenous and government relations.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an initial telephone interview approximately 60 minutes long, with the possibility of follow-up conversations. Interview dates and times will be held based on your preferences and availability.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including scheduling a date and time to have an interview. Otherwise, it is not anticipated that any inconvenience will be caused by your participation in this study.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research are to the state of knowledge, society and to the participants by having your efforts profiled for the benefit of others.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. Should you wish to withdraw, you must inform the researcher. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the analysis of the research.

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as friend/researcher or coworker/researcher relationship. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken:

- You will be under no pressure to participate and have the right to withdraw at any time.
- All interviews in the context of this study will be conducted in an objective, professional manner with no preferential or exceptional treatment given to the participant.

It is possible that we may need to schedule follow-up telephone interviews to gather more information. To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will ask you at the beginning of each session if you consent to the same conditions that you agree to at this time.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name will not be included in the research through the analysis or presentation of results. No malicious or incriminating information causing harm will be presented in the research results.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will not be protected as your anonymity cannot be guaranteed. For the credibility and meaningfulness of the analysis and results, it may be necessary to associate the name of the organization with the specific analysis.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: Directly to you and other participants, dissertation and class presentation, published articles, books, and at conferences.

This research may lead to a commercial product or service. The nature of this commercial use is a published articles and/or book.

Data from this study will be stored for future use by the researcher, myself, Lori Dennis. It will be stored in password-protected files on the researcher's computer.

Again, a list of individuals that may be contacted regarding this study will be emailed to you shortly.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Do you agree to be identified by name and/or organization's name / credited in the results of the study?

Do you agree to have your responses attributed to you by name and/or organization name in the results?
[Researcher to Note response]
Your verbal approval indicates that you understand the conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by myself.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

[Researcher to Note response]

APPENDIX C- Interview Questions

The following list represents the types of questions that may ask, categorized in the following themes (sub headings).

Interview Questions:

1.) What is your current role and duties as it relates to Indigenous and government relations?
2.) What experience do you have related to Talking Circles?
3.) Does your agency participate in Talking Circles between Indigenous Nations and government bodies?

        A) -If yes to question 3, what was the expected outcome of doing so?
        ii) -What were the factors to this outcome?

        B) -If yes to question 3, what is your opinion of the effectiveness of Talking Circles in terms of Indigenous Nations and government relations?
        ii) - What were the factors in this outcome?

        C) If no to question 3, why not?

4.) Do you have any further information or recommendations to provide the Researcher related to the topic?

APPENDIX D- University of Victoria Human Ethics Review Committee Approval Certificate

Human Research Ethics Board
Office of Research Services
University of Victoria
Administrative Services Building B202
Tel 250-472-4545 Fax 250-721-8960
Email ethics@uvic.ca Web www.research.uvic.ca

University of Victoria

Human Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

Principal Investigator	Department/School	Supervisor
Lori Dennis **Master's Student**	**PADM**	**Catherine Althaus**

Co-Investigator(s):

Project Title: Aboriginal Talking Circles: An Indigenous Centered Method of Determining Public Policy, Programming and Practice

Protocol No.	Approval Date	Start Date	Expiry Date
10-118	10-Mar-10	10-Mar-10	09-Mar-11

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.   Extensions and/or amendments may be approved with the submission of a "Request for Annual Renewal or Modification" form.

Dr. Afzal Suleman
Associate Vice-President, Research

10-118   Dennis, Lori

REFERENCES

Bardach, E. (1994). Comment: the problem of 'best practice' research. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *13*(2), 260-268.

Bardach, E. (2005). *Smart practices research*. Retrieved (2010, July 18) from http://archive.epinet.org/real_media/010111/materials/Bardach.pdf

Becker, S. (2006). Talking circles: northern plains tribes american indian women's views of cancer as a health issue. *Public Health Nursing*, *23*(1), 27-36.

British Columbia Housing Management Commission. (2010). *Breaking the cycle of homelessness.* Retrieved (2010, August 10) from http://www.bchousing.org/resources/BreakingtheCycle/Overview_fact_sheet.pdf

British Columbia Treaty Commission. (1999). *Our sacred strength: talking circles among aboriginal women*. Vancouver, Canada.

Campbell, C. (Ed.). (2006). *Comparative trends in public management: smart practices toward blending policy and administration*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canada School of Public Service.

Coates, K. (1996). A Drunken impulse: aboriginal justice confronts canadian law. *The Western Quarterly*, *27*(4), 453-477.

City of Vancouver. (2010). *Opening a dialogue*. Retrieved (2010, June 1) from http://olympichostcity.vancouver.ca/mediaroom/feature-stories/opening-a-dialogue.htm

Denhardt, R. (1987). Implementing quality circles in state government. *Public Administration Review*.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (Ed.). (2007). *An Integrated aboriginal policy framework*. Ottawa, Ontario: Communications Branch Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Gray, B. (2007). The Great circle of justice: north american indigenous justice and contemporary restoration programs. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *10*(2), 215-225.

Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. (Ed.). (2008). *Still on our streets*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness.

Government of Canada. (2009). Canadian Heritage Glossary. *Canadian heritage*. Retrieved (2010, May 21) from http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pam-map/guide/108-eng.cfm

Government of Canada. (2010). *Truth and reconciliation commission of canada*. Retrieved (2010, June 22) from http://www.trc-cvr.ca/

Government of Saskatchewan. (2005). *Creating a healthy, just, prosperous and safe saskatchewan: a response to the commission on first nations and métis peoples and justice reform*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Government of Saskatchewan.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. (Ed.). (2004). *Restructuring the relationship*. Ottawa, Ontario: Government of Canada.

Kirk, R. (1988). *Wisdom of the Elders: Native Traditions on the Northwest*. Vancouver: Douglas & Mcintyre Ltd.

McGregor, D. (2004). Coming full circle. *American Indian Quarterly*, *28*(3&4), 385-410.

Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation. (Ed.). (2009). *2009/10-2011/12 Service plan update*. Victoria, British Columbia: Government of British Columbia.

Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation. (Ed.). (2008). *The new relationship: moving forward into 2008*. Victoria, British Columbia: Government of British Columbia.

Petten, C. (2004). Companies committee to par program. *Windspeaker*, *21*(12), 28-30.

Rothe, J. et al. (2006). The role played by a former federal residential school in a first nations community's alcohol abuse and impaired driving: results of a talking circle. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2006, pp. 347-356.

Running Wolf, P. (2003). Talking circles: a native american approach to experimental learning. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *31*, 39-43.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2010). Talking Circles. Email. Retrieved (2010, June 28).

Tupper, A. (2010). Crown Corporations. *The canadian encyclopedia*. Retrieved (2010, May 29) fromhttp://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1ARTA0002048

United Nations. (2004). The Concept of Indigenous Peoples. *The United nations secretariat of the permanent forum on indigenous issues*. New York, USA.

Zapf, M. (2003). The Learning circle. *Tribal College Journal*, *15*(2), 52-58.