

**INDIGENOUS WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE REFLECT ON
THE POWER OF NATURE ENGAGEMENT**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Education In the Department of Educational
Psychology and Special Education School and Counselling Psychology University of
Saskatchewan Saskatoon

By

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ABSTRACT

Being in nature positively impacts overall health and psychological well-being. This study explored the narratives of three Indigenous female survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), and their experiences of healing while experiencing nature. The women were asked to reflect on their connections and experiences while in nature, and how they utilized nature as healing. Each participant engaged in an open-ended narrative interview while incorporating self-selected naturalistic photographs. The interviews and photos aided in the production of a composite narrative which encompassed three general themes of how these women experienced healing while in nature: (1) *Exploring Strength*, (2) *Finding Comfort in Mindfulness* and, (3) *Reconnecting to Spirituality*. The results of this research suggest that these Indigenous women, who experienced CSA, discovered healing in nature. The lived experience gathered in this study provides valuable information for survivors of CSA about how embracing nature can be healing in the aftermath of trauma. Implications for practice and further research were identified.

Keywords: childhood sexual abuse, nature healing, photo-elicitation, narrative.

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DEDICATION
For all survivors.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As an Indigenous woman, I have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA) which has added to my passion to discover and learn more about the effects of trauma and how survivors cope with and heal from their experiences. For years, I was interested in understanding and exploring the reason why individuals would commit sexual abuse. After further identity exploration and life experience, I decided to focus my energy and research on the survivors of CSA rather than the perpetrators. I am confident in my choice as I am drawn to the strength and resiliency that survivors of CSA demonstrate, what factors contribute to their healing, and specifically, how nature plays a role in their healing. Through this study, I hoped to empower the CSA survivor participants through interviews and representing their voices in my thesis document. The purpose of this study was to recognize the detrimental effects of CSA and to explore individual processes of holistic healing (nature engagement) for Indigenous women survivors. Holistic wellness may include physical, emotional, occupational, spiritual, intellectual, and social components. Furthermore, Indigenous spirituality is not a religion- it is a culture in which we look to our natural surroundings, our land, drawing on its healing powers in the face of our suffering.

According to studies, exposure to nature has beneficial effects on overall health and wellbeing. Exposure to our natural surroundings has been found to alleviate stress, improve psychological well-being, and increase healing time (Greenleaf et al., 2014). Strong associations have also been found between distance to green space, health, health-related quality of life, and life satisfaction issues (Trau et al., 2016). Nature contact and images of nature have been studied as corrective or remedial measures to counteract stress, anxiety, or to aid in the recovery from illness (Nisbet et al., 2011). Additional research is needed to understand how trauma survivors

use nature to support their healing. In Saskatoon, there is no known wellness program(s) that utilizes nature as healing for Indigenous women survivors of CSA

Survivors of CSA confront significant barriers to their voices and stories being heard, believed, and made visible. Sexual violence against a child has immediate negative effects and impacts their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing (Cotter et al., 2012). However, studies have identified that survivors of CSA display improved functioning and balance with the use of social support, spirituality, and resilience (Arias et al., 2013). Through photo-elicitation and narrative interviews, this study highlights how three Indigenous women survivors experienced nature as healing in the wake of CSA.

Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and present narratives of three Indigenous female survivors of CSA, and their experiences of healing while in nature. Readers are asked to recognize that “Indigenous” represents an expansive and diverse group of peoples. Among these peoples, there are approximately 60 languages, hundreds of culturally distinct groups, variability in practice of traditional spirituality and religion, variability of influence by traditional versus Western education, as well as all the variability that is in the population at large, including rural versus urban populations and so on (Canadian Psychological Association, 2018). The significance of this study is to acknowledge the stories and spirituality of three Indigenous women and emphasize how experiencing the natural physical environment can impact and support their well-being (Greenleaf et al., 2014).

As an Indigenous Cree woman, my traditional roots in spirituality help me find meaning and wholeness in nature settings. Indigenous spirituality is challenging to articulate. In Indigenous spirituality there is no separation between people and the land; Indigenous spirituality

embodies an interconnectedness and interrelationship with all life (Baskin, 2016). Therefore, this study will focus on how Indigenous women who have experienced CSA appreciate an interconnectedness to nature which promotes their healing and sense of wellbeing.

Considering the high incidence of Indigenous women experiencing CSA, there is a need to study how engaging in nature is an element of healing, specifically how experiencing nature promotes well-being and resilience in Indigenous female survivors. This study is significant as Indigenous women are nearly three times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than non-Indigenous people (Government of Canada, 2019). A study conducted by Banyard and Williams (2007) highlighted that non-Indigenous women who are survivors of CSA relate to the importance of connecting with their spirituality. Further, they identified a need for further exploration of resilience and other factors that promote how nature supports well-being and recovery for survivors of CSA in the middle and later stages of life (Banyard et al., 2007). The present study will address this gap by exploring the benefits of holistic healing arising from connections with nature for Indigenous women who have experienced CSA.

Researcher Interest

As a researcher and survivor of CSA, I am interested in the healing processes and resiliency of other Indigenous survivors. My interest lies in how these survivors make sense of their experience and their natural environment. I am interested in discovering how Indigenous women who have experienced CSA discover balance in nature which aids them in their healing journeys. The healing process is a continuum, which begins with an experience of survival and awareness of the fact that one lived through the abuse and made it to adulthood, and it ends with thriving (Bass et al., 2008). Participants in this study expressed their experiences of nature healing using photo elicitation, which will highlight their voices, journeys, and notions of

wellbeing. My personal exploration of nature means that I am comfortable, safe, and mindful of the role nature can play in healing processes. The cool, crisp outdoor air feels lighter which provides me with an overwhelming sense of happiness. Personally, nature offers a sense of healing in that it makes me feel healthy, joyful, and energized. Nature reminds me that it matters that I take time for myself and practice just ‘being here’ in the present moment.

It was not until I turned 32 years old that I began to understand my personal experience with CSA and how I experienced healing in nature. Before this time, I did not allow myself to deal with my emotions effectively. I coped in unhealthy ways because I was full of shame and fear, and I would not allow myself to ever be vulnerable. If I allowed or displayed vulnerability, I was reminded of the last time I was vulnerable. I felt weak, unimportant, and experienced a complete lack of control of my own being. While this journey has not been easy, I have continued to reconstruct my sense of self and my personal experience of healing while in nature. I wondered if there were other Indigenous women who shared similar experiences of holistic healing through nature engagement. As an Indigenous woman, researcher, and survivor of CSA, I feel that I have a deep cultural understanding and connection with other Indigenous women who have experienced CSA. In addition, as a graduate student in an applied psychology program, I have extended education and training in aiding others who have experienced sexual violence. Furthermore, England found that respondents who had been sexually abused as children indicated a preference for a counsellor who had personal experience as a survivor of CSA (Draucker et al., 2006).

I incorporated photo elicitation to facilitate my understanding of the very moment my participants experienced healing while in nature. Survivors who participate in photo elicitation are encouraged to revisit and retell their stories, which allows them to address negative cognitive

distortions to reduce self-blame as well as encourage positive meaning-making (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). Photo-elicitation, therefore, shows promise in being a rich experience sampling approach that provides a model for collaboration where participants' emotions and memories, not easily accessed through using words alone while interpreting complex concepts, are evoked (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). This method incorporates the participants' trauma into the larger context of their lives and may inform how nature is healing. This study not only allowed these survivors of CSA to have their voices made visible, but they were also able to have control over their stories the shared, as experts on their own journeys.

Terminology

This section will define each word for the purpose of this study and note if there are any words that are used interchangeably. Keep these definitions in mind as you read through this document. The impact of trauma early in life, including child abuse, neglect, witnessing violence and disrupted attachment, as well as later traumatic experiences, can be devastating. According to the *Trauma-informed practice guide* (TIP), it is important to note that there are several dimensions surrounding trauma (2013). This includes magnitude, complexity, frequently, duration, and whether it occurs from an interpersonal or external source (TIP, 2013).

Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA)

Defining the exact nature or meaning of CSA has proven to be difficult. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to use the following definitions to ensure clarity and respect for the survivors. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines CSA as “any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer (p.1). The terms sexual abuse and sexual assault are often used interchangeably. For this study, the following definition will be used: sexual assault is any

unwanted sexual act or behavior which is threatening, violent, forced, or coercive and to which a person has not given consent to or was not able to give consent (American Psychological Association [APA], p.1, 2019). Sexual assault is most often used in reference to a single experience (Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre [SSAIC], 2021). Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats, or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent (APA, 2019). For this study, both definitions will be used interchangeably.

Victim versus Survivor

Healing from CSA involves remembering and reprocessing traumatic past experiences. Therefore, throughout this study I will use the term “survivor.” This term identifies an individual who has been victimized by violence and acknowledges their strength in surviving the abuse. This definition highlights and acknowledges that the individual is refusing to become a victim of the negative effects of the abuse (SSAIC, 2021). Healing will refer to the survivors having to relieve the feelings and pain they were unable to feel at the time of abuse as they attempt to integrate the fragmented parts of themselves (SSAIC, 2021). The study aimed to not only explore these women’s experiences but to allow them to feel empowered by their involvement in this study.

Sexual Consent

For the purpose of this study, sexual consent will adhere to the Canadian Criminal Code definition of how sexual interference is perpetrated. Sexual consent is broken when any person, who, for sexual purposes touches, directly or indirectly, with a part of the body or with an object, any part of the body of a person under the age of 16 years (Government of Canada, 2019). Furthermore, any invitation to sexual touching for a sexual purpose, invites, counsels, or incites a

person (this includes directly or indirectly touching the body with an object) under the age of 16 years old is considered CSA (Government of Canada, 2019).

Nature

For this study, nature may be considered as the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth's elements (Oxford, 2019). Nature can also be considered from an Indigenous perspective. It was important for me to acknowledge the central feature of our Cree Indigenous philosophy and concept of *Miyo-wicehtowin*. *Miyo-wicehtowin* which involves human-nature relationships with the “land” and the environment or, more broadly, “Mother Earth” (Hatala et al., 2019). For this study, nature is inclusive of land, environment, physical setting, Mother Earth, and Earthly components. Readers are invited to view the interconnectedness that humans share with nature and all its components. Healing and coping with a past trauma includes self-discovery in order to achieve overall wellness. Benjamin and Looby (1998) identified that wellness is a conceptualizing process of six major dimensions: physical, emotional, mental, social, occupational, and spiritual. Our Cree concepts view different ways of being and notice that everything is in relation to our concept of the self.

Research Questions

My research study was guided by the following research question: How do Indigenous women, who have a history of CSA, engage in healing while in nature; nature engagement? I developed this question in hopes to explore forms of healing and provide additional knowledge about trauma experiences. In order for me to conduct this research, I chose to incorporate a thematic analysis approach using photo-elicitation and narrative data. There are staggering rates of CSA within Indigenous populations, and these reports are not always taken seriously. CSA

disclosure may be met with a dismissive, disbelieving, non-supportive, hostile, or nonprotective response which can be further traumatizing and may lead to long-term mental health impacts (O’Leary et al., 2010).

Thesis Overview

Current literature is presented in Chapter 2, which focuses on the incidence of CSA, the impact of CSA, and the vulnerability of Indigenous women to CSA. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to answer the research questions, including participant recruitment, data generation, data analysis, ethical considerations, and relevant quality criteria. Chapter 4 will present the results of the analytic process and how these women experience healing in nature. Lastly, Chapter 5 is a discussion of findings and how they connect to the extant literature. A section of this chapter focuses on implications for practice and recommendations for future research. Finally, I present a personal reflection.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will describe recent literature surrounding CSA including prevalence, effects, and intergenerational trauma impacts. Additionally, this chapter will feature literature on coping skills used by survivors of CSA, including literature on nature healing and Indigenous approaches to healing.

Intergenerational Trauma

My research topic is seeking the perspectives of three Indigenous women survivors of CSA; therefore, it is important to note the history of my people and the Intergenerational trauma that exists in modern day. The term ‘intergeneration trauma’ describes the psychological and emotional effects that can be experienced by people who live with trauma survivors (TIP, 2013). Before the arrival of the Europeans, Indigenous groups in North America were largely independent and self-governing, determining their own philosophies and approaches to cultural, economic, religious, familial, and educational matters (Bombay et al., 2009). Years of colonization and attempts at forced assimilation have led to the devastation of Indigenous communities and cultures (Bombay et al., 2009). For example, in North America, Indigenous peoples encounter high levels of adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, and household substance abuse (Bombay, 2009). These experiences of colonialism and attempted assimilation, i.e.: Residential Schools, continue to display the effects in Indigenous family dynamics, mental health, and in terms of overall wellbeing. Moreover, stressful events may have immediate effects on wellbeing, by influencing appraisal processes, coping methods, lifestyles, parental behaviours, as well as behavioural and neuronal reactivity which may also have long lasting repercussions on physical and psychological health (Bombay et al., 2009). Coping and adaption patters developed in response to trauma can be passed from one generation to the next

(TIP, 2013). There is now considerable evidence that the effects of trauma experiences are often transmitted across generations, affecting the children and grandchildren of those that were initially victimized (Bombay et al., 2009). Acknowledging the history of Indigenous peoples allows individuals and society to gain insight to our experiences as an Indigenous population and how those historical effects ripple into our experiences today.

Incidence of Child Sexual Abuse

There were approximately 14,000 child and youth victims of sexual offences in Canada in 2012, a rate of 205 victims for every 100,000 children and youth (Cotter et al., 2012). Arias and Johnson (2014) identified that 1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males are sexually abused before the age of 18. Sexual abuse against Indigenous children was also found to be prevalent. Statistics suggest that Indigenous women were a staggering five times more likely than the general population to have been victims of sexual offending (Government of Canada, 2019). Studies show that on average 25% to 50% of Indigenous women were victims of sexual abuse as children compared to a 20% to 25% average rate within the non-Indigenous population (Collin-Vézina et al., 2009). Most victims and perpetrators are known to each other. Additionally, there was a higher proportion of Indigenous people who self-reported being physically or sexually maltreated before the age of 15 (40%) than non-Indigenous people (29%) (Government of Canada, 2020). More specifically, a larger proportion of Indigenous girls (14%) self-reported experiencing both physical and sexual maltreatment before the age of 15 than Indigenous boys (5%) (Government of Canada, 2020).

Incidents of trauma are also affected by the different levels of trauma, the Trauma Informed Practice Guide (TIP, 2013) informs us of the different levels of trauma. Single incident trauma is related to an unexpected and overwhelming event such as an accident, natural disaster,

a single episode of abuse or assault, sudden loss, or witnessing violence (TIP, 2013). Complex or repetitive trauma is related to ongoing abuse, domestic violence, war, ongoing betrayal, and often involving being trapped emotionally and/or physically (TIP, 2013). This study places focus on developmental trauma, which results from exposure to early ongoing or repetitive trauma (as infants, children and youth) involving neglect, abandonment, physical abuse or assault, sexual abuse or assault, emotional abuse, witnessing violence or death, and/or coercion or betrayal (TIP, 2013). This often occurs when the child's care giving system interferes with healthy attachment and development as you will read below.

Childhood Maltreatment

CSA is often accompanied by other forms of childhood maltreatment. These forms of maltreatment may be expressed through psychological abuse, including acts of rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, and corrupting of a child (Draucker et al., 2006). There may also be forms of physical abuse which may include, but not limited to, hitting, kicking, punching, beating, and threatening to use or using a weapon (Draucker et al., 2006). Furthermore, CSA is more common in families in which one or both parents have a history of problem drinking or psychopathology; children are physically or emotionally abused or neglected; and/or familial conflict, including violence between parents or parental separation, is present (Sartor et al., 2003). Childhood maltreatment may be expressed in diverse ways which may be linked to a history of family dysfunction.

Childhood Sexual Abuse Prevalence

In Canada, the victimization rates of Indigenous peoples are extremely high. Studies have investigated the under-reporting of victimization among Indigenous people and the particularly high victimization rates among Indigenous women, youth, and persons with physical and mental

health issues (Collin-Vezina et al., 2009). Reasons for underestimating rates of sexual assault are due to fear, shame, embarrassment to report, and the variability in methodology, such as differences in definitions, and different types of screening etc. (Hanson et al., 2016).

Abuse characteristics vary among survivors and may often present themselves differently depending on experience(s). An important challenge for researchers is to explain how some but not all sexually abused children experience mental health symptoms during adulthood. Characteristics of the sexual abuse, including its severity, may explain variability in mental health among adults who were abused as children (O'Leary et al., 2010). This same study reported that the intrusiveness of the sexual act (e.g., penetration), injury, physical violence, whether the survivor was close in relation to the abuser (e.g., parent), and frequency are all factors that should be considered in relation to CSA survivors' mental health and wellbeing, in the present and future. Furthermore, it is often assumed that children will benefit by telling someone about their abuse. A disclosure that is met with a dismissive, disbelieving, non-supportive, hostile, or nonprotective response can be traumatic in itself and may lead to long-term mental health symptoms (O'Leary et al., 2010). Therefore, if there is a level of dysfunction within the family unit the child may have no other resources to disclose the abuse encountered.

Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Impacts of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Adverse childhood experiences have been described as potentially traumatic events that can have negative lasting effects on health and well-being. This includes maltreatment and abuse as well as living in an environment that is harmful to their development (Boullier et al., 2017). It is important to discuss how life experiences can change the way the brain functions, especially

when dealing with trauma. To understand the life lasting effects of CSA, it is important to examine how these traumatic events impact the human brain (Levenkron, 2007).

A child's earliest impressions reside in the limbic system, the collective name for structures in the human brain involved in emotion, motivation, and associating emotion with memory (Levenkron, 2007). Furthermore, when a child experiences sexual abuse, the result may be the integration of distorted beliefs into these schemas or the creation of new disruptive schemas (Owens et al., 2001). These cognitive distortions may then generate psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, hyperarousal, and fear. Owens et al. (2001) highlighted that distortions in the areas of trust, power, esteem, and intimacy may produce additional symptoms of psychological distress. Understanding the dynamics of cognitive distortions may aid survivors of CSA in their healing journey.

Emotional, Mental and Physical Health Effects

From the moment an abusive act takes place, children may experience a variety of physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms (Roberts et al., 1999). Childhood sexual abuse is linked to mental health concerns including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as well as teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and domestic violence (Deepa et al., 2018). Women with CSA histories have been shown to have more physical health complaints, including higher rates of chronic pain, gastrointestinal problems, obesity, and cardiopulmonary symptoms, compared to women without such histories (King et al., 2015). There are four identified parameters of experience: behavior, affect, somatic sensation, and knowledge. When an individual experiences a traumatic event, these parameters of experience can become disconnected as a defense against overwhelming affects (Draucker et al., 2006). CSA often results in detrimental effects to an individual's overall health and wellbeing.

Behavioral Effects

Every child that experiences CSA has vastly different experiences and responses. Children may not be able to acknowledge the abuse as it occurred or may be too ashamed to report it to an adult (Hanson et al., 2016). Young children may not always understand or have the verbal or cognitive capacity to recognize their experience as abusive as their brains are still developing (Hanson et al., 2016). Behavior problems in children associated with child sexual abuse can include nightmares, disruptive behaviors (e.g., physical and verbal aggression), clinginess, and fearfulness (Roberts et.al., 1999). As these abused children reach adulthood depression appears to be the most reported effect of CSA (Roberts et al., 1999). Research has demonstrated that sexually abused children are reported to exhibit greater frequencies of sexual behaviors than normative, however, sexual behavior problems are not a definitive sign of CSA (Hanson et al., 2016). Research on CSA it is needed to educate and support prevention efforts to protect young, vulnerable children.

Attachment Effects

The most important attachment is a young child's healthy developing relationship with at least one caregiver. Attachment theory suggests that when a parent or caregiver violates this trust the child learns that their environment cannot meet fundamental needs (Musliner et al., 2014). Research shows that when a child is sexually abused by a parent or caregiver they may be unable to accurately judge the extent to which others are trustworthy in their adult life (Musliner et al., 2014). This means that when the parent perpetrates the sexual abuse, it harms a child's lifelong ability to establish trusting, intimate relationships (Karakurt et al., 2014). Therefore, as the child matures into adulthood, they may form friendships or relationships with people who continuously betray or violate their trust, thereby adding to, rather than protecting against,

emotional problems (Musliner et al., 2014). Furthermore, addressing non-offending family members is another concern as survivors of CSA struggle with issues in relationships with a parent or parents who did not protect them (Draucker et al., 2006).

Long-Term Effects

Long-term effects related to CSA are staggering as they are deep in the core of the survivor. Childhood sexual abuse is a trauma that effects the development of a women's identity, self-concept, and belief system (Duncan, 2004). Studies examining the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse and related stressors have found an increased risk for outcomes such as substance use and misuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide, and numerous other health and social problems (Dube et al., 2005). A study by Bowland et al. (2012) provides evidence that over 70 percent of childhood sexual abuse survivors experience re-victimization and continuing abuse throughout adulthood. Additionally, these long-term experiences may result in an impaired sense of self and interpersonal functioning, cognitive distortions, emotional distress, and avoidance behaviour (Hanson et al., 2016). CSA has been proven to have long-term effects on survivors and their overall mental health and wellbeing.

Research indicates that survivors of CSA develop various ways of coping. Childhood abuse may create a situation of adult vulnerability in relation to the ability to cope with current life stressors (Gall, 2006). Avoidant coping represents the most frequently used strategy by both male and female survivors in response to CSA (Phanichrat et al., 2010). A study by Gall (2006) identified that coping responses to the situation of abuse appeared to fall into two categories: (1) strategies aimed at preventing the person from being overwhelmed by intense feelings (e.g., avoidance), and (2) strategies aimed at managing feelings of helplessness and a lack of control

(e.g., reframing). Therefore, coping strategies may include the survivor avoiding triggers such as a sight, sounds, touch, smell, or feeling which remind the survivor of a traumatic experience.

Women with a history of CSA are at greater risk of developing alcohol use disorders (Evans et al., 2020). Studies show that there is a high correlation between being a CSA survivor and substances. The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Addiction (2020) recognize that early childhood experiences shape our minds and play a large role in how we interact with the world. Furthermore, they describe that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can increase the risk of physical and mental illness later in life, including vulnerability to addiction. CSA has also been linked to elevated rates of adolescent alcohol use, regular smoking, nicotine dependence, and cannabis use and cannabis use disorders (Sartor et al., 2003).

Survivors of CSA often experience elevated feelings of negative mental health concerns in adulthood. Specific problems in adulthood that are associated with CSA are listed, but not limited to: addictions, anxiety, depression, body image concerns, sleep, self-image, sexuality, and chronic pain. Other affected areas are fearful thoughts and behaviors, memory impairments, along with challenges with trust issues and parenting and relationship issues. Revictimization of the self or others is also impact of CSA (Duncan, 2004). CSA appears to correlate with depression particularly strongly among females (Signal et al., 2013). This same study (Signal et al., 2013) showed those who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood were more severely depressed, utilised coping styles that were less optimistic, and reported a greater likelihood of using drugs to mitigate negative emotional states. Furthermore, dissociative symptoms which include emotional numbing, derealization, depersonalization, and out-of-body experiences that happen during trauma have been found to predict later Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Phanichrat et al., 2010). Depression and PTSD symptoms are common amongst CSA survivors.

Experiencing a trauma such as CSA affects physical wellbeing and mood in a variety of ways. CSA exposure may impact physical health through a variety of pathways, including health behaviors (e.g., smoking), chronic experiences of stress, or early dysregulation of stress-response systems (King et al., 2015). Mood is linked with physical health and is known to be an integral component of daily life and strongly influences feelings of happiness, appreciating the moment, coping with stressful situations, and quality of life (Barton et al., 2010). It is known that children who experienced traumatic events or have a history of abuse and maltreatment show abnormalities in the regulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis – the main neuroendocrine stress response system (Kamiya et al., 2016). Moreover, the HPA dysregulation can increase susceptibility to developing autoimmune disease, mood disorders, chronic fatigue, obesity, fibromyalgia, and cardiovascular risk factors such as increased heart rate, postural hypotension, and glucose dysregulation (Kamiya et al., 2016). These studies demonstrate that CSA is a significant public health concern.

CSA survivors often report displaying intimate partner relationship issues during adulthood. Survivors of CSA may experience difficulties that disrupt relationships, prevent the development of appropriate ways of expressing affection or other emotions in intimate relationships, and interfere with the development and establishment of a positive identity and self-concept (Duncan, 2004). Negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and disgust during sex are more common among adults with who have experienced CSA than those who have not, and may impact their physiological response to sex (Easton et al., 2011). Furthermore, women who experienced penetrative CSA were more likely to report more sexual dysfunction symptoms than women who did not experience penetrative CSA (Easton et al., 2011). Reactions to intimate

relationships among CSA survivors vary, however the impact of their physiological response is similar.

CSA has been associated with re-victimization in adulthood. It is estimated that CSA doubles or even triples the risk of further victimization compared to those without a CSA (Papalia et al., 2017). Adult women with a history of CSA are known to experience greater distress in response to sexual assault than those who have been sexually assaulted without a prior history of CSA (Field et al., 2001). A study by Papalia et al. (2017) found that female victims with medically confirmed CSA were five and seven times more likely to have been re-victimized for a sexual offense, and three and two times more likely to have been re-victimized for a violent offense, respectively, relative to comparisons to others without a known history of abuse. In addition, there is evidence that CSA predicts adolescent or precollege victimization (Krahé, 2000). Therefore, experiencing a history of CSA may suggest future risk of experiencing violence.

Survivors of CSA are at risk for developing a range of effects both immediately and at subsequent life stages (Valentine et al., 1993), although reactions vary. While some reactions may be mild, others may be life threatening, and severely debilitating. Now that we have discussed how damaging a CSA experience is or can be, we can explore how women survivors of CSA interpret their experiences and what resources they utilize to aid them in their healing journeys. The next section will highlight the importance of survivors' resilience, self-compassion, and mindfulness. A study by Valentine et al. (1993) suggests that stressful childhood sexual experiences may not inevitably lead to an abnormal outcome if a child can develop a sense of purpose and a satisfying life task appropriate to their nature. With a focus on

self-compassion, resilience, and mindfulness we can begin to explore how some survivors heal from the impacts of CSA.

Coping with Childhood Sexual Abuse

Resilience

There is much research surrounding ACE and how these experiences affect the lives of youth and their development into adulthood (Boullier et al., 2017). Resiliency is a process rather than a compilation of protective factors, moreover, to be resilient one must be exposed to a traumatic or stressful situation, then respond in a way that protects them from negative traumatic experiences (Bogar et al., 2006). Trauma response is different for every individual. When survivors experience the process of reconstructing their sense of self and finding meaning in the wake of their traumatic experiences, they tend to fare better than do those who view themselves as victims, blaming others for what happened to them (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). Additionally, one factor shown to be associated with resilience in CSA survivors is the survivor's perceptions of the availability and quality of emotional support (Musliner et al., 2014). Therefore, as children develop into adulthood, they may be able to access certain protective factors such as coping strategies (i.e., patterns of protection: fight, flight, freeze, fawn), stable living situations, and social or caregiver support (Hanson et al., 2016). This study worked closely with Indigenous women to explore and understand nature healing. Given our cultural history of acute and chronic stress and trauma, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated enormous resilience (Bombay et al., 2009). Survivors may struggle in different areas of their lives due to CSA, but they may also display incredible resiliency in the face of adversity.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is conceptualized as an alternative way of responding to the self in times of distress, whether that distress is caused by something that the individual has done or is something that is completely beyond their control (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion involves the understanding of one's own pain and suffering and the knowledge that their pain is part of the human condition, and an attempt to alleviate one's own pain (Neff, 2003). Often when an individual thinks of compassion, it is seen as a motivation or as an emotion. Compassion is motivating because it can mean having the desire to help others by providing relief to those who are suffering; it is emotional because it involves feelings of sympathy and concern (Gilbert, 2005). Compassion is at the core of what it means to be human, and self-compassion is an adaptive way of relating to the self with kindness when experiencing personal failures and difficult life events (Neff et al., 2010). Compassion has a generalized assumption of only treating others with compassion, whereas, showing ourselves self-compassion is critical for our wellbeing and health.

Self-compassion has three elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Brown, 2010). Self-kindness is being warm and understanding towards ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism (Brown, 2010). Self-kindness entails treating oneself with care and understanding instead of judging oneself harshly in the face of negative life events (Neff, 2003). Common humanity recognizes that suffering and feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience (Brown, 2010).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated (Brown, 2010).

Mindfulness is a state of awareness of thought and emotion, it encompasses being aware of or bringing attention to this moment in time, deliberately and without judging the experience (Collard, 2014). Mindfulness requires that we acknowledge our suffering and let ourselves experience it (Neff, 2012). Additionally, Schmidt (2004) mentions that the mindfulness concept is outlined through a set of mind and heart qualities. Mindfulness is strongly related to compassion, and it is compassion that serves as a source for all intentional healing (Schmidt, 2004). Moreover, mindful awareness of difficult situations makes space for mental clarity and perspective (Neff, 2012). Combining a state of mindful awareness and an exposure to a nature setting may provide restorative benefits.

Nature Healing

From an overview of published studies, a significant gap in the literature emerged regarding the potential therapeutic and protective effect of nature engagement (NE) in individuals with ACE such as CSA (Touloumakos, 2020). Exposure to nature plays an important role in human wellbeing and wellness. Studies suggest that the natural environment is a central component in facilitating change (Revell et al., 2014). Researchers have begun to examine the extent of human exposure to nature in our daily lives and how decreased contact with nature compromises our well-being. Trau et al. (2016) expressed that our preference for natural beauty and scenic landscapes is due to the significant role these features have played in our evolution. Nature is not only important to our emotional health but also to our sense of togetherness or connection to one another (Trau et al., 2016). Nature and natural settings have well-documented relaxation, healing, and restorative benefits (Nisbet et al., 2011). Exposure to nature may provide a balance between our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self.

Studies indicate that having a connection with nature is associated with an overall greater wellbeing. A strong connection with nature may be associated with positive emotions and greater well-being (Nisbet et al., 2011). Theoretical explanations for this have posited that non-human nature may: 1) restore mental fatigue; 2) trigger deep reflections; 3) provide an opportunity for nurturing; and 4) rekindle innate connections (Brymer et al., 2010). Touloumakos et al. (2020) suggested that NE can positively impact the physiological and psychological health of children who have experienced trauma, opening the door to the potential beneficial effects of nature and inducing a retroactive effect. Wellness is often associated with physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, environmental, and occupational dimensions of living. A study by Bymer et al. (2010) discovered that both emotional wellness and the ability to reflect on a life problem were enhanced by exposure to actual and virtual nature as compared to urban settings.

The spiritual value of non-human nature has also been explored from various traditions including Hinduism, Sufi practice, Indigenous life practices, Tibetan Buddhist meditation, Taoist practices, Buddhist tradition, and Western philosophical conventions (Bymer et al., 2010). The *National Aboriginal Health Strategy* (NAHS) defines health as: “Not just the physical well-being of the individual but the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the whole community” (Ganesharajah, 2009, p. 7). This is a whole-of-life view which includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.

Indigenous Approaches to Healing

This section explains Indigenous teachings such as the Cree Medicine wheel and how I used this understanding to create a balance for my personal connection with the land and how these Indigenous women experienced healing in nature. Please note that the Cree Medicine wheel is often used as a contemporary tool for psychoeducation. In Chapter 4 you will read about

the many connections and comments made by the participants about how they ‘went back’ to their culture and revisited teachings that were passed on to them from their family of origin. This section explores holistic healing using the land.

Indigenous teachings

As an Indigenous Cree researcher, it is important that I incorporate the Cree Medicine Wheel and describe how it contributes to our wellbeing. Exploring the Cree medicine wheel highlights my own spiritual beliefs as a Cree woman. It is important to recognize our unique ways of healing and how we incorporate our land as a healing ground. A study by Hansen (2018) gathered elders’ teachings as it pertained to Cree connection with the land:

Everything is spiritual: the trees are alive, the grass, the rocks, they have a spirit. The animals, they have a spirit and so the ceremonies are based on those teachings, like the things that we do, it was for a purpose; ... the purpose is spiritual. We didn’t use the bible, so we used the feather, because that feather teaches us; or the rock, it affects every one of us and it is spiritual. These are the kinds of things that helped the Cree people, and I hope that they continue. ... We have to use the spiritual part, the spiritual side, when we do our work and in the conflict resolution and in peace that’s what we’re asking for. If you understand the wind [makes a circular movement with his hands] to blow the bad things away, to blow in the good things into your mind—when you’re doing that, that’s what the Elders do; one of the grandfathers will help you with that process.

As Indigenous Cree people we conceptualize health as a holistic understanding of wellbeing. Wellness models for Indigenous peoples extend beyond the individual to include balance and inter-relationships among families, communities, land, nations, and ancestral ties connecting past, present, and future generations (Hatala et al., 2019). Please note that there are

many different cultural versions of the Medicine Wheel (i.e.: meanings, colors etc.). The Cree Medicine Wheel integrates the four directions to help each person to rediscover and find the way back to his or her own path (Mawhiney et al., 2011). East is depicted by spring; spring is a healing season and is represented by red, because the roots are renewing themselves as the earth renews herself (Mawhiney et al., 2011). Teachings from the East direction bring a message of peace and harmony. The South is a direction that encompasses summer, time, relationships, and the sun (Mawhiney et al., 2011). The South is represented by yellow, and it is during this direction that we experience patience, sitting quietly with our feelings, thoughts, and spiritual ways. West is represented by black, a symbol of respect, reason, water, and fall (Mawhiney et al., 2011). This direction enhances our inner life and humility, it is a time of reflection. The North, is represented by white, caring, movement, and air (Mawhiney et al., 2011). This direction involves a level of interaction with family, school, communities, and the nation and time for us to build on how we communicate (Mawhiney et al., 2011). Lastly, our center, is represented by Green, a symbol of Mother Earth. Our center is a symbol of balance and listening, we are in touch with our inner spiritual fire (Mawhiney et al., 2011). According to our Cree Indigenous conception, people are healthy when all four components are balanced.

A study reviewed by Cey (2002) recognized a definition of Mino-Pimatisiwin. A personal healing, learning and growth meaning of life that translates to “the good life” (p.198). He describes this Indigenous approach to seeking wholeness and balance among all aspects of the self and society. A harmony that is within oneself and the world that intends lifelong growth and development along with healing and restoration (Cey, 2002).

Holistic Health

Indigenous peoples holistic view of health and healing involves a process through the Medicine Wheel which is relevant for my study due to the nature of wellbeing of Indigenous women. The Canadian Psychological Association [CPA] (2018) has responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report [TRC] in regard to Indigenous mental health. According to the CPA, the profession needs to: acknowledge accountability for harms done to Indigenous Peoples in Canada on the part of the profession of psychology, including an articulation of the specific harms done and a formal apology to Indigenous Peoples in Canada on behalf of the profession. The profession also needs to develop a position statement providing direction on how to move forward toward reconciliation between the field of psychology and Indigenous Peoples, and how psychology can support Indigenous Peoples in Canada moving forward. As a student enrolled in a professional psychology training program, I feel that this study may aid towards supporting Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the CPA recognize the importance of the connection to the land within Indigenous concepts of self and healing, and the relevance of the natural environment to healing and treatment (CPA, 2018). Moreover, this study explored how nature may be used as healing for Indigenous women.

Land-Based Healing

The idea of healing with the land involves a deeper level of connection between humans and our physical environment. Indigenous communities tend to perceive and understand the land in ways that are spiritual and healing in nature (Hansen, 2018). Indigenous peoples have a land-based education system that emerges out of their own worldviews and perspectives, which need to be applied to research concerning Indigenous cultures. By incorporating how the land is meaningful to Indigenous peoples this study created a backstory of the connection we share with our natural environment.

There is abundant research that pertains to the immediate and long-term effects of CSA. Survivors' mental health issues are a significant cause for concern as they range from mild to severe and can have lasting effects well into adulthood, which may include intergenerational trauma (Robbins et al., 2011). As noted, the immediate and long-term effects of CSA are detrimental to a survivor's health and wellbeing. However, not only does CSA impact the survivor, it continues to affect our Nations and broader communities. Continued research that informs prevention and intervention efforts to ensure Indigenous survivors of CSA have access to the best quality of life is critically important. Furthermore, Indigenous perspectives and healing methods need to be considered when dealing with Indigenous populations, particularly with women who have experienced CSA.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes qualitative inquiry and how a general narrative method was suitable for this study. It also highlights my interest in this phenomenon while exploring epistemology and Indigenous methodology. This qualitative study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to understand the narratives of three individual Indigenous women who had experienced CSA and oriented to nature engagement. These narratives were thematically analyzed to create a single narrative of nature healing. Participant recruitment, data generation, and data analysis will be described. I will also explain how photos were used to prompt the generation of rich accounts of the phenomenon. Issues related to trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also identified.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative inquiry is an umbrella term for various research approaches that place emphasis on exploration, description, and/or interpretation of individual or societal experiences (Merriam, 2002; Smith, 2003). Moreover, the research and data generation process is generally inductive in nature (Merriam, 2020). Qualitative research can give diverse and neglected populations a voice in the research literature (Mattar et al., 2014) and may also be used to improve individuals' lives by informing interventions and advocating for social change (Creswell, 2005). These outcomes may be achieved by creating space for survivors of CSA to share their stories and participate in creating a narrative of nature healing. My research explored experiences and themes of nature healing from the perspective of three Indigenous women survivors of CSA, which suggested implications for future research and intervention.

Epistemology: Social Construction

This study was an investigation of nature engagement stories, shared by Indigenous women survivors of CSA, that were co-constructed between myself and the participants. A social constructivism paradigm allowed me to research the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge as it pertained to the lived experiences of participants (Crotty, 1998). Individuals who approach research from the social constructivist paradigm assume that human beings seek meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2009). This approach highlights that our social world is subjectivity experienced and there are many social contexts which inevitably impact individuals' meaning making (Crotty, 1998). Within this study, I recognized that each participant, as an Indigenous woman survivor of CSA, was an expert in her own experience with her own understanding of healing while in nature.

Indigenous Methodology

In Chapter 2, I highlighted my synthesis of the literature on intergenerational trauma and the history of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous scholar Wilson's (2001) explained that Indigenous ontology is about how people see the world and influence their understanding of what exists, and vice versa. It is based on an understanding that there are many ways of knowing that are directly and indirectly related. It is important to recognize that Indigenous researchers are expected by their communities and institutions to have some form of historical and critical analysis of the role of research in the Indigenous world (Smith, 2012). I feel confident that my general narrative thematic approach is suitable for understanding the experiences of Indigenous women survivors of CSA as it provided a relational space for Indigenous women survivors of CSA to share their unique stories and meanings of healing in nature.

Narrative Structures

Narrative research is very much tied to the quest for knowledge about identity and the self (Moen, 2006). The act of telling one's story, including the choices made about how, when, and to whom the story is told, reveals the function of narrative (Bamberg, 2012). Narrative as a method reflects a general approach to inquiry that assumes that individuals attribute meaning to the events and the objects in their world, and that the meaning that is conferred is subjective (Bamberg, 2012). Narrators self-reflect and establish a connection between past and current circumstances, thereby making meaning of problematic live events and engaging in a healing process (Bamberg, 2012). A general narrative method provides a framework for understanding the past events in one's life and plans for future action (Riessman, 1993). By applying general narrative principles in my study, I created a space for participants to express their unique experience(s) and subjective meanings regarding their experiences of healing from the impacts of CSA while in nature settings.

For this study, I gathered stories of nature engagement from Indigenous women who were sexually abused as children. There are many types of techniques and approaches to narrative storytelling, but this study focused on actual event(s) and photo(s) to facilitate participants' story telling about nature as healing. Kurtz (2014) noted that stories consist of three dimensions: form, function, and phenomenon, and are about transforming the participants' experiences to aid with identity construction. This study used individual stories to bring together shared experiences of nature engagement and used those narrative expressions to examine one or more variables that explained the experience of nature healing.

Stories often consist of conflicts, struggles, a protagonist, and a plot; however, in my study, the stories focused on the interactions these survivors experienced with nature, identity continuity (past, present, future), and the situation (place) where they had experienced growth

and healing. I used a general narrative approach because it is important to highlight storytelling through lived experience. This may be accomplished by using the survivors' verbatim expressions to gain a deeper understanding of their experience. Using a narrative method allowed me to explore my interest in healing experiences. I am aware that each person's experience of healing is unique and complex, and I wanted to learn specifically about nature healing. My personal narrative of healing may be different from those of my participants.

Indigenous Storytelling

Indigenous cultures are based on oral history (Indigenous Awareness Canada, 2020). Storytelling is a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies and research approaches (Iseke, 2013). In my personal experience as an Indigenous person, there is an understanding that the listener would already have some context of the story being told. This may tie back to Intergenerational trauma as explain in Chapter 2, as Indigenous people understand one another on a spiritual level. It was important for me to incorporate Indigeneity into my research. I am connected to these stories; these stories are connected to a larger, ongoing collective lived story of my People. One of the most visible examples of this connection would be to acknowledge Intergenerational trauma. My research question was consistent with Indigenous storytelling because I wanted to explore other forms of healing through the narratives and voices of Indigenous women. I wanted to create a study that allowed for their voices to be heard and represented.

Storytelling ceremonies allow for the expression, affirmation, and sharing of Indigenous heritage and culture to successive generations. Traditionally, at the close of each ceremony, after food gathering and preserving, the community gathers to celebrate through dance, song, and the telling of legends, mythical stories, and clan histories (Indigenous Awareness Canada, 2020).

Storytelling reconnects Indigenous Peoples with the land as these stories are connected and defined by the land, language, and Nation of the people (Datta, 2018).

Data Generation

As noted, two methods, photo elicitation and interviews, were used to generate narrative data for this study. Photography has the potential to be a visual language with which we can chronicle and represent one's reality (Close, 2007). Interviews were semi-structured to elicit further information regarding the photographs and what they meant for the participants. Using these two methods in conjunction yielded a deeper understanding of how Indigenous women survivors of CSA experienced healing qualities through nature engagement.

Participant Criteria and Processes

A large family of viruses labelled COVID-19 (Coronavirus) resulted in a pandemic that affected the safety and lives of our global and local peoples and communities during 2020/21, including my research process. Specifically, my recruitment and interviewing strategies were adapted to ensure the safety of myself, participants, and the community. The Government of Canada and the Saskatchewan Health Authority continue to set mandatory restrictions such as maintaining six feet of social distance with others, wearing personal protective equipment, and diligent hand washing to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Due to these restrictions, only online recruitment and data generation was allowed. Furthermore, due to my financial limitations, I could only afford to provide honoraria for three participants.

Participant Recruitment

A recruitment poster (Appendix A) was posted on University of Saskatchewan's PAWS bulletin for public viewing. I had five potential participants display interest via email within four months, however, after administering the screening process through email (Appendix B), only three persons qualified for the study. I responded to each email with gratitude and explained the

purpose of my study along with participation criteria. The research screening questions included: are you English speaking female of Indigenous decent? Are you a minimum of 18 years old? Have you experienced past childhood sexual abuse (before 16 years of age)? Additionally, I asked each participant to confirm that they were not currently in a state of crisis. This step was taken as a safety precaution for each participant (e.g., reducing re-traumatization). I also asked: have you experienced being in nature as healing if so, are and you willing and able to discuss your experience? Are you willing and able to commit to approximately one to two hours to complete a research interview? During the screening process I opened our conversation up to any questions, concerns, or comments participants might have regarding the study and their participation.

Although it was not a requirement, I also inquired about the availability of each participants' current supports to ensure there was someone for them to connect with if their safety was of concern. Each participant confirmed they had either family, friends, or community supports readily available in the event that they became distressed as a result of their involvement in this research process. As an additional precaution each participant was emailed a community resource sheet.

Once confirmed that interested persons met participation criteria, I inquired with each of them on their preference for future communication, offering an online video platform (WebEx) or a telephone conversation (due to pandemic circumstances, no individual, in person interviews were conducted). Two participants chose telephone as their preferred mode of communication, while one chose the online video interview option.

Once the participants agreed to participate, we decided on a date and time that worked best given our schedules. The participant who selected the WebEx interview option was sent a

link for access. I suggested we schedule our interviews for a week in advance to allow ample time for participants to gather their photos and decide which ones they wanted to share and discuss. Once we solidified a date and time each participant was immediately sent a consent form, photo guidelines, and a debriefing form via email. I explained that we would discuss these forms during the first part of our scheduled interview but invited them to view them beforehand, so that we were both prepared for the interview. Two participants forwarded their signed copies of the consent form to me via email prior to the interview and the participant who selected a video interview provided oral consent at the beginning of the interview.

Interview preparation

During the week preceding scheduled interviews, I encouraged the participants to contact me if they were experiencing any difficulties understanding and applying the photo guidelines. This guideline invited them to take one week to either capture three to five current photographic images, or collect older photos, and send them to me a few days prior to the interview. These photographs were used as springboards for sharing stories of nature healing during our scheduled interview.

In preparation for the interviews, I asked each participant to choose the photos that were most meaningful to them and that represented the experience of CSA and nature healing. Once participants were satisfied with their selection, they emailed their photos directly to me a few days prior to our scheduled interview. Sending the photos a few days in advance allowed me to prepare for the interview. I prepared Usask OneDrive folders for each of the participants. These folders contained their individual photos followed by their individual paperwork, which included signed consent forms, photo release forms, and screening approval. This preparation allowed me

to be organized and prepared for each interview, freeing me to focus on the stories the participants shared.

Near the end of our interview, I provided participants with the opportunity to share any additional comments regarding their nature healing experiences; they were also asked if they wanted any content deleted from their interview record. Each participant confirmed that they were comfortable with all statements provided. Near the end of the interview, we discussed the information in the debriefing form (Appendix H). I also sent each participant their honorarium via email transfer.

Photo-Elicitation

To encourage those, we study/learn from to attend to and speak about important moments in their lives, it is necessary to provide a facilitating context in the research interview (Riessman, 1993). This research study used photo-elicitation to foster dialogue within a traditional semi-structured interview. This method enabled the participants to describe their experiences in their own words, using photographs to help conceptualize their thoughts and feelings (McClain et al., 2013). This is a methodological approach that values and liberates participants by enabling them to gain insight while empowering them to tell their stories (Sinko et al., 2019). This approach also provides sensitivity and ability to provide space for autonomy which is important when trying to understand struggle and healing after trauma, perhaps particularly CSA (Sinko et al., 2019). Adding sight to sound (using photographs) expands sensory awareness and increases the reflexive process (Padgett et al., 2013). These important moments, captured by the participants through photographs, allowed me to explore, understand, and conceptualize their stories.

A study by Close (2007) provides evidence that photography is both communicative and generative because it provoked and conveyed meaning as new understandings and deeper

insights were created with each photo. Each participant was asked to talk about their three to five photos (time pending) prompted by the following questions: Tell me what is in this photo? What is meaningful about this photo for you? How does this photo represent your healing journey? As a survivor, what role has nature played in your healing journey? What are the beneficial effects of being in nature for you? What does wellness mean to you? While each participant's story was different, they all spoke with eagerness and willingness to engage in our conversation. There was no dismissal of questions or refusal to continue the interview process.

Interviews

In terms of authenticity, it was important for me to express genuine feelings of unconditional positive regard for my participants. As an Indigenous researcher, I placed emphasis on embracing and enhancing my participants' personal and spiritual growth. My ability to be a warming presence and create a safe space was how I ensured these women survivors felt comfortable expressing and sharing their experiences. As a researcher with lived experience of CSA nature healing, it was important for me to be self-aware and establish appropriate boundaries with the participants. During our points of contact I was fully aware of the risks and triggers associated with the topic of my study and discussed this with each participant (Appendix C). A primary aim of this study was to cultivate a safe space to empower participants to choose and share their stories, in their own words, in their own ways.

As I interviewed these courageous Indigenous women who shared their nature-based healing experiences, I was in complete admiration of their strength and courage. I conceptualized the conversational interviews in five parts. In part one of the interview, I created a space of openness as each participant delved into their photos, explaining the memories and moments that created their serene moments in nature. I identified with many aspects of the stories they shared,

and had difficulty not becoming completely drawn in by their accounts, as each participant spoke with such ardor and spirit. I connected with their shared hardships and struggles to surmount barriers in striving to overcome the impacts of CSA. I connected with their challenges related to substance use, identity, and relationships. The words they used to express their nature healing experiences resonated with my own experience and I felt a genuine connection with each of them. Importantly, we also shared moments of laughter, promise, and a sense of hope and optimism for the future.

Part two of the interview involved generating data through a series of questions. I asked each participant to describe what was in each photo, explaining the characteristics in the photo such as the setting and environment. Each photo sharing started with ‘Tell me what is in this photo?’ but each participant engaged differently. I continued posing gentle prompting questions to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, such as: ‘What is meaningful about this photo for you?’, ‘How does this photo represent your nature healing experience?’, ‘How does looking at this photo remind you of your healing?’, ‘As a survivor, what role has nature played in your healing journey?’ and ‘What does wellness mean to you?’. Using probes such as: ‘What was that like for you?’, ‘Was that significant for you?’, ‘Tell me more about that’, ‘Was that important for you?’, ‘Can you give me an example?’, and ‘How do you feel about that?’ were helpful in supporting participants’ storytelling. Throughout the interview I used ‘check-ins’ (Ivey et.al., 2015), or gentle prompts or probes, to ensure that each participant was comfortable moving on. Some check-in comments were: “How are you feeling?,” “Do you need a break?,” and “Shall we continue?.”

Part three of the interview provided an opportunity for closure in which the participants were offered space to address anything we may have missed or they wished to add. They were

also asked if there was any content they wished to have remove from the data record. I provided a gentle reminder about the community resource support form (Appendix E) that was sent with the consent form via email. Additionally, in a separate email I provided a debriefing form (Appendix H) to each participant. Part four of the interview was focused on expressing my genuine gratitude to each participant. I thanked each participant for having the courage to participate and being interested in my study. Each conversation was deep and meaningful, and I felt honored to have had the opportunity to listen to and acknowledge their healing journeys. Finally, in part five of the interview, I provided each participant with the twenty-five-dollar honorarium via email transfer.

Data Analysis

In this section, I present the process of data analysis. In general, thematic results were generated through careful analysis of patterns, commonalities, and narrative threads that held meaning and significance within and across participants' narrative accounts (Clandinin et al., 2000). Specifically, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of inductive thematic analysis was applied to the narrative accounts provided by participants. Thematic analysis extends understanding of how people represent themselves and their experiences, both to themselves and others. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun et a., 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analyses included: 1) familiarizing myself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

In Phase one I began to familiarize myself with my data and allowed myself to become re-immersed in participants' stories. I listened to participant's individual audio recordings of their interviews while reviewing their transcripts several times, in a sequence which allowed

several days before revisiting each separate account. It is vital that researchers immerse themselves with the data to familiarize themselves with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun et al., 2006).

Phase two involved storying the transcripts through coding. This process required prolonged engagement with my data and took several weeks to complete. I highlighted important keywords that were stated by each participant while identifying patterns (themes) within each transcript. Creating these themes (categories) required reflecting on my research question of how CSA survivors experienced healing in nature. I developed an organizational structure, or a mind map, to make sense of the shared themes across transcripts. I created this mind map by reviewing my highlighted transcripts. During the review of transcripts, I made notes in which I described three dimensions of the survivor's lived experience: the situation (place), continuity (present, past, future) and interactions (personal/social). This aided the analysis as each participant described the physical environment (place) of the photo and how they (continually) used nature as a healing in their (personal or social) lives. During this intensive phase, I engaged in reflexive writing, which involved continuing to familiarize myself with my data and working with and reflecting on codes and keywords that emerged from the data. Cutcliffe and McKenna (1999) argued that reflexive writing helps researchers to examine how their thoughts and ideas evolve as they engage more deeply with the data. This process was critical as the more I analyzed the more I was able to articulate what was reflected in the data.

Phase three began by collecting codes into themes. Creating these themes (categories) required reflecting on my research question of how CSA survivors found healing in nature. I began to extract the interview transcripts by creating codes, these codes produced and determined my themes. These three broad themes that became 'categories' were created, then I

revisited the data to find the sub-themes. Identifying these meaningful patterns required me to review each theme across each of the transcripts and see if there were noticeable defining connections. This allowed for me to sit and think about what I was reading. I returned to my coding and began highlighting various patterns between the codes that created themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that theme names need to be punchy, immediately giving the reader a sense of what the theme is about. Therefore, I began extracting words from each story and created a mind map of useful words that would identify themes. I considered how the themes that I was creating fit into the overall story about participants' experiences of nature healing. I began to mind map on a separate piece of paper to make sense of my thematic connections. To identify themes, I kept detailed notes about the photos, including meanings and definitions attached to the participants' narratives; during this process, I continued to envision each naturalistic atmosphere within each photo.

When I had new insights as the process of analysis progressed, I returned to my mind map to make notes. This aided me in Phase four of thematic analysis. At times, I was concerned that I missed pieces and struggled with confidence when identifying and reviewing my themes. However, through internal and external guidance and validation I was reminded of how this topic is important work and the process of analysis is complex. During this phase, I revisited my initial themes, and regularly returned to the raw data to ensure these themes were fully supported by evidence. Through this process, I eliminated some codes that seemed vague, inadequate, or unconvincing. Additionally, I merged some codes that appeared logically connected and useful for describing participants' experience of nature healing.

During Phase five I reviewed my finalized set of themes and carefully defined and described them to ensure I was representing participants' stories accurately. Across the three

transcripts, it was clear that each participant shared similar experiences surrounding nature healing. All quotations used in presenting the findings of my thematic analysis were verbatim from the interview transcripts. Additionally, any paraphrasing of the interview discussions were taken directly from transcripts. Staying as close as possible to the data allowed me to use the codes to create a name or descriptor that was easily understandable and made sense for each theme. This process involved adding and subtracting, or sometimes even combining codes until I was satisfied with final thematic representation.

During Phase six I revisited my research question and began to make cohesive sense of my findings. I selected, interpreted, ordered, and arranged my data for fulsome presentation of findings in chapter 4 (Willis, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, and evocative. I adhered to some of Tracy's (2010) "Eight 'Big-Tent' criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research" (p. 841). These criteria encompassed having a worthy topic that often emerges from disciplinary priorities and is therefore theoretically or conceptually compelling (Tracy, 2010). Considering the stigma that is attached to sexualized violence I believe that this study is relevant and can advance advocacy. This study is timely as CSA and sexualized violence in general are unrelenting problems in families and communities. There are significant social advocacy efforts underway, such as the Me too Movement (me too, 2021) and the education, service, and research initiatives focused on addressing the significant issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Government of Canada, 2020). These efforts are bringing light to the injustice of sexualized violence. Providing knowledge and awareness about sexualized violence and its

varied and significant impacts as well as the role nature can play in healing from such trauma is worthy of attention.

If data is new, unique, or rare, a valuable contribution can be achieved with even very little data (Tracy, 2010). I wanted to learn about in-depth experiences surrounding a CSA survivors' experience of healing in nature. Although these stories were unique to each individual there were commonalities across their experiences. Creswell (2007) advises narrative-oriented researchers to "focus on a single individual (or two or three individuals)" (p. 214). My participant pool was small, purposive, and convenient. Using a smaller data set allowed me to unpack each narrative element into meaningful moments within and across participants' stories. Exploring and revisiting my descriptive notes while collating those notes with pages of verbatim transcripts yielded valuable information that produced results about the impact of nature healing.

Additionally, there is also a level of transferability of findings arising from my study. CSA is an experience of trauma. According to Tracy (2010), evocative, substantiated stories increase transferability of findings and have the power to create in readers the idea that they have experienced the same thing in another arena. A study by Williamson et al. (2020) found that secondary trauma can result from indirect exposure to a firsthand account of another's emotional exposure. It is important to be mindful of the narratives these women are expressed as they may result in unique emotional impacts for readers.

One of the most celebrated practices inherent to many qualitative research traditions is the need for researcher self-reflexivity, considered to be expressed and documented honesty and authenticity about one's self, one's research, and one's audience (Tracy, 2010). Throughout my data collection and analysis processes, I recognized my own experiences as separate from those of my participants. I was strategic in how I approached the interviews, ensuring that I created a

space where I was well versed on my influence as a researcher and question-asker while remaining present to fully listen with empathy during each interview. My genuine curiosity about exploring nature healing allowed me to exude a warming presence when conversing with my participants. My intentions were to grasp CSA survivors' subjective experiences of nature healing in a way that might contribute to the growing literature and practice in this area. Moreover, in the following section I outline how I considered procedural, situational, and cultural-specific ethical issues.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved working with human participants, so I followed the guidelines outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* [TCPS 2] (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). I submitted an ethics application to the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board and received approval.

This study involved working closely with vulnerable persons (i.e., Indigenous women). Therefore, I used chapter 9 of the [TCPS-2] (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018) for guidance to ensure my engagement with Indigenous participants satisfied requirements. In respect to proceeding with research in an ethical and respectful way I created a reasonable community engagement plan so that my findings could be used to advocate on behalf of the constituents of my community. Additionally, I created a community of representatives, beyond the members of my thesis advisory committee, to support my research process. One of the advisory committee members was, Debbi Ross, B.I.S.W, R.S.W., MNDG she is a counsellor/psychotherapist and clinical hypnotherapist in Saskatoon, SK. This female Indigenous community member provided guidance and support during my research process, encouraging me

to explore healing modalities and the concept of Miyo-Pimatiswin. Exploring Indigenous nature healing is important and significant.

The three Indigenous women survivors of CSA who participated in my study shared emotional sensitive experiences. Therefore, the informed consent process highlighted the nature of the research process, specific participation requirements, and identified the risks and difficulties that may arise throughout the study (Corey et al., 2015). Throughout the interviews and research process participants were voluntarily offering their experiences and were reminded that they had the right to withdraw their participation (without penalty) at any time and for any reason. Although this was research on a sensitive topic, my intention was not to explore the participants' experience of CSA, but to explore their experiences of nature as a healing.

Researcher Self-Care

This research required a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, and physical energy and held the potential to affect or deplete my wellbeing (Kumar et al., 2018). Types of emotionally demanding research include: (a) research on sensitive issues (e.g., violence, abuse, mental health, chronic or terminal illness, death), (b) research similar to personal trauma previously experienced by the researcher, (c) the researcher's experience of traumatic life events while conducting a study, and (d) unexpected events that arise during research in what was previously *not* identified as a sensitive issue (Kumar et al., 2018). According to the literature, this research is categorized as being emotionally demanding, so a clear selfcare plan was very important.

Secondary trauma (ST) is a term for a recognized phenomenon about the impact of indirect exposure to other's traumatic experiences (McCann et al., 1990). In order to prevent researcher fatigue, I created boundaries and engaged in a variety of self-care strategies when I was feeling overwhelmed or emotionally exhausted. Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) highlighted

several self-care strategies they utilized, including accessing regular debriefing, support and supervision, psychotherapy, creativity, and spirituality. During my research process, I continued to utilize physical naturalistic spaces to create a sense of mindfulness, balance, and grounding. In these environments, I created a space for just me, a space to clear my thoughts, find meaning in the present moment, and stay connected to the research process. Researchers of sensitive topics employ a range of coping strategies to deal with the immediate and long-term impacts of their work but do so knowing they are choosing to work in their fields. Many researchers of sensitive topics strive to make social change for others, or in some cases, themselves, who have experienced or witnessed abuse (Williamson et al., 2020). I hope these findings will advance advocacy for CSA survivors and shine light on the healing power of being in nature.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter is organized around the presentation and description of three primary narrative themes and associated sub-themes, based on my composite inductive analysis of participants' photo elicitation and interview data about nature healing. Moreover, a visual representation is provided below: Figure 1, *Overview of Themes*.

Introducing the Results

The following narrative themes capture or represent participants' composite experiences of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual connection with the land and nature. In my sharing of these composite themes, I aimed to create an adequate representation of survivors' experiences of healing in nature. I did not establish a theoretical approach before conducting my research as my interests lied heavily and solely on understanding survivors' stories about nature healing through the processes of deep, authentic listening and inductive analysis (Braun et al., 2006).

All thematic findings are anchored with direct verbatim quotations from the participants' interview transcripts. Additionally, any paraphrasing of the interview discussions were taken directly from transcripts. Participants discussed their photographs in a variety of ways. For example, one participant verbalized a history of symbolism that a photo held, while another expressed literally what was in the photo and summarized an overview of where the photo was captured. Another participant summarized the meaning of a photo with words that evoked her experience such as "serene," and "calmness." As I probed with respectful and gentle questions, each participant delved deeper into how they attributed meaning to their photos and their relevance to nature healing. With each photo and story shared, I began to envision myself submersed in the nature setting and feeling empowered by their stories.

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of analysis and informed by my own experience and judgement I made sense of raw data generated from three transcribed semi-structured interviews. Although each participant had their own unique experiences, they shared similar stories surrounding nature healing. The three primary themes and associated sub-themes include: *Exploring Strength* (including sub-themes: *Gaining Wisdom* and *Supporting Peace*), *Finding Comfort in Mindfulness* (including sub-themes: *Feeling Calm* and *Noticing Power*), and *Reconnecting to Spirituality* (including sub-themes: *Connecting with Creator/God* and *Connecting with Culture*). All themes are interconnected, yet suggest important elements noted in participants' experiences of nature healing.

To preserve participants' confidentiality and that of third parties, the following is a presentation of composite thematic findings. Any individual participant's verbatim quotation used to illustrative findings is referred to as: 'participant' and/or 'she/her.' Each section will open with select photos to help readers visualize the natural setting that represented nature healing for these survivors. As you read through these stories, I invite you to set aside all judgement and create a space of openness, acceptance, and respect as you join me in my sharing what I learned about these survivors' nature healing experiences.

As a survivor of CSA and a researcher, I immersed myself in each healing participants' account and found a new depth of understanding of the impact of nature as an important healing space. This powerful phenomenon that I was so fortunate to research and as I considered photographs presented alongside participants' narratives the following keywords came to mind: 'power,' 'peace,' and 'strength.' I wondered, 'what do these terms have in common?' I envisioned the sheer and pure vulnerability of being a child and having experienced a trauma such as CSA, and how as children we lost our sense of personal 'power,' 'peace' and 'strength.'

While writing and analyzing, I discovered a deepened understanding through their healing-in-nature stories, strengthening my wisdom. These stories produced a way to understanding that what was taken away as a child was found through a series of healing in adulthood.

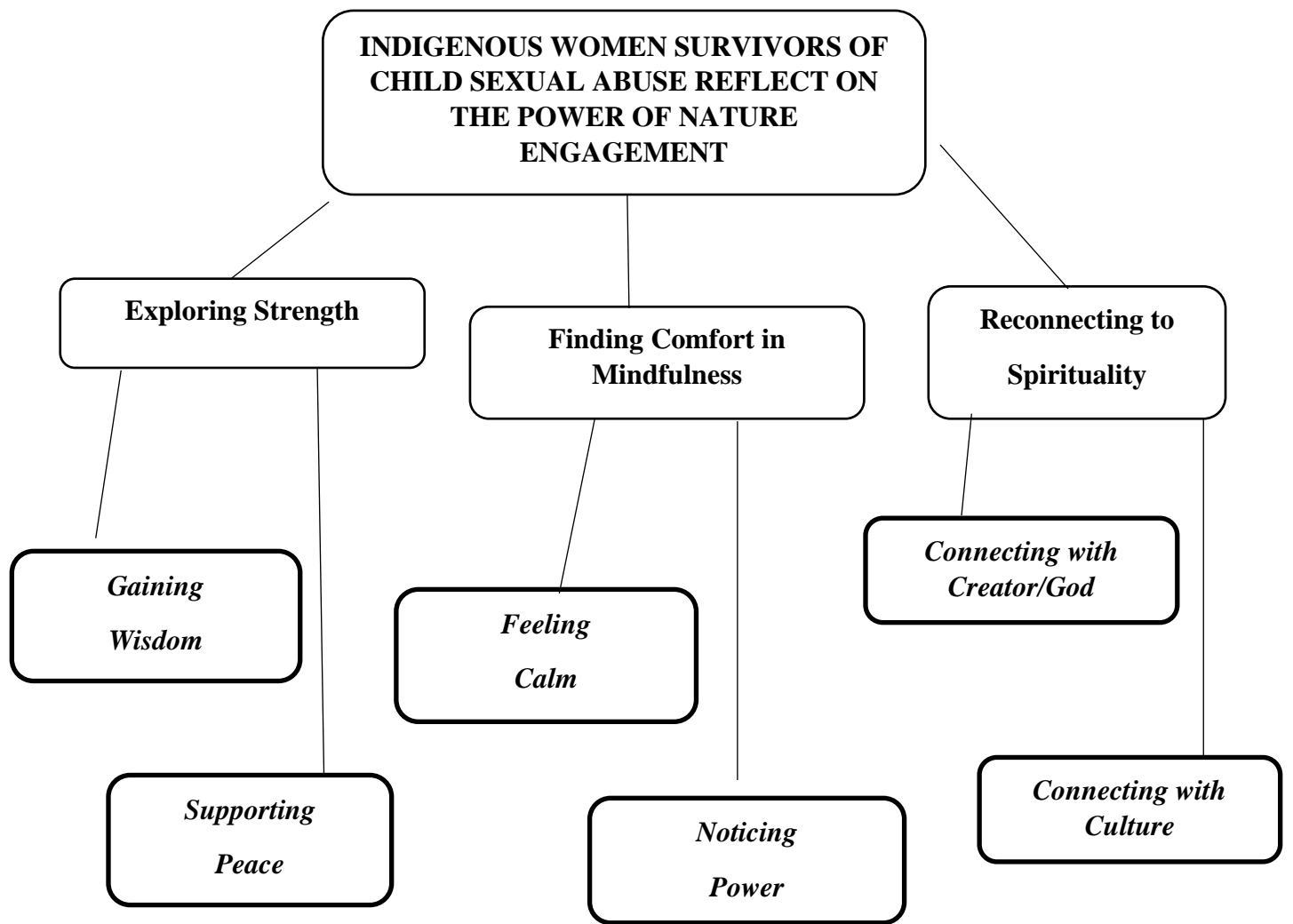


Figure 1

Overview of Themes

Presentation of Themes and Sub-themes

Exploring Strength



Figure 2

Mountain Lake



Figure 3

Snowy Plains

The theme *Exploring Strength* is for the purpose of discovery and looking closely to capture the endurance and mental quality of each participant. This ability to overcome resistance is expressed through storytelling in their interview. As you read, you will notice that these participants used the term ‘strength’ and expressed that their photos represented levels of support that aided their exploration of inner strength in the wake of CSA. In some cultures, strength is often viewed as physical ability that one can draw on to deal with difficult or problematic circumstances. This section explores strength as a mental quality, and an emotional state in which one can draw on to cope with a situation(s) or event(s) that are distressing or difficult. During inductive analysis, two sub-themes: *Gaining Wisdom* and *Supporting Peace* emerged.

Gaining Wisdom

Gaining Wisdom explores the quality of making decisions that have principles of prior experience and knowledge. These women spoke about the wisdom they gained while sitting in the solitude of nature. As you read through their narratives you will notice how they continued supporting their sense of harmony through nature engagement. One participant spoke about the wisdom that existed for her while she looked beyond the snow-covered plains (Figure 3, *Snowy Plains*), and envisioned a “lifetime of growth.” Regarding her daily walks and how connected to the earth she felt in those moments, she shared:

It’s like [short pause] time just stops, ya know? Like there’s nothing that matters in that moment, other than feeling powerful. I feel like the more I breathe the more I am calm and the more aware I am of what I have overcome in my life. I’m so comforted by that sun shining on my face that I feel this overwhelming sense of strength [laughs], if that makes any sense?

This participant referred to the solace in (Figure 3, *Snowy Plains*), that filled her with a sense of love and warmth. She described a sense of power arising from the experience of becoming completely present within her natural surroundings. She shared that the hardships that she has overcome have been like a driving force for her ambition and passion towards personal transformation.

Supporting Peace

Supporting Peace comprises of being free from disturbance and being presently in a state of calm. Experiencing this peace in nature contributed to self-exploration. One participant voiced that when she would go for her runs down a road that had turning curves and hills, she would run until she could not run anymore. Upon returning home she expressed feeling like she had “left the ugly down there” [referring to the end of roadway path]. This participant expressed her

ability to free herself from disturbance through the process of running, really exerting herself, in nature. This same participant spoke about literally grounding herself each time she was in a nature setting. Grounding, also referred to as earthing, is a therapeutic technique that includes doing activities that ‘ground’ or electrically reconnect you to the earth (Healthline, 2021). A grounding technique that one of the participants utilized was taking off her shoes and socks to become barefoot as she walked on the earth. In this scenario, she summarized that she experienced the world in a way that is “hard to explain.” She described the world as not just a place to live and grow in, but rather a more holistic experience that is more powerful than her. She shared, “[Being in nature is] like a source that is more powerful than me.”

Another participant spoke about the “journey of life” as depicted in one of her photographs Figure 2, *Mountain Lake*, and how she made the decision to “change things.” This participant also spoke of her healing journey and having to simultaneously grieve the loss of a dear friend. As she continued expressed her story, she explained that this photograph Figure 2, *Mountain Lake*, represented a moment of “not wanting to live with that trauma anymore.” As she recognized her experience, she experienced a sense of deep knowledge about her own power to move forward without carrying the heavy burden of trauma. She shared deeply about the heightened awareness and feeling a sense of calm while standing at the top of that hill overlooking the lake and the mountains. She expressed the significance of this experience:

I made the decision to move ahead, the decision to not live, um [short pause], in that trauma anymore. It all has to do with healing [short pause] like, I mean, that shit just goes with you. Like I mean it’s a part of the fabric of who you are, it’s not like one endeavor fixes that; you carry that with you for a long time. [Inhales] As you gain strength you deal with all of that accordingly [exhales].

As she continued to speak about this photo and the moment that it represented, she described saying ‘goodbye’ to a dear friend during the process. I noticed the tone of her voice changing as she voiced her most touching and memorable moments. She expressed the vulnerability inherent in carrying the trauma of CSA throughout her lifetime and shared, “it’s a fabric of who you are.” Through listening to her story, I experienced a deeper understanding of how trauma can impact a person’s identity and life trajectory. As I continued to listen, I began to understand that her experiences enabled her to become increasingly aware of her identity and her journey. During analysis it became clear that through these stories these women made a decision and reclaimed their power and experienced a sense of strength. This sense of strength was a powerful feeling of being in those moments, on those days; it created a sense of stillness, a peaceful “celebration of life” which with participants will carry for the rest of their life.

The theme *Exploring Strength* revealed how these women, as survivors, were connected to the beauty they experienced in nature - it was splendorous to listen to their stories and to explore the meanings they made of their photographs.

Finding Comfort in Mindfulness



Figure 4

Water Ripples



Figure 5

Winter Pines



Figure 6

Fall Tree

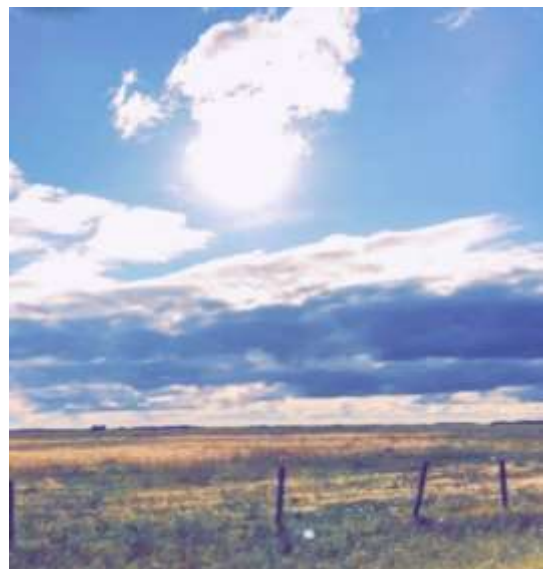


Figure 7

Country Clouds

What does it mean to be mindful? What does it mean to find comfort in this state? Being mindful allows one to approach painful emotions and feelings with openness and clarity, as well as to relate to others with similar experiences. Mindful awareness is a non-judgmental state that allows one to observe thoughts and feelings without exaggeration or suppression (Neff, 2003). During inductive analysis, two sub-themes: *Feeling Calm and Noticing Power* emerged.

Feeling Calm

Feeling Calm expresses, a soothing emotional state or sensitivity that makes someone tranquil. It is evident that these women experienced a meaningful connection while in nature. This connection helped them find the intensity to not only sit in the discomfort of their experiences but to experience the comfortability in moving forward in their healing journey. These women spoke about a sense of calmness, a calming existence that immersed while in nature. These participants described peaceful settings, as revealed through their photographs, that represented freedom from worry and stress.

As we explored how nature impacted participants' healing from trauma, each participant spoke with such passion. One participant expressed how tranquil she felt as she floated on a tube down a lake: Figure 4, *Water Ripples*. The mountain backdrop and cloudy sky created a calming environment for her. She indicated that the weather was particularly inviting that day:

Ugh [exhales], I wish I was there now! It was so comfortable, the sun was shining on my face, the birds were going, and the water felt so lovely my fingers were trailing in the water and the temperature was amazing. It was so soothing to have your feet soaking in there and to sit back and have that sunlight on my face, I felt at peace. Being out there seems to right [short pause]... it centers me.

This participant spoke of this day and being on that lake for a few hours and experiencing how “lovely the water felt.” An overwhelming sense of serenity that surrounded her during this float was evident in her story. She spoke of the “temperature being so soothing” and “having a bit of sun shining on my face” and how “it just felt so nice.” As she expanded on her sense of freedom from distress and disturbance while on this lake, I understood how important the role nature was for her sense of mindfulness, as reflected in this moment.

Another participant focused on how the crisp Northern air made her feel untroubled and free from disruption. As pictured in Figure 5, *Winter Pines*, she voiced how these “quiet” moments made her realize that chaos does not always exist. She shared:

I took a trip up north a while back and I took this shot right after a hike. My face was red and pinching from the cold air. I could feel the tip of my nose piercing and running a bit. I could see my breath in the air. [laughs; exhales] I have never felt so present then on this day. I realized that, ‘yes, okay, shit happened, and it will continue to happen,’ but [inhale] I tell myself ‘be in this moment...[pause] life is tough, but it won’t always be.’ The more I felt those cold symptoms from the weather the more present I felt, it was amazing.

As each participant spoke about the stillness that existed in each of these moments reflected in the photographs, I noted the calming experience that they were expressing. Understanding that it was not only the earth, it was the earth and all her elements that help create this sense of mindfulness. The sheer experience of just being in nature and finding solace - just being present with themselves, their thoughts and feelings, and completely aware of their surroundings enhanced their experience of mindfulness. As each participant described in detail the impact of the variations in temperature, it became clear that their sense of touch was elevated during these times in nature. Human beings have an amazing capacity for amplified quality

experience in nature, which creates an embodied knowledge, and awakening of all senses. The understandings about themselves and their lives that survivors come to and the decisions they make while in these nature settings may aid their healing journeys. Referring to Figure 7,

Country Clouds, one participant explained:

This moment was the moment I realized that I am not going to allow my traumas [to] define me. I will not let what happened to me make me feel bad about myself anymore. I stopped on the side of the road this afternoon and I looked into the clouds that were covering the sun ever so slightly and thought this is the time, I can change how I am healing. It's up to me. I have to remain mindful or I start to lose myself, ya know?

While this participant focused on her ability to recognize her emotional and mental states when triggered by a situation or life event, she would often resort to a country drive for console. Moments of calmness existed for her when she was driving; she described it as “free time” for her to be aware of just that particular moment in time; in that moment, she reconnected with herself and her land. This participant expressed being an “outdoor person” and has had a lot of experience being immersed in nature settings. She summarized the harmony she experienced in nature:

I know this may sound silly, but I almost feel really powerful out there. Like, here I am creating fire using materials from the land, using the food I gathered from the land and paying my respects to everything around me that's providing me nutrients and peace. I just feel so grateful to be there, ya know? Like [pause]...conflict free or something?

Each participant expressed *Finding Comfort in Mindfulness*. Embracing nature as healing was unique to each individual; each survivor reached for elements of nature they believed would

offer them the most comfort, calm, and sense of safety. This sense of safety was evident in participants' descriptions of the quietude and calm that surrounded them while in nature.

Noticing Power

Noticing Power encompasses becoming aware of one's own ability to act or produce an effect that is beneficial for their wellbeing. This participant noticed her ability to be fully aware of her own emotions a sense of living well with herself. She noticed her past teachings from family members, particularly from her Grandfather and Mother; this thread of relationships. This participant produced a safe space for herself to unload the "bad;" a relational place to leave things she did not want to carry on her own. She summarized:

Anytime I was feeling angry or like aggressive, or I just need to let something go and you do not want to talk about it or anything like that, you are to go to a tree and you hug it and you hang on to it and it takes it out of you. Figure 6, *Fall Tree*.

This participant referred to her past teachings from her Mother and Grandfather during her moments of hardship. As she reflected on being "in the moment" and "being present" with the earth she remembered two teachings. She created an effect by expressing her grandfather's teaching she shared: "I had a grandfather that said anytime I felt bad he would say 'find a place where it's quiet and just sit on the ground in the bush or by the river.'" She continued to share how "freeing" it felt to "get out and do whatever I wanted." She also shared a teaching from her mother that aided her wellbeing:

My mom taught me to go and hug a tree. [She said, explaining Figure 6, *Fall Tree*]:
'Anytime you're feeling angry or like aggressive, or you just need to let something go and you don't want to talk about it anyway, like that you are to go to a tree and you hug it

and you hang on to it and it takes it out of you.’ So, there was a lot of tree hugging growing up [laughs].

One participant explored her beliefs about how nature was healing for her in many ways, and often accessed as a “grounding tool.” She found that immersing herself in nature was more beneficial than household duties:

Yah, ever hear of grounding?... It’s like when I’m in the house, I’ll make the bed or do the dishes, something to help me feel grounded. There are times when that’s not enough. I head outdoors and walk.

Another participant expressed that when she was overwhelmed in the face of daily pressures, she often felt “heavy or dizzy.” She expressed that the stress sometimes became too much for her to deal with and she coped by driving an automobile in the country, producing a positive emotional effect.

Another participant spoke about the sense of peace and tranquility she experienced while she walked outdoors on a path not far from her doorstep. She expressed, “I keep walking until I’m ready to resolve it, or I’m feeling better about whatever the overwhelming feeling was.” It was fascinating, this sense of vulnerability participants experienced, this sense of understanding where they were in each moment and allowing vulnerability to take them where they wanted or needed to go in their healing process. These women noticed what effects were beneficial for them in each moment. This exploration of *Finding Comfort in Mindfulness* was evident in participants’ stories and their descriptions of their abilities to become fully aware of emotions while in nature creating a space of relief.

Reconnecting to Spirituality



Figure 8

Blue Heron



Figure 9

The Arbor

The theme *Reconnecting to Spirituality* refers to re-establishing a bond of communication with something that is a greater whole of which we are a part of. Through these narratives it became clear that there was a force stronger and greater than human beings that aided their healing process: an exploration of the self through a spiritual connection. During inductive analysis, two sub-themes: *Connecting with Creator/God* and *Connecting with Culture* emerged.

Connecting with Creator/God

Connecting with Creator/God is to understand the relationship between two or more things, particularly an Ultimate being that brings something into existence. These survivors expressed feeling a spiritual connection with their God/Creator which allowed them to experience a deep sense of safety in nature settings, being alongside their God/Creator. This participant shared details about the deep connection that she felt with God while in these nature environments: Figure 8, *Blue Heron*. She described how being on the land is the “same a

breathing,” for her and that both are essential to her wellbeing and, in fact, her survival. She needed to have time with “her land and her God.” She shared:

When I think of nature healing, for myself, I realize how it effects my mental health, it’s the closest I feel to my Creator, is when I am in nature [inhales]... that’s my time. It’s just me and God hanging out, ya know?

Referring to Figure 8, *Blue Heron*, she shared:

When I’m out there, breathing, my grandmother used to tell me to do breathing... ‘in with the good air and out with the bad,’ so me enjoying that, and taking a deep breathe, it’s just so filling with that purity. You breathe in and you exhale, all the negativity goes out with it.

This participant summarized how being in nature just seemed to “center her” expressing a feeling of “it just seems right” [referring to being in nature]. She explained that nature and wellness did not seem to be separate for her as an Indigenous person. She said, “they’re not a separate thing for me... If I don’t have my time out there, my time with my land and God and all of it, I just couldn’t exist.” She clearly affirmed that her time with the land and God were important for her mental health.

Connecting with Culture

For the purpose of this study, *Connecting with Culture* involves joining or linking characteristics of Indigenous decent within your belief system. As one participant expressed, when she moved back home it was time to reconnect with her culture. Referring to Figure 9, *The Arbor*, she described the photo “it’s a circle, it has openings to directions North, East, South and West.” She emphasized that this arbor was a major healing space for her and explained that, “it was a defiantly part of when my life changed... that’s when everything kinda stopped, it was

kind of a new life.” This participant spoke about the journey of moving back home and how this move reinforced a “huge reconnection” to her culture. She shared:

It’s helped me in like [short pause], an emotionally, physically, and everything. The reconnection, it was like being reborn because like now I had the opportunity to be whoever I wanted to be and do what I wanted to do, even though I had no idea what I wanted. It helped to have people encouraging me to reconnect back with my culture, it’s freeing. I get to do whatever I want. Figure 9, *The Arbor*.

As a listener/researcher, I experienced a deep resonant empathy with participants as they shared their nature healing stories. A force greater than human - a force that is our Culture – bonded us as survivors. As an Indigenous female, having been a part of Indigenous ceremonies that take part within an arbor, I am familiar with the experience of something greater than the ceremony. This arbor allowed for a deepened connection to the Creator and Earth. As I probed for details, this participant continued to speak about the “dark patch” she experienced and how being in this arbor allowed for a sense of reconnection to her culture and surrounding land, She shared:

But like... um... it’s helped me in many ways, and anytime I get lost now there was a dark patch there when I was using drugs and alcohol and the only way I could help myself was to get back in that circle. And that’s what I did, it still helps me. And like, ya know, not only with everyone beside me [referring to close relationships], they encouraged me to reconnect back with my culture.

As I asked for more details about these moments it became evident how significant and impactful this outdoor arbor-experience was for her as a survivor. She clearly incorporated all her past spiritual teachings from her grandfather and used them as a guide and sense of

encouragement to push through those “hard moments, when I was struggling” in this nature setting.

Through conversations with each survivor, I understood more about the power of nature healing for survivors of CSA. Their spiritual connectivity with the Earth and Culture highlighted their values, courage, and teachings as they navigated the impacts of CSA. Their distress was displayed through verbal expressions such as: “when I felt bad or angry,” “that shit stays with you,” and “shit happened.” They each acknowledged their trauma and resulting hardships. They also explained the powerful impacts of their experiences of healing while in nature.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss these findings in relation to current literature. I will also highlight the limitations of this study along with some recommendations for future nature healing research and implications for practice. I will close with a reflection on my research process.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Findings presented in chapter 4 suggest Indigenous women survivors of CSA experience the healing power of nature engagement. Growing research in this area provides evidence that being in nature can be healing and that there are significant links between spending time in a natural environment and increased levels of psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being (Greenleaf et al., 2014). Another study suggested that nature-based engagement is increasingly being promoted to improve mental health (Hart, 2016). This chapter will discuss how the findings of this study are related to the literature on this phenomenon. Additionally, this chapter will review the limitations of this research, provide recommendations for future research and discuss implications for practice. Final researcher reflections will close this chapter.

Connecting the Findings to the Literature

The findings of this project are discussed in relation to self-compassion, healing the self and holistic coping experienced through nature engagement.

Self-compassion

The experience of trauma and ACE's, such as CSA, can alter core beliefs and assumptions that people hold about themselves, the future, their sense of safety (personal and general) and the goodness of others (Rudat et al., 2018). During analysis I was aware that each participant acknowledged their past pain and suffering surrounding CSA. As demonstrated in the literature, there is significant emotional pain associated with experiencing CSA. Compassion is one way of relating to others, but it can also be a way for individuals to relate to themselves and their own suffering. As Neff (2003) explains, self-compassion involves the understanding of one's own pain and an attempt to alleviate that pain. These survivors all found peace through engaging with nature, an environment that soothes deep pain associated with past CSA. Self-

compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies, and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2013).

This self-compassion can display itself through self-kindness, this entails being warm and understanding towards oneself and extending a level of compassion towards oneself during hardship and general suffering (Germer et al., 2013). As one participant voiced her level of compassion towards herself, explaining, 'I will not let what happened to me make me feel bad about myself anymore' as she spoke genuinely on Figure 7, *Country Clouds*.

Self-compassion is a relational concept; it involves practicing compassion directed towards oneself, which involves expressing empathy towards oneself (Rudat et al., 2018). Throughout their healing journeys these survivors expressed how they directed kindness toward themselves by moving towards healing and reducing self-criticism. As one participant stated, she faced a "dark patch" in which she used drugs and alcohol to cope with her childhood trauma. She acknowledged her suffering and showed resilience and strength in her effort to move towards what she referred to as a "healthier lifestyle." Her resilience and strength was evident in her ability to reconnect with her culture, which she admitted to knowing "nothing about." She shared that she took a chance by going back to that outdoor arbor circle (Figure 9: *The Arbor*) daily, as she was unfamiliar with her cultural teachings and did not know who to turn to for guidance. This fear and doubt of "not knowing" were obvious mental and emotional barriers but she remained hopeful for a "healthier lifestyle." This participant utilized her supports and resources to enhance her self-exploration and healing. Her story highlighted that self-compassion was a vital component in her healing journey. She expressed that the more she was present in this arbor setting, the more she developed connections to others that could provide support.

Another participant expressed change is difficult; no matter what she does, as a survivor of CSA “that shit goes with you.” She referred to her healing process as a journey that requires strength, resilience, and reconstruction. A study by Rolbiecki et al. (2016) suggested that survivors go through a process of reconstructing their sense of self. One participant highlighted this suggestion by expressing that her life is a journey and made a choice to “change things” and that she was “not wanting to live with that trauma anymore.” This participant reconstructed her traumatic experiences through engaging with nature. Just like the day she was floating on that lake with her toes in the water and the sun on her face “I felt at peace, being out there seems to right [short pause]... it centers me.” Nature engagement supported self-compassion within these survivors’ stories.

Healing the Self

The results of this study suggest that nature was important for these survivors’ emotional health as well as their sense of wellness (Trau et al., 2016). Through these narratives, it was apparent that the harmony these women experienced while in nature provided an opportunity to balance their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of self. Participants in this study described leaving the “bad emotions” that made them feel distressed, in their naturistic environments allowing them to feel replenished. Healing the self was about efforts to be free from disturbance and note the depth and breadth of their experiences and knowledge, while recognizing the impact of CSA. One participant expressed her struggles with substance use (e.g., drugs and alcohol), confirming Evans’ (2020) finding that women with a history of CSA are at greater risk to develop alcohol use disorders. This participant explained how she began to heal herself once returned home and reconnected with her culture and land. The Canadian Psychological Association (2021) recognizes the importance of one’s connection to the land

within Indigenous concepts of the self and healing. This same participant spoke of the importance of reconnecting with her culture. She expressed that reconnecting with her culture and land helped her “emotionally, physically, and everything; it was like being reborn.” This reconnection with Indigenous concepts such as: powwow dancing and cultural ceremonies aided her through her healing process and reconstruct her sense of self.

Another participant spoke deeply of the innate connections to the land and nature that she experienced while up North on a vacation. A study by Brymer et al. (2010) explained that nature healing may trigger deep reflections and provide an opportunity for nurturing self. This participant spoke of the ‘weight’ lifted off her shoulders during her daily hikes. She expressed allowing herself to “feel every emotion” Exploring her own reflections of past experiences and current thoughts allowed her to recognize that she was grateful to be alive. These women have found ways to explore their emotions and experiences while engaging in nature settings in ways that increased their sense of safety. Boyd (2020) collected information from Indigenous peoples on traditional medicine and revealed that Indigenous cultural spaces in health care settings are critical to improving health care for Indigenous peoples. That same study determined that interactions with a traditional healer made the Indigenous participants feel safer. This parallel between feeling safe during nature engagement and feeling safe while in the presence of a traditional healer is fascinating. There is a correlation between a traditional healer, nature engagement and overall health practices. These all encompass traditional healing through practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs that incorporate Indigenous world views. These traditional healing techniques enrich my interest in researching how healing is experienced through nature engagement.

Holistic coping

Often noted is the holistic and integrative character of Indigenous worldviews, which emphasize the connections, harmony, and fundamental relationships between all things (Boyd, 2020). Within this study, survivors reinforced their appreciation for relations between all things, which was particularly evident for them while in nature settings. Such a holistic vision means that the inner and outer dimensions of health and well-being are indivisible; the well-being of each individual cannot be dissociated from the environments and world around them (Boyd, 2020). One participant explained that being outdoors alleviated her stress and allowed her to practice grounding in order to balance her overall wellbeing. Our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being are all interdependent and our well-being is connected to that of past and future generations (Boyd, 2020). As Indigenous people we encourage one another to connect with our culture to support peace and gain wisdom to create a balance of being mindful. The results of this study suggest that nature engagement may be beneficial for the well-being of survivors of CSA. Interviewing Indigenous women for this study was very important as I wanted to emphasize the unique needs and concepts of Indigenous healing. The results of this study provided insight into the role and experience of nature as healing for three Indigenous survivors of CSA. Their narratives expressed how nature engagement may facilitate a sense of comfort, safety, and mindfulness.

The Canadian Psychological Association (2021) notes the relevance of the natural environment to healing and intervention for Indigenous peoples. One participant mentioned that there was no difference for her when it came to her Indigenous heritage and the land. She spoke of needing the land and its elements just as much as she needed air to breathe. Expressing how life is experienced through our land is a powerful concept and articulating the connectedness she had with the land revealed the power of holistic healing. As Hansen (2016) mentioned,

“everything is spiritual: the trees are alive, the grass, the rocks, they have a spirit. The animals, they have a spirit and so the ceremonies are based on those teachings, like the things that we do, it was for a purpose; ... the purpose is spiritual.” (p.83). These survivors affirmed that there is a connection between humans and the Earth’s elements, and these connections, when experienced, may be healing.

This study refers to holistic as parts of something that is interconnected to a whole. This study refers to coping as exploring our own conscious efforts to solve issues and to make our stress more manageable. This study explored three Indigenous women’s holistic coping styles using nature engagement. These women combined their past and current hardships, knowledge, experiences, resiliency, and courage to investigate their own healing process while *Exploring Strength, Finding Comfort in Mindfulness* and *Reconnecting with Spirituality*. Pro-environmental behavior was directly predicted by an emotion-regulating strategy (namely, cognitive reappraisal) and indirectly through the experience of ‘being away’ when embedded in a natural environment (Spano et al., 2021). This study amplifies the one participant’s expression of when she was nature, it was her “free time,” a time for reflection and relief from life’s daily stressors. This concept of ‘being away’ was evident in her story when she expressed being in nature as her “quiet time” away from chaos. Touloumaskos et al. (2020) argued that there is a significant impact that our natural environment has on human physiology, human psychology, and the effects of ACEs. Nature engagement has proven to have beneficial, therapeutic, and protective factors for trauma survivors.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. In the current study, narrative thematic analysis was used to understand the processes, qualities, and reflections of three Indigenous

women survivors of CSA experiences with nature engagement. In general, the results of narrative studies are not considered generalizable and are often drawn from unrepresentative pools (Riessman, 1993).

As the focus of this study was to understand Indigenous female survivors' experiences of nature engagement, men were not included. Hence, these findings are not reflective of males who may have experienced CSA and the healing aspects of nature engagement. Another limitation was the small sample size. The decision for a small and specific sample was made in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, which is common within narrative traditions. Additionally, Member-checking, which is a way to confirm results within qualitative inquiry (2019) was also limited. While this study did engage in some member checking such as conducting interviews while empathetically listening and solidifying the participants reactions and responses to ensure accuracy. If time was allotted the data may have be more enriched to engage in the co-construction of results through a more rigorous member-checking process such as transcript review. Moreover, having participants actively partake in the creative processes of identifying sub-themes and themes have enhanced the credibility of the results of this study. Such a process might have allowed for a deeper understanding of survivors' thoughts and feelings about nature engagement as healing. Furthermore, this small sample was drawn from the population of one university, not a community sample, which may have impacted the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Indigenous people and their ways of understanding do not receive enough attention, and, in most cases, Indigenous voices get lost within Western forms of data analysis and

academic writing (Datta, 2018). While this study emphasized personal stories using a narrative thematic analysis method, it may be beneficial to explore an Indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2007). In searching for knowledge, there are three phases: 1) the desire to access knowledge for the purpose that fits with world view, 2) the way to about searching; and 3) a way to interpret that knowledge so as to give it back in a way that is purposeful, helpful and relevant to the community (Kovach, 2007). During my research proposal followed by the ethics process, I discovered that I had a desire to access Indigenous knowledge of nature engagement and had to distinctly go about it in a way that was respectful and inclusive. Lastly, I had to deliver my results in a way that would hopefully be purposeful and relevant for the community and future research. Therefore, I recommend utilizing narrative storytelling as a method of data generation and analysis to further understand the impact of nature engagement on survivors wellbeing. Through traditional storytelling, Indigenous peoples and communities are empowered and their knowledge is celebrated; the findings of research done this way become “ours” rather than “theirs” (Iseke, 2013, p. 560).

Future research may consider exploring the Earth’s elements separately with regards to nature engagement (e.g., water, trees, air, etc.) Further exploration might reveal *Exploring Strength, Finding Comfort in Mindfulness, and Reconnecting to Spirituality* can be experienced and described on a much deeper level. This study focused on narratives of nature engagement and suggested different perspective of healing near water, trees, and air. Therefore, further exploration of the healing qualities of the Earth’s elements may provide deeper insight into the myriad benefits of nature engagement. Furthermore, exploration of the Earth’s elements may produce additional resources for healing methods.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study may aid professionals (e.g., counsellors/therapists, mental health professionals) who work with survivors of CSA. Nature engagement can be proposed as a unique form of support for those who have experienced trauma. Furthermore, there is a level of cross-cultural psychoeducation that may be adapted into therapeutic settings. Mental health professionals provide an opportunity for clients to speak in a safe environment, to share raw and unprocessed material and to find a sense of release (Ellsberg et al., 2005). This is often experienced as a regulating, cathartic, and empowering encounter for clients (Smith 2000; Moch & Cameron 2000; Hutchinson et al. 1994). Therefore, this study's findings may aid as an opportunity for others to explore nature engagement as a therapeutic approach.

The results of this study may also provide a valuable resource for mental health professionals in their efforts to aid clients who have experienced a specific trauma such as CSA. It is crucial for mental health professionals to acknowledge the survivor's expression and recognize their courage in disclosing personal details regarding CSA. One participant stated that she found strength through sharing her story with me and that finding others with similar experiences has enabled her to feel free of the 'victim' burden. Acknowledging and validating survivors' experiences may aid in building rapport and providing a safe space for clients. As a future Indigenous psychologist, I intend to create a space that is inclusive, warm, inviting and calm. As an Indigenous woman who wishes to work with adult and senior Indigenous populations, the need to establish a comforting therapeutic environment is crucial. These survivors' voices deserve to be heard and validated.

The Indigenous aspect of this study is important due to need for more researcher that is cultural inclusivity in the mental health field. Cross-cultural principles to guide effective therapeutic work with Indigenous survivors may include: displaying humility, being respectfully curious, displaying genuine empathy, and acknowledging clients' hardship and resiliency.

This study contributes to our knowledge and understanding of Indigenous victimization within Canada, specifically CSA, and provides a window into the healing effects of nature engagement. Acknowledging Indigenous history and intergenerational trauma is extremely important in understanding how there may be cultural dynamics that contribute to a survivor's situation and wellbeing. Creating a holistic and inclusive environment may allow for narrative storytelling to flow with little distress. One participant found comfort in when I disclosed that I am an Indigenous female CSA survivor; as she smiled and said 'okay, so you get it, you know...'. This participant was referring to the cultural barriers and shared hardships of trauma. Another important element when working with Indigenous clients is their cultural traditions. One participant addressed the importance of going back to the land and learning more about her culture for guidance and healing.

I hope this study, focused on the power of nature healing for Indigenous survivors of CSA, and will inspire further research in this area. For mental health professionals and agencies that may consider creating programs for Indigenous women survivors of CSA, it is important to gain feedback from the group of interest, as they are the experts in their own lives and needs.

This study focused on stories shared by three Indigenous survivors during one interview at one point in time. Therefore, future research might address how the impacts on wellbeing arising from nature engagement change over a period of time. A longitudinal exploration may reveal knowledge about how survivors' changing emotions, meaning-making, and states of

wellbeing shift while in nature that could inform mental health professionals' responsive, client-centered practice. This study also focused on healing from CSA, reinforcing the resilience and capacity for wellness that exists for survivors. These findings add to the literature on the benefits of being in nature as a regular wellness practice, but also as an intervention for those who have experienced childhood trauma and other traumatic experiences. The results of this study may support arguments for protecting and even developing dedicated green spaces for nature engagement and mental health promotion. If clients are seeking nature engagement resources perhaps exploring what holistic health and wellness means to the client and finding out how each client wishes to achieve an optimal balance of their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional self. It may also be beneficial to explore and identify all external environmental factors that either support or impact overall health and wellness.

Researcher Reflections

When my Master of Education in School and Counselling Psychology program started, I was both fearful and excited to embark on this journey that was going to change my life forever. During my program, I was able to engage in practice and research on topics that were meaningful and significant. I wanted to study CSA, then I learned I also wanted to explore how being or engaging in nature can be healing. It was not until I experienced nature healing myself that I thought there might be others who have experienced this type of healing. From there, my passion grew; the more I reviewed the literature and the more clients I worked with during my intensive practicum, the more intrigued I became about this phenomenon. Once I started collecting data, the more I was validated for my interests in exploring the impact of nature engagement for Indigenous

women who have experienced CSA. I was grateful for this rich opportunity to talk with others about this phenomenon.

During this research process I was responsible to my participants. I was compelled to ensure their stories were heard, understood, and captured in my composite analysis. I was inclusive and respectful while conducting my research. As an Indigenous woman, it was important for me to acknowledge and respect our cultural values, practices, and beliefs. I am fortunate to have heard and explored these survivors' stories. However, I believe that there is still so much that can be learned from them about the healing benefits of nature engagement. I honor their courage; they have inspired me to continue this important work in practice and research. I am forever grateful that these women trusted me with their stories and experiences.

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APPENDIX A

Department of *Educational Psychology and Special Education*
University of Saskatchewan

**SEEKING INDIGENOUS FEMALE PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A
PAST CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE FOR
RESEARCH IN NATURE ENGAGEMENT PHOTO PROJECT!**

I am an Indigenous female student researcher seeking Indigenous women who have experienced a past childhood sexual abuse and are willing to share their healing experiences using a photo conceptualization method i.e.: the use of nature photographs. The purpose of this study is to use photo-elicitation that will acknowledge Indigenous women survivors experience(s) and explore healing qualities of nature engagement.

Please consider volunteering if you are:

- i. English speaking female
- ii. Indigenous descent
- iii. Must be at least 18 years of age
- iv. Experienced past childhood sexual abuse (before 16 years of age)
- v. Not currently in a state of crisis
- vi. Experienced nature as healing and be willing and able to discuss experience.

Participants will:

- o Have two points of contact with an Indigenous researcher.
- o One telephone/email connection and the second point of contact is a semi-structured interview (approximately 60 minutes).
- o Gain experience using photos to express voice and healing experience.

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*For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,*

*please contact:*

*Tania J. Rediron B.A., B.Ed.*

*School & Counselling Psychology Master Student*

*Email at: [Nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:Nature.healing@usask.ca)*

**This study has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research  
Ethics Board**

## APPENDIX B

### SCREENING PHONE CALL: INDIGENOUS WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE REFLECT ON THE POWER OF NATURE ENGAGEMENT

Hello

This is Tania Rediron, an Indigenous researcher seeking participants for my photovoice research study and I'm following up about your interest in my study. Thank you for contacting me. This phone call is to tell you more about the project and what is involved for volunteers, as well as make sure you meet the criteria needed to participate. Is this a good time to speak? First, let me tell you about who I am looking to have participate in the study. I am seeking an Indigenous English-speaking Female over the age of 18 years of age residing in Saskatoon. Who has had a past experience with CSA and who have experienced healing qualities through nature engagement.

So, let's go through each point and you can let me know whether this is true of you or not.

- English speaking female
- Indigenous descent (does not have to be Cree descent)
- Must be at least 18 years of age.
- Experienced a past childhood sexual abuse (before 16 years of age).
- Not currently in a state of crisis.
- Experienced nature as a healing resource.

Lastly, this is not a requirement of my study, but I am curious as to what supports do you currently have? Thank you for sharing that information. Additionally, I will be sending a document that contains support resources via email.

Based on answers, "Great, you meet all the criteria to volunteer" OR "I'm sorry but we won't be able to include you because \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for your interest and taking the time to be in touch."

Due to our current COVID-19 pandemic, I have created ways in which we can social distance and still interact in a manner that is safe and secure for both of us. Are you comfortable moving forward even though we cannot physical meet in person?

So, now let me briefly describe what is involved if you decide to volunteer for the project.

- This study's purpose is to explore **the role of nature** in Indigenous women's CSA healing journey. My interest lies in nature healing and not your CSA experience(s). Due to the stigmas that surrounds CSA there has been a development of denial that CSA is prevalent in our society. Survivors often face significant barriers as it pertains to their voices being believed, acknowledge and rendered visible. It is my research goal to examine the use of photo elicitation as a therapeutic intervention with Indigenous women who have experienced a past CSA, with a focus on their experiences in nature. We will **not be** discussing your experience of CSA rather, we **will be** discussing your healing journey and how nature has aided in this process.

- Please be aware that I am aware of the sensitivity of this issue and will proceed in a highly ethical and professional manner. Please note: that I am not interested in the details of your CSA experience, this is not my focus of this study. However, I will be mindful of any thoughts or experiences that may be triggered no matter what stage you are in life while we speak on your healing and how nature has played a part in that. I am aware of the visitation of that trauma and you will be capturing photos of nature scenes and how that represents your experience of healing from childhood sexual abuse.
- We will have two points of contact, this phone call and one scheduled interview. Therefore, participating in this study means that at your convenience, we will schedule our one interview via Webex (which is a web-based video conferencing tool that offers quality video and audio). Webex is a secure and safe way to have a conversation I will require your email to send you an invitation and all you have to do is accept the invitation and sign in on our scheduled date and time. At the beginning of this Webex meeting we will complete all necessary paperwork this includes oral consent, transcript, and photo release forms. Oral consent will reduce the risk of personally identifying documents floating around. This interview will last approx.. 60-90 minutes. You may also request a telephone interview.
- Refer to Appendix D to explain to participants the photo guidelines and instructions.
- During our audio recorded interview (1 week after this conversation) you will send your 3-5 photo(s) to me via email ([nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:nature.healing@usask.ca)) one day prior to our scheduled interview. These photos will be securely saved on to my PI's OneDrive Usask data storage account and stored away safely until I view them with you during our interview and data analysis.
- If you could label your photos 1-5 (or if you have a meaningful title for it that is fine too) so that we can avoid miscommunication. As our starting point would you label your number 1 photo as being the *most significant* in your healing and we can move on to the rest throughout the interview.
- We will have an open-ended conversation regarding the meaning behind those photos and how they pertain to nature as a healing resource. I have created some interview questions that I will prompt you will as we go through each photo. I have allotted about 15 mins per photo, of course this is time pending. We may not cover all five photos, three is our goal to ensure I am gaining a great insight into your nature healing journey.
- Again, you will be asked questions of an open-ended nature so that I can gain information about your experiences. Your participation will involve approximately 60-90 minutes.
- The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed for my thesis data analysis. I will transcribe the raw data from the interview. You do have an option of

requesting a copy of the transcribed data. Immediately after our interview you may change, alter, or delete something. If there are no concerns and will begin analysis. Would you be interested in doing this? Your oral consent will be taken at the beginning of our Webex meeting as well.

Also know you have the right to change your mind and withdraw from the study at any point without consequence or penalty. I will immediately e-transfer the \$25 honorarium.

Do you have any questions before we go ahead and schedule our interview?

Date:

Time:

Email:

One last thing you will receive an invitation of our Webex meeting immediately after this conversation that you will need to accept and keep our meeting ID confidential so that when the day comes you can enter the meeting ID and passcode to enter the meeting.

Thank you again. Your willingness to contribute is much appreciated. Please feel free to call or email me. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing you on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

## APPENDIX C



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Education

*Participant Consent*

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL  
PSYCHOLOGY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION  
EDUCATION.USASK.CA

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**You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:**

**Researcher(s): Tania Rediron B.A., B.Ed., School & Counselling Psychology Master Student, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, [nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:nature.healing@usask.ca)**

**Supervisor: Stephanie Martin Ph.D., Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, 306.966.5259, [stephanie.martin@usask.ca](mailto:stephanie.martin@usask.ca)**

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- The purpose of this study is to explore the role of nature engagement in Indigenous women's healing journey.
- Photo-elicitation will enable participants to describe their experience in their own words using photographs to help conceptualize their thoughts and feelings.

**Procedures:**

- At this present time, the researcher and participants would have been in telephone contact to schedule this interview session. We have previously discussed photo directions, guidelines, and the instructions of study. I have also sent a copy of the support resources form for your convenience, if needed.
- At this present time, we will discuss consent and the interview will begin immediately after, this scheduled session will be our second and last point of contact. Please note that this interview may be requested as either via Webex or telephone.
- During the next week you were directed to capture a current photo in nature or use a previous photo that you have captured. These photos will best represent your healing journey and how you feel that nature aids in your overall health and wellbeing. These photos will only be of nature and not including any individuals or humans. You have sent these photos to me via email and I have securely stored them for my viewing during this interview and for my future data analysis. These photos will only be used for my thesis, they will not be in any publications or presentations.
- A copy of detailed photo guidelines and instructions has been issued to you via email as a resource in order to protect yourself and other's confidentiality. For example, photos cannot contain any identifying information which includes but not limited to faces of people, yourself or a third party (e.g., friends or family members). The photographs will be sent to me the day prior to the interview via email. I will have these photos open on secure Usask Onedrive device during our interview. Emails will be securely stored separately from the data.
- These photos will inform the interview by way of scripted questions prepared by myself to inquire about what makes this nature piece/memory/moment a part of their healing journey. These questions are derived around exploring the healing effects of nature.
- During this interview we will have a conversation regarding your experiences of nature engagement. I am not seeking for a detailed accounts of your childhood sexual

abuse experience. Rather, I am interested in your experience of nature engagement and how that contributed to your healing journey.

- Immediately after our interview I will provide time for you to alter, change or delete any information you wish to not have included from our interview as these interviews will be transcribed.
- I will transcribe the raw data from the interview. If you do have adjustments to be made please contact me. If you wish to add, alter or delete any information you have shared, please contact me using the information on the top of page one. If I do not hear from you I will proceed with analyzing the transcript from the interview.
- This interview is taking place via of Webex to ensure the safety and wellness of all parties involved during this COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on comfortability participants may also request a telephone interview.
- Webex platform: <https://www.webex.com/>
- Webex privacy and security: <https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/about/trust-center/webex.html#%7Edata-protection-and-privacy>
- This interview is being audio-recorded and will be transcribed for data analysis. Data from this interview will be used for the master student's (Tania Rediron) thesis. Data collected from this interview will be summarized or direct quotations from our sessions together. No identifying information will be used within the thesis. Please be aware that your photos may also be used as a part of the master student's thesis.

#### **Potential Risks:**

- My study is to explore your healing journey and how nature engagement may have influenced that. However, I am aware that speaking on the journey may trigger emotional stressors. There are anticipated risks associated with this research study. Speaking on past experiences of childhood sexual abuse may trigger emotional and psychological responses.
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:**
- I have incorporated a list of community resources and support to aid in case of emotional or psychological distress.
- I have incorporated a debriefing and checkout with each scheduled interview.
- Audio will be recorded during the Interview so that I may analysis the data, and for participants to keep in mind that there is no guarantee of privacy with the Webex platform website.
- I will save these recordings to a secure Usask data storage device to ensure its security.

#### **Potential Benefits:**

- There are potential benefits of this study, however; they are not guaranteed. Voices of survivors rendered visible, research has proven that survivors may feel a sense of empowerment once their story and journey has been verbalized.
- Your participation in this study may aid in continuing education for researchers or health professionals regarding experiences and supports for Indigenous survivors.

#### **Compensation:**

- In appreciation for your time, you will be compensated \$25.00, via e-transfer.

#### **Confidentiality:**

- All data collected in this study will be kept confidential. Participants will be assigned unique identification numbers and these numbers will be used on research-related information collected about the you during the study. In this way, your identity will be kept confidential from everybody except the researchers.
- When using any web platform, there is no guarantee of privacy of data; however, certain precautions can be taken to protect identifying information. The videoconference or phone call interview will be conducting in a private space in my home that is not accessible by individuals outside of the research time.
- Participants must agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of our Interview.
- Participants can protect their identity and increase the protection of their personal information by using only a nickname or a substitute name, you can turn off your camera during our Webex or telephone interview.
- The researcher(s) will not maintain as confidential information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of an infant, child, or youth, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he or she may be required to report it to the authorities as her duty to report.

**Storage of Data:**

- Information that contains your identity (e.g., this Consent form) will be kept separately from the rest of the data collected from you (ie: interview). All electronic data files will be stored on the PI's secure network using a secure Usask data collection storage system. This data collected will be saved for five years post-publication and when no longer required, data will be destroyed beyond recovery.

**Right to Withdraw:**

- Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. You can request to have the digital recorder turned off without giving a reason.
- Should you wish to withdraw, your data will be immediately destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data have been pooled. After this time, it is possible that some form of the research dissemination will have already occurred, and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.
- You will receive compensation even if you choose to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at this point. A deadline for withdrawal will be two weeks after data collection; October 9, 2020.

**Support Resources:**

\*A copy of these support resources will be sent via email for your convenience

Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre (SSAIC)

#201- 506 25<sup>th</sup> Street East

Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7

Canada

Telephone: (306) 244-2294

Email: [info@ssaic.ca](mailto:info@ssaic.ca)

Fee: No charge

Family Service Saskatoon (FSS)  
#102- 506- 25<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7  
Telephone: (306) 244-0127  
Email: [info@familyservice.sk.ca](mailto:info@familyservice.sk.ca)  
Fee: Sliding scale (dependent on income)

Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service (SCIS)  
103-506 25<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7  
24-hour Crisis line telephone: (306) 933-6200  
Email: [info@saskatooncrisis.ca](mailto:info@saskatooncrisis.ca) (Administrative email online and is not monitored outside business hours.)  
Fee: No charge

**Sexual Abuse Information:**

Government of Canada: Healthy living: Coping with emotional reactions  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/coping-emotional-reactions.html>

Canadian Centre for Child Protection: Support for survivors and their families

<https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/survivors/>

Indigenous mental health counselling: May request Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut languages

<https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/>

**Follow up:**

To obtain results from the study, please feel free to contact the student researcher at [nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:nature.healing@usask.ca)

**Questions or Concerns:**

- You can contact the researcher at any time using the information at the top of page 1.
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 306.966.2975 or [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca). Out of town participants may call 1.888.966.2975.

Y

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided: I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to the audio recording to be used for further analysis and dissemination.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to the release of my photos to be used for further analysis and dissemination. I consent to the release of my photos being used for the purposes of this study.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to the release of my transcribed interview data to be used for further analysis and dissemination.

A copy of this consent form will be provided to you for your records.



I read and explained this consent form to the participant before receiving the participants consent, and the participants had knowledge of it's contents and appeared to understand it.  
**Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oral Consent will the taken via Webex or phonecall.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Researcher's  
Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

*A copy of this consent will be emailed to you, and a copy will be secured by the researcher.*

## APPENDIX D



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The use of photographs are included in this study because it may help create new meanings of your experience(s) and it is another tool which you can use to help me understand your experiences.

### **Photo Directions:**

During our first initial telephone meeting you will be introduced to the study and photo guidelines. We will schedule the first interview for one week after this meeting. Within that week, I am asking you to take pictures or use previously captured photos that represent nature engagement. I am interested in the healing you experience while in a nature setting and how nature may have been healing for you and your journey recovering from childhood sexual abuse. During our interview I request that you choose three-five photos that best represent your experience of using nature as a healing resource.

### **Photo Guidelines:**

In order to protect your and other's confidentiality there are some guidelines/rules for using photos.

- You are creatively free to capture photos of nature settings, whatever represents your experience of childhood sexual abuse and how you are using nature as a part of your healing journey.
- You CAN capture photos of objects, nature settings, places, and animals.
- You CAN NOT include faces of people either yourself or 3<sup>rd</sup> parties (eg., friends or family members). This is to protect your confidentiality as well as others.
- You CAN NOT include any identifying information and should not be photographed either (e.g., your name, address, or anything else that may allow others to identify you).
- Here are some questions to help you think about your childhood sexual abuse experience. You may or may not find these questions useful so please feel free to use or not use what feels right to you. How do you conceptualize your feelings in a nature setting? What positive personal experiences do you experience while in nature? How do you believe your physical world aids you in wellness and your continued healing journey?

### **Photo Copyright Release:**

Photographer's initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

The above-named Photographer hereby warrants being the legal copyright owner in the work described below.

3-5 photos captured for the purpose of research in the thesis work titled: **INDIGENOUS WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE REFLECT ON THE POWER OF NATURE ENGAGEMENT**

The photographer hereby grants permission to Tania J. Rediron B.A., B.Ed. (Master student) to use the 3-5 photos for further analysis and dissemination for the purpose of her thesis research study.

Oral consent received at Saskatoon, SK on this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2020.

If you have any questions about the photo guidelines or the study in general please email the student researcher at [nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:nature.healing@usask.ca)

## APPENDIX E



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Saskatoon Counselling Services should you experience any emotional anxiety or distress as a result of our interviews. Below is a compiled list of services.

#### **Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre (SSAIC)**

#201- 506 25<sup>th</sup> Street East

Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7

Canada

Telephone: (306) 244-2294

Email: [info@ssaic.ca](mailto:info@ssaic.ca)

Fee: No charge

#### **Family Service Saskatoon (FSS)**

#102- 506- 25<sup>th</sup> Street East

Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7

Telephone: (306) 244-0127

Email: [info@familyservice.sk.ca](mailto:info@familyservice.sk.ca)

Fee: Sliding scale (dependent on income)

#### **Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service (SCIS)**

103-506 25<sup>th</sup> Street East

Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4A7

24-hour Crisis line telephone: (306) 933-6200

Email: [info@saskatooncrisis.ca](mailto:info@saskatooncrisis.ca) (Administrative email online and is not monitored outside business hours.)

Fee: No charge

#### **Sexual Abuse Information:**

Government of Canada: Healthy living: Coping with emotional reactions

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/coping-emotional-reactions.html>

Canadian Centre for Child Protection: Support for survivors and their families

<https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/survivors/>

Indigenous mental health counselling: May request Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut languages

<https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/>

## APPENDIX F Screening Process

**Part 1:** Screening process via telephone- participants must meet the following criteria:

- vii. English speaking female
- viii. Indigenous decent
- ix. Must be at least 18 years of age
- x. Experienced past childhood sexual abuse (before 16 years of age)
- xi. Not currently in a state of crisis
- xii. Experienced nature as healing, and be willing and able to discuss experience

Participants must be comfortable with not physically meeting in person rather completing a Webex meeting scheduled by me. Phone interviews will also be considered.

If individuals meet participation requirements, the conversation will turn to addressing issues in Part 2 (below). If individuals do not meet criteria, I will express my gratitude for their interest and explain which of the above criteria they do not meet for the study. If they are interested, I will provide them with some referral sources over the telephone (the same ones identified on the Consent Form)

**Part 2:** Scheduling of interviews and directions

Discuss Webex app/website (provide details of how to download and access)

Explain that I will be needing their email to send an invitation with a unique code that only we have access too. Participant will receive a notification that will prompt them to accept or decline our meeting.

Schedule date and time for Webex (or telephone) meeting to discuss oral consent and complete the semi-structured interview.

Provide directions/guidelines for photography

Note that documents (consent form, photo guidelines and photo release form) will be sent via email one week prior to the scheduled research interview.

Address any questions or comments regarding study focus and procedures

## APPENDIX G

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide (60-90 minutes)**

#### **Part 1: Orientation**

Introductions (greet and address any Webex technical difficulties)

I will provide an overview of the structure of the interview. We will start the audio recording now and discuss informed consent [refer to Consent form and review all content with participant}. Please follow along with me and ask any questions you may have. Once I have documented your oral consent to proceed, then I will ask you a series of questions in which I would like for you to respond in a manner that is your truth and best represents your healing journey from CSA in a nature setting. Reminder: this study is to focus on how nature engagement is healing for you, not the focus on your experience of CSA.

If you have any questions at any time please feel free to ask or if you do not understand the question, I will elaborate. Again, if at any time you are feeling uncomfortable please let me know and we can take a break. Please remember that your time with me is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any given time, just let me know.

\*Document oral consent & time

#### **Part 2: Semi-structured interview (start audio recording)**

Participants will be asked to share their photos with me via email 1 day prior to our interview. I will upload their photos to my secure Usask Onedrive for viewing during the interview and for further data analysis. I will have the participants label photos 1-5 to avoid miscommunication. The first will be the most significant to share as our starting point. During our interview, I will have the photo present on my laptop as we engage in questions. Assuming there are 3 photos I will allow for 15 mins of sharing for each photo. If time allots, we will explore the other 2 photos. This decision is dependent on time and how detailed the participants responses are. I will explain to participants that I will be asking open-ended questions to help them elaborate on each photo in a way that will help me understand the story of their journey and how they have found healing through nature engagement.

The interview will be loosely structured around the following questions:

#### **Interview Questions**

Tell me what is in the photo?

Probe: What is meaningful about this photo for you?

How does this photo represent your healing from CSA?

Probe: Tell me more about that. Was that important for you?

Tell me about how this nature photo has been a part of your healing from CSA?

Probe: What was that like for you? What is significant about this for you?

As a survivor, what is being in nature like for you?

Probe: Tell me more about that. How do you feel about that?

What does land-based wellness mean to you?

Probe: Can you give me an example. Tell me more.

How do you feel that nature engagement is viewed as healing?

Probe: Has this changed over time? Tell me more about that.

‘Check-ins’ will occur throughout the interview, such as:

How are you feeling?

Do you need a break?

Shall we continue?

Icebreaker example:

Tell me a story about you.

What caught your interest about my project?

**Part 3: Discuss resource support sheet**

Family Service Saskatoon, Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre, and Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service as well as, general information websites.

**Part 4: Gratitude**

We have had a very detailed and wonderful conversation. I wanted to take this time now to thank you for sharing your journey and photos, I appreciate you taking the time to volunteer for my study.

Are there any further questions you may have regarding this interview or my study, or anything that we've missed about your story and using nature as a healing resource?

Remind participants of my contact information.

**Part 5:** Provide \$25 honorarium via e-transfer (digital receipt, after digital receipt it received, it will be stored with consent forms).

## APPENDIX H



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### Debriefing Form

**Project title:** Using photo-elicitation to explore nature engagement for Indigenous women survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA).

#### Contact Information:

##### Master Student investigator:

- Tania J. Rediron B.A., B.Ed. Master student, Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education, [nature.healing@usask.ca](mailto:nature.healing@usask.ca)

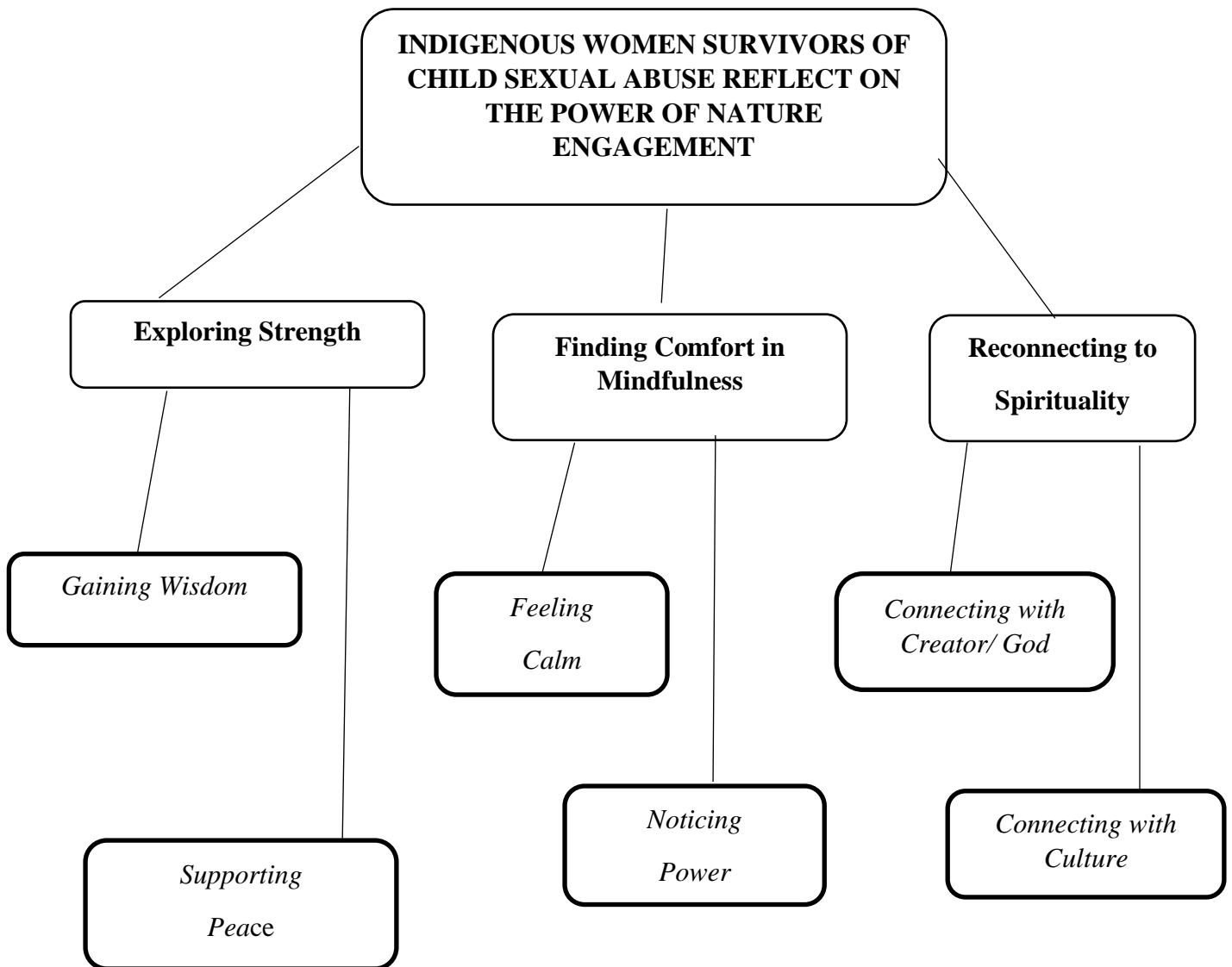
##### Principal Investigator:

- Dr. Stephanie Martin  
Office ED 3115  
28 Campus Drive.  
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1  
Telephone: (306) 966-5259  
Email: [stephanie.martin@usask.ca](mailto:stephanie.martin@usask.ca)

### Thank you for participating in this study!

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Indigenous women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and the healing properties of nature engagement. Research suggests that exposure to nature has beneficial effects to our overall health and wellbeing. Our natural surroundings have been found to alleviate stress, improve psychological well-being, and decrease healing time. Using photo-elicitation enables you to describe your experience in your own words using photographs to help conceptualize your thoughts and feelings. If you have any questions or concerns, or if you wish to discuss accessing community resources, please feel free to contact the Student Researcher or the Principal Investigator.





**Figure 1**  
*Overview of Themes*



**Figure 2**  
*Mountain Lake*



**Figure 3**  
*Snowy Plains*



**Figure 4**  
*Water Ripples*



**Figure 5**  
*Winter Pines*



**Figure 6**

*Fall Tree*



**Figure 7**

*Country Clouds*



**Figure 8**  
*Blue Heron*



**Figure 9**  
*The Arbor*