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Sisters in Spirit Research Framework: Reflecting on Methodology and Process

Jennifer King

The Native Women’s Association of Canada and the Sisters In Spirit Initiative

The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) was founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Aboriginal women within the Aboriginal community and Canadian society. NWAC is an aggregate of thirteen Native women’s organizations from across Canada and was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1974. NWAC works to help empower women by being involved in developing and changing policy and legislation that affects them, and by involving them in the development and delivery of programs that promote equal opportunity for Aboriginal women. Much like a “grandmother’s lodge,” we as aunties, mothers, sisters, brothers, and relatives collectively recognize, respect, promote, defend, and enhance our Native ancestral laws, spiritual beliefs, language, and traditions given to us by the Creator.

The Sisters In Spirit initiative is a multi-year research, education, and policy initiative addressing the disproportionate number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The initiative is designed to help NWAC and other stakeholders better understand the root causes of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and identify measures to increase their safety and well-being. This work is funded by Status of Women Canada. Through the Sisters In Spirit initiative, NWAC works to honour the women and girls who have been lost to violence and remember those still missing.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the methodology and processes of research carried out through the Sisters In Spirit initiative. Exploring the strengths and limitations of our methods (and articulating why we are comfortable with the limitations) is an important part of “good research,” and we hope that other individuals and organizations can build on our experience.

Research Framework

The Sisters In Spirit initiative seeks to reclaim traditional Aboriginal protocols, processes, and understandings around ways of knowing and what it means to

conduct research. NWAC has developed a community-based research plan (CBRP) to guide our work in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. Our approach to Aboriginal community-based research involves a collaborative, reciprocal process between equal partners.¹ This methodology privileges the experiences of Aboriginal women, girls, and their families, and incorporates key principles of participatory action research (PAR). PAR is research directed towards changing structures that promote inequality. It emphasizes the direct participation of research participants in the entire research and action process (Hick 2002, 83). The ethical principles that guide our work are woven throughout the research process.

Our approach reflects a relationship-based model of research, and is guided by the cultural and ethical values of caring, sharing, trust, and strength. This participant-oriented, experiential methodology ensures that families' different cultures, values, traditions, needs, and perspectives are reflected in the stories they share. Our research reflects a visionary philosophy in which families and other stakeholders, such as community members and service providers, are asked to share their vision for the future. NWAC is dedicated to building sincere, collaborative relationships with participating family members, as without their ongoing vision, strength, and commitment the Sisters In Spirit initiative would not have been realized.

As a research-for-change process, the Sisters In Spirit initiative is about more than simply “finding out” about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Sisters In Spirit research activities are designed to uncover root causes, circumstances, and trends in order to promote policy change that will increase the personal safety and security of all Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. In particular, the initiative explores the relationship between violence and the stereotypes and assumptions surrounding “Aboriginal womanhood” (Anderson 2006). NWAC believes that the ongoing effects of colonization in Canada have led to the dehumanization of Aboriginal women and girls and considers this to be a root cause of the violence they experience. Our research is guided by the following four questions:

1. What are the circumstances, root causes, and trends leading to racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women in Canada?
2. How has the justice system responded to family and community reports of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada? What issues, challenges, and gaps exist?
3. What changes need to be implemented in order to improve the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women in Canada—particularly related to this issue?
4. How might these changes be implemented in order to reduce or prevent racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women, particularly that which results in disappearance or death?

It is important to note that in the context of this research initiative, the word “murder” is used to refer to deaths resulting from homicide and negligence (including deliberate omission/commission of acts). We also track cases of “suspicious death.” “Suspicious death” refers to incidents that police have declared natural or accidental, but that family or community members regard as suspicious. Consider, for example, Mary’s story. Mary was missing for several days before being found along the side of a rural road a few kilometres from her home. According to police, she died of exposure after attempting to walk home from a party at a neighbour’s house. Her mother, however, tells us that Mary had severe knee problems and would never have attempted to walk such a long distance, especially in frigid weather. How, then, was Mary found miles from the location where she was last seen? Mary’s mother asked police to investigate further, but they refused. Because Mary’s mother has raised serious and unanswered questions about the circumstances of her daughter’s passing, not to mention concerns about the police response to her death, we consider Mary’s death to be “suspicious.” In this way, our conceptualization of “suspicious death” is driven not by police or judicial determinations, but by family and community knowledge about the death of a particular woman or girl.

Sisters In Spirit research activities are conducted using a mixed-methods approach. NWAC has created a database for recording demographic and other quantitative information about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Qualitative research is carried out through storytelling (interviews) with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Using the life cycle as a guide, families are invited to share the life story of their daughter, sister, mother, or grandmother. These stories also explore families’ experiences in relation to the justice system, the media, victim services, and other institutional and community supports. The stories shared are placed within the broader framework of the Sisters In Spirit initiative and serve to confirm conclusions based on other research, illustrate common themes, inform policy recommendations, and identify future directions.

The analysis of data collected through the Sisters In Spirit initiative is guided by a grounded theory perspective. This inductive approach holds that conclusions must be grounded in the data collected; researchers should build theories that reflect the evidence, rather than attempting to make the data “fit” into preconceived hypotheses. The fluidity associated with a grounded theory perspective means that our research tools, such as NWAC’s database of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and the Sisters In Spirit CBRP, and published research reports are also fluid and will be revised as the data dictates.

Description of Quantitative Research

The collection and analysis of quantitative data is fundamental to the Sisters In Spirit initiative. As was noted above, the initiative is concerned with identifying

preventative measures and effective responses to increase the personal safety and security of Aboriginal women and girls. Doing so, however, requires knowledge of the current (and historical) situation, as well as an understanding of circumstances, trends, and root causes.² To this end, NWAC has developed a database to record information about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. As of March 2009, the database contained almost two hundred variables organized according to four themes: demographic information; life experiences (of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls); incident information; and trial information. Criteria for inclusion in the database are as follows:

- Aboriginal identity. The database includes only cases involving First Nations (status and non-status), Métis, or Inuit women and girls.
- Murdered (based on NWAC's definition of murder, as described above), suspicious death, or missing. If a woman or girl is safely found, her name is removed from the NWAC database.
- Female or living as a woman. A very small number of cases involve missing or murdered transgendered or transsexual Aboriginal women.
- Born in or connected to a community in Canada. While the database does include a few cases of women from Canada who disappeared or were murdered in the United States, NWAC does not include the names of women from the United States, Mexico, or other Indigenous women who are missing or who have been murdered.

The database is populated mainly through secondary research. Frequent sources include newspaper articles and other news sources; RCMP, provincial, and municipal law enforcement websites; and reported court decisions. Secondary source data is supplemented by information shared through family interviews, as well as reports from community members and other key informants, such as police officers. The design of the database, variables, and variable values were informed by the work of other research bodies, particularly Statistics Canada. This allows for comparability between Sisters In Spirit research findings and general population trends related to violence against women and homicide in Canada.

Issues in Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

While we rely heavily on secondary source research, we recognize that there are many limitations associated with this method. Indeed, we believe that our database may account for only a fraction of the actual number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Cases presented in the public domain reflect only those incidents that are (a) reported to police/media, (b) acknowledged by police/media, and (c) publicized by police/media. Cases that fail to meet these separate but interconnected conditions are generally not reflected in our research findings.³

In considering these limitations, it is necessary to remember the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada as over-policed and under-protected (Aboriginal

Justice Inquiry Commission 1999). As noted by Amnesty International Canada (2004, 30), “[m]any Indigenous people feel they have no reason to trust police and as a consequence, are reluctant to turn to police for protection.” This history affects the willingness and readiness of some families to contact police when a family member goes missing. Furthermore, while homicides are more likely than most other crimes to be known to police and subject to investigation (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2006, 2), cases that are known to police are not necessarily reported in the media and as such may not be captured through secondary research methods.

While law enforcement agencies generally insist that all cases are handled the same, regardless of the gender, race, or class of persons concerned, our research indicates that family members often experience barriers when attempting to report a missing loved one to police (NWAC 2008b). How many families, perhaps already suspicious of police, have abandoned their attempt to file a missing persons report after being rebuffed by police? Such questions and gaps in the research are compounded by the potential for reported cases to be overlooked or unacknowledged by the media. Bias in the media, particularly related to decisions to highlight certain stories and minimize or dismiss others, often affects the reporting of stories about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls (Goulding 2001; Gilchrist 2007). Reflecting on our quantitative research methods has prompted important questions with respect to the police and media: in cases where reports of missing women and girls are accepted, or in homicides involving Aboriginal women and girls, how regularly do police use the media to raise awareness about these cases and encourage tips? What factors influence police decisions to engage (or not engage) with the media?

NWAC recognizes that there are limitations associated with our secondary research methods and that these limitations impact our findings, not only in terms of “under-counting” the number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada but also with respect to the depth of our analysis. Media reports concerning cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women are often limited to a description of the incident, providing only such details as the woman’s name, location, date of disappearance or death, and cause of death. Meanwhile, details about the woman or girl involved, her life, and her experiences, are generally minimal. Most reports provide only basic demographic information such as the woman’s age, place of residence, and, sometimes, her number of children. Data collection is also hindered by the media’s failure to provide ongoing coverage of cases involving Aboriginal women and girls. In many instances the media reports when a person is charged, but fails to provide any subsequent information about a trial or other outcomes of the charges laid (if, for example, the person charged pleads guilty). Sadly, some cases are afforded only a single news article.

Finally, we recognize that media reports convey only the “official” version of events and do not necessarily represent the feelings or beliefs of family or community members. Family and community members have told us about

deaths declared accidental by police (in one instance, for example, the death was declared a drug overdose; in another the cause of death was cited as exposure), but considered suspicious by the family or community. Unfortunately, since such community knowledge is rarely (if ever) reflected in the media, our awareness of such incidents is dependent on the ability and willingness of family or community members to come forward and advise NWAC of these cases.

The general absence of substantive media reporting around cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls raises an important question: Should life experiences be reported in the media? If so, which experiences? What about personal and traumatic experiences like violence, addiction, or poverty? Certainly, we do not advocate “hiding” these experiences, as hiding such issues acts only to silence (and in many cases shame) those who experience them. But is it the place or role of the media to report on such experiences without the consent or control of the woman involved or those who loved her? At the same time, does failing to report in a substantive way conceal the experiences of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada? Put another way: Is it better to report on Aboriginal women’s experiences without providing the historical context of colonization than to not report at all? And if we ignore their experiences, how can we expect to create change? These are hard questions, without easy answers.

Identifying root causes of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls (one of our main research questions) is largely about uncovering commonalities and differences in life experiences. This approach in no way suggests that the “fault” lies with the individual. Rather, it allows us to identify the supports, resources, and opportunities necessary to improve well-being and reduce vulnerability. But because the media fails to report on the life experiences of these women and girls (and indeed, we are not even sure we want them to), we have faced challenges in identifying commonalities and differences between the women and their lives. This gap in our quantitative methods is addressed through our qualitative research. Through the storytelling, or “life story” process, we seek to give voice to their families and deepen our knowledge and understanding of the root causes surrounding the disappearance or death of their loved one.

Clearly, there exists a tension between our critique of media reporting on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, and NWAC’s reliance on these same reports as a main data source. In acknowledging the limitations of our quantitative research, it is important to discuss why we have adopted this method. Our reliance on secondary research is largely practical. Despite the limitations, media reports and other secondary sources are timely, national in scope, generally easy to access, and have some level of accuracy, especially when checked against multiple sources. Like many Aboriginal women’s organizations, NWAC lacks the resources to support frequent travel. Expecting family and community members to share their knowledge and experiences without spending time in their community, without taking the time to build relationships and trust, is both unrealistic and offensive. Such an approach is unlikely to yield comprehensive community

reports and, moreover, visiting a community for the sole purpose of extracting knowledge violates the ethics of conducting research with Aboriginal peoples. As such, we have found secondary research to be the most accessible and practical method for engaging in national research with limited resources.

It is important to recognize to that the Sisters In Spirit initiative represents the beginning, not the end, of critical research addressing missing and murdered Aboriginal girls in Canada. As one of the first stakeholders to address this issue, NWAC did not have the benefit of building on the experiences of or “lessons learned” from other research initiatives. In being open about and reflecting on the limitations of our methods, we hope to create space for dialogue surrounding different methods and strategies for carrying out this research.

Finally, it is important to note that NWAC is not the only stakeholder addressing the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Our research exists in the context of important work by other individuals, groups, and organizations. Some have compiled their own lists of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in order to raise awareness and advocate for change. Naturally, different research designs can lead to different findings between different groups and organizations addressing the same issue. For example, some lists include cases involving children who died as a result of neglect or abuse, while others focus on a specific geographic area such as the Highway of Tears (Highway 16) in British Columbia. Other lists may include deaths as a result of drugs, alcohol, or suicide. Some lists reflect a particular point in time and therefore include names of women or girls that have since been safely located.

Unfortunately, differing research results can lead to confusion and, in some instances, tension between individuals and groups working towards a common goal. Some advocates worry that differing numbers or findings may misrepresent the severity and pervasiveness of violence against Aboriginal women and girls, especially when one group reports numbers that are noticeably higher or lower than the others. Results based on differing methodologies can be misconstrued as a threat to the broader political objectives, thereby weakening relationships between individuals or groups that are actually working towards a common goal. And yet our vision is largely the same. We are all working to honour the women and girls who have been lost to violence and remember those still missing; to raise awareness about the disproportionate number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada; and to build the political will to address this crisis. Indeed, the bridges between us are much stronger than the politicization that works to drive us apart.

Description of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research conducted through the Sisters In Spirit initiative seeks to document, through life stories or storytelling, the experiences of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Their stories are based on interviews

conducted with family members. Structured around the life circle, the process allows family members to share the story of each woman or girl from birth to death or disappearance. The research also seeks to explore family members' experiences with the justice system, the media, victim services, and other institutional and community supports. Through storytelling, researchers acquire a better understanding of the root causes and circumstances surrounding missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.

While our quantitative processes reflect what might be termed a Western approach to research, storytelling is more reflective of traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing. As Thomas (2005, 252) explains: "Storytelling traditionally was, and still is, a teaching tool. As such, the stories that are told in research too will be teaching tools. Sharing stories validates the experiences of the storytellers, but also has the ability to give others with similar stories the strength, encouragement and support they need to tell their stories." In following traditional protocols and processes, we seek to create a context in which families feel safe and comfortable enough to share their stories openly.

As part of the storytelling process, researchers work to foster sincere, reciprocal relationships with participating family members. Relationship building as a research methodology (and a key research ethic) reflects traditional Aboriginal ways of being. As articulated by Kovach, a relationship-based model of research "honours the cultural value of relationship, it emphasizes people's ability to shape and change their own destiny, and it is respectful. By relationship, I mean a sincere, authentic investment in the community" (2005, 30). Indeed, research with family members is premised on the understanding that "research, like life, is about relationships" (ibid.).

In keeping with a relationship-based model of research, the storytelling process is collaborative and participant oriented. We acknowledge that participating family members are the authors/creators of the stories and the knowledge they contain, rather than participants in an external process. It is the families that do the storytelling. Our role as researchers is to use what has been shared to educate, raise awareness, and develop recommendations to create positive change. This emphasis on relationships and collaboration—how we understand the role of participating family members—is reflected in how we describe their involvement in the initiative. Rarely do we speak about family members as "participants"; rather, we speak about "participating family members" or simply "families."

In accordance with the principles of collaboration and inclusivity, there are no real criteria for selecting participating family members and, as such, no exclusionary conditions. Family members who express interest in the research are invited to share their story. Families may be introduced to the initiative through NWAC board members, NWAC staff, other participating family members, or someone familiar with the Sisters In Spirit initiative (such as a community member or service provider). In other instances, families contact NWAC directly to inquire about participation. Our objective, however, is to be as inclusive as possible and

we are always looking for new ways and opportunities to connect with family members. Through presentations at workshops, rallies, vigils, meetings, and conferences, NWAC staff and board members work to raise awareness about the research conducted through the Sisters In Spirit initiative. Efforts are also being made to connect with family members through new information and communication technologies such as Internet message boards and social networking sites like Facebook.

Not all family members are interested in participating in the research. Some prefer simply to post a missing alert or memoriam about their mother, daughter, or grandmother on NWAC's website. Others prefer to participate in education and awareness-raising activities, such as organizing vigils or speaking at events related to violence against Aboriginal women. However, we have found that while some families are initially hesitant to participate in the research aspect of Sisters In Spirit, they often develop an interest in the storytelling process after building a rapport with those involved in the initiative. This speaks to the importance of trust and dialogue with families as a precursor to the interview process.

Interviews conducted through the Sisters In Spirit initiative adhere to a relationship-based model of research. This approach requires that researchers take the time to establish a dialogue with interested family members prior to the interview (relationship-building is an ongoing process that begins with an initial "hello" and continues throughout the storytelling journey). Dialogue builds trust, and trust is integral to the storytelling process. Storytelling requires "high degrees of rapport, trust, and collaborative spirit" (Leavy 2007, 149). It is also necessary to take time to advise interested family members about the storytelling process, so that they can assess whether they feel prepared, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, to engage in the process.

While the interview is semi-structured, families have control over the stories they share. They are given a copy of the interview guide and may decline to answer particular questions. The process is best described as organic. The objective is to structure the interview around the preferences and comfort level of participating family members. Some families choose to lead the interview, using the interview questions to guide the process. Other families prefer the researcher to lead the process. Following the interview, researchers transcribe the interview and draft a story based on what was shared. The interview is followed by an ongoing dialogue; families are offered several opportunities to revise the story, and they may make changes or add new information at any time, even after the story has been published. Some family members have written large portions of the stories themselves, while others offer only a few comments or suggestions. Again, the level of involvement depends on the preferences and comfort level of participating family members. Once the story has been published, NWAC continues to inform families as to the activities and progress of the Sisters In Spirit initiative.

As participating family members are "selected" through expressions of interest, relationships, and trust, interviews conducted through the Sisters In Spirit initia-

tive are not random. Rather, family members are “selected” through purposive sampling. As noted in the Sisters In Spirit CBRP, the purpose of such sampling is not to generalize to the larger population (as is often the case in quantitative research), but to clarify and deepen knowledge through comprehensive study (NWAC 2008a, 19). As such, our focus is on how the sample contributes to the research questions posed—how it broadens our understanding of root causes, trends, and experiences surrounding missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Still we believe that, as much as possible, the stories should reflect the distribution of the database and efforts are being made to meet this objective. For example, as most cases identified to date occurred in British Columbia (NWAC 2008b, 52), we recognize the need to connect with families of women or girls that disappeared or were murdered in this province. In this way, the database serves as a sampling frame for the interviews conducted.

Finally, it should be noted that NWAC is mindful of issues surrounding confidentiality and acquires the informed consent of participating family members. Family members are made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. In instances where families complete the interview but decide not to move forward with the story, NWAC will return or destroy the transcript. Families also have the option of allowing NWAC to retain the information shared (including the interview transcript) for the Sisters In Spirit database.

Issues in Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Storytelling has profound benefits for both researchers and participating family members (Thomas 2005, 252), but there are challenges associated with conducting these interviews. In addition to the challenges associated with the difficult and sensitive nature of this research, there are also practical issues related to poverty and lack of resources. Considering the high rates of poverty experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada, it is not surprising that some family members do not have regular home phone service or access to the Internet. Lack of access to these technologies makes it very difficult to build relationships or maintain contact with families, especially over long distances. Such issues are further complicated by the mobility of some Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada 2003, 11). Without the link afforded by home phone or Internet access, it can be easy to lose contact with families if they have to move or change jobs. Families may indicate an interest in the research, and even begin the process, but unfortunately lose touch with NWAC before the story is completed.

Such challenges are exacerbated by limited funding for Aboriginal women’s organizations such as NWAC, especially funds for travel. Certainly the availability of funds for travel has a real impact on our ability to conduct research with families over long distances. The storytelling process involves not only the interview, but one or more follow-up meetings to review the story and incorporate families’ changes and suggestions. In instances where participating family

members have access to a phone or the Internet, follow-up work can often be carried out via these technologies. But if they do not have access, our ability to build relationships, conduct interviews, and carry out follow-up meetings is dependent on funds to travel. Issues such as these speak to the difficulty of attempting to carry out a national research initiative without adequate funding.

In undertaking this work, we have considered how a relationship-based model of research impacts our understanding of concepts like informed consent. Participating family members are asked to sign an information and consent form. This form states that the information shared during the interview will be used to create documents such as policy papers, research papers, and reports. Yet while information presented as part of an aggregate analysis (based on the entire database or a subset of specific cases) protects the anonymity of the women or girls and their families,⁴ families have told us how upsetting or even traumatizing it is to find out that someone has been speaking about their loved one without their knowledge. Therefore, despite the consent afforded by the form, we have made it part of our research protocols (ethics) to try to advise families before referencing their stories as part of other papers or presentations. This does not mean that families have control over the analysis or conclusions drawn, or that NWAC cannot use the information shared if it loses contact with participating family members. It is simply about respect for families. We believe that if we plan to present a paper (academic or policy) based on families' experiences, we should make every effort to ensure that they know we are drawing on their story.

As part of the research process, we reflect on the strengths and limitations of our methods. We have considered possible challenges to the validity of the information collected through interviews with family members, as well as the potential limitations of this information. In particular, we have contemplated the extent to which families share/do not share information, because they remember or wish to present their daughter, sister, mother, or grandmother in a particular manner; because they are thinking about how other family members will be affected by the disclosure of particular information; or because they may be limited in their knowledge of their family member's experiences. In considering these issues, we contemplated our own experiences. One team member shared a particularly illustrative story about her own familial relationships:

If you had interviewed my mother about me when I was in my twenties there is a lot that she wouldn't know or a lot that she would have wrong, because I didn't necessarily tell her about everything that was going on in my life. My sister would have even fewer facts about that decade, because we were not in touch much then. My brother would know quite a bit more about my experiences, but he would likely leave out some of the details or put a positive spin on it, which is falsifying it to some degree. Why? Because (a) he wouldn't want to have his

children know X or Y about their aunt that might be considered “negative,” especially if he was involved in it as well; (b) he wouldn’t want overshadow my memory by relaying “negative” aspects of my life; or (c) he wouldn’t want to upset our mother by getting too specific about some unhappy memories. And this assumes that he knows everything that was going on in my life, which he didn’t, so his account would still be limited to only part of my story. So, no matter who you talked to in the family (mother, sister, brother) you would have an incomplete picture, slanted in a particular way because of the choices being made about sharing or not sharing information.

Her story speaks to the potential limitations of our approach. We are aware that family members, particularly parents, may not know the full or actual experiences of their daughter, sister, grandmother, or mother. Combine this with a fear of having your loved one branded as “bad,” and the “objectivity” or “accuracy” of the story becomes uncertain.

Yet critics should remember that objectivity is, at best, a relative concept. Indeed, we are suspicious of researchers who fail to recognize or acknowledge the preconceived assumptions, meanings, and values that are inherent to every story, perspective, or interpretation. Certainly the stories shared are told from a particular position, but that does not negate their value. To our knowledge, NWAC is one of the only actors (if not the only actor) to conduct quantitative and qualitative research on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls at the national level. Those who may critique our methods should remember that the stories shared represent “new information” and as such offer an immense contribution to our collective knowledge and understanding of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Our research is about giving voice to perspectives that have been ignored or devalued by other researchers and certainly in the larger societal context. Through storytelling, we revalue families’ positions and perspectives. As Thomas (2005, 244) explains: “Storytelling creates space for the ‘Other,’ or voices that have been excluded or erased, to be included in the dominant discourse. Storytelling fills the gaps in the present documentation of the lives of First Nations [and Aboriginal] peoples.” Moreover, if (as we maintain) there is no real objectivity, then everything is perspective, and if everything is perspective, our qualitative methods are no more or less biased than any other research endeavour.

This leads to another important point. In our experience, families may or may not know the whole story, but they are extremely forthcoming in sharing what they do know. This may be because the interviews begin with a discussion about what the information will be used for: to honour their loved one, to tell their story in a way they can control, and, perhaps most importantly, to create change. We explain that the research is about change to protect Aboriginal women, change to

increase access to justice, and change to improve resources and supports for the families of missing and murdered women and girls.⁵ Knowing that they control the content of the story, and that what they share will be used to improve the collective safety and well-being of Aboriginal women may account for the willingness of families to share freely in the interview.

It should be noted that while families control what appears in the story, everything shared during the interview is entered in the database. Therefore, even if certain information is excluded from the life story, it is captured elsewhere and included in the research findings. In this way, we are able to identify commonalities and differences without specifically attributing information or experiences to particular women or girls. And while participating families have the right to exclude interview information from the database, and may request to at any time, we have yet to encounter an instance where a family has asked to do so.

Dialogue with family members about the content of the story is an important part of the process. NWAC recognizes that ownership of this knowledge rests with the participating family members. They have control over what appears in the stories. At the same time, we as researchers drafting the stories have a responsibility to consider how the stories are presented. These are real stories of real mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, and their families. It is important, therefore, to recognize the role of the researcher as the “gatekeeper” of what was shared in the interview. Some of the interviews deal with themes of addiction, apprehension of children, or prison—themes often associated with “bad” women. Does recounting such experiences in detail really add value to the story? Our concern is that readers may focus on such details while overlooking contextual pieces around colonization, poverty, abuse, or neglect as a child, or previous experiences of violence. This means that, in drafting the stories, we may choose to include certain experiences and omit others.

Our role as gatekeeper becomes especially important when we consider that different family members have different levels of engagement with the review process. As was previously noted, some family members are very engaged, writing large portions of the stories themselves, while others offer few comments or suggestions. As such, in drafting the stories, we frequently ask ourselves: “If this story was about my mother, sister, daughter, or grandmother, how would I feel? Would I be comfortable with how her story is presented?” Such questions guide us as we work with families to facilitate the storytelling process.

The storytelling process is further complicated by the potential for differing opinions around the presentation of the story. Different family members may have differing perceptions or understandings of their loved one and her experiences, or may want her story presented in conflicting ways. Some may want to include details that other family members do not. There are also challenges specific to sharing the story of a woman whose disappearance or death remains unsolved. There can be tension between the family’s desire to share the full story of what they believe happened to their loved one, including who they might consider

responsible, and the need to uphold the integrity of an open police investigation. We are mindful that inadvertently disclosing information not already in the public domain could jeopardize or undermine an ongoing investigation. It is also necessary to consider how disclosing certain details may affect other family members, especially if the information was previously unknown to them. What if, for example, a participating family member tells us that her daughter was physically abused by her husband? How might the woman's children be affected by such a disclosure? What if they did not know about the abuse?

These are ongoing tensions and there are no easy or uniform solutions. We consider each story carefully, reflect on our concerns, and contemplate potential consequences. If we feel that a particular part of the story may have unintended or unanticipated outcomes, we discuss our concerns with participating family members. Families have control over the story, but at the same time, NWAC has a responsibility to consider how the stories we publish represent the woman or girl involved and how the story might affect those close to her. This too speaks to the importance of relationship-building as a research ethic. Taking the time to establish a collaborative dialogue with participating family members creates a safe and comfortable context from which to approach potentially sensitive issues or opposing views. In our experience, most differences are easily resolvable through honest and respectful dialogue.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual effect on those who undertake this research. The feelings of grief, trauma, and injustice associated with the issue of missing and murdered women and girls are, at times, overwhelming. Without proper supports, researchers may find themselves deeply affected by the trauma associated with this work. Researchers who have experienced similar or related issues may be unexpectedly "triggered" by the stories recounted by participating family members. In the absence of necessary supports, the potential for vicarious trauma is very real. This means that researchers, even those who have not experienced previous trauma, may suffer emotional distress as a direct result of their involvement in this research.

In relationship-based research, the lines between researcher/friend/support person are often unavoidably blurred. Balancing one's role when working with families who have experienced the trauma of the disappearance or murder of a loved one can be very challenging, especially in the absence of other supports/programming to help families deal with their grief. As a research, education, and policy initiative, Sisters In Spirit was not designed or intended to provide direct services like counselling, legal advice, or financial support. It is important, therefore, for NWAC to build links with service providers and other professionals who can offer such supports.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

As has been noted, NWAC is one of the few stakeholders (if not the only stakeholder) to carry out quantitative and qualitative research on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls at the national level. Our work represents the beginning, not the end, of critical research aimed at promoting the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. As we look forward, we consider the following best practices or lessons learned as a framework for conducting research on violence against Aboriginal women and girls:

- Interviews with families of missing and murdered women (or women who have survived violence) should be facilitated by individuals with experience in research involving trauma.
- An elder, counsellor, or other support person (minister, sibling, friend, etc.) should be present during the interviews and follow-up meetings.
- In conducting relationship-based research, the boundaries between researcher/friend/support person are frequently blurred. However, it is important to be clear about what sort of supports you (as a researcher), and the organization or institution you are working with, can provide. Are you qualified to act as counsellor or support person to families experiencing trauma? Are you capable of offering legal advice to families attempting to navigate the justice system? Failing to clearly articulate your role can easily build false expectations. Avoidable miscommunication has the potential to irrevocably damage the trust and rapport so essential to relationship-based research.
- Build relationships with service providers and other professionals and offer referrals when appropriate.
- Researchers and other staff engaging in this work must have access to supports like elders or counsellors.
- When applying for funding, it is imperative to identify the real cost (time, number of staff, consultants with specialized skills, support persons, etc.) of your research. If adequate funds are not secured, how will this affect your capacity to carry out this work? It may be necessary to revise your research design to reflect new circumstances.

As we work towards increasing the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada, we recognize that there is still much to do. NWAC hopes that our work through the Sisters In Spirit initiative will create a movement of community members, families, leaders, organizations, policy-makers, and academics, working together to create the real change required to protect our sisters.

Endnotes

- 1 In this paper, “we” and “our” are used interchangeably with “NWAC.” While the work of the Sisters In Spirit initiative was designed by, carried out, and belongs to NWAC, referring to the people involved in this process only as “NWAC” or the “organization” seemed too removed in the context of a paper emphasizing the value of relationship building as a research ethic and the importance of a participant-oriented approach.
- 2 Identifying cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls also serves to validate preliminary research presented during the 2004–2005 Sisters In Spirit campaign. Based on anecdotal evidence, NWAC estimated that five hundred Aboriginal women had gone missing or been murdered in the last two decades.
- 3 Exceptions include cases reported by family or community members, and information provided by other key informants (such as police officers).
- 4 In instances where aggregate data is drawn from a subset of the database, we are mindful of the need to ensure that the population size is large enough to protect the anonymity of the women and girls included in the subset.
- 5 In its broadest sense, access to justice encompasses the ability of Aboriginal women and girls to enjoy basic, fundamental standards of human rights. Discriminatory laws, programs, policies, and services must be identified and the discrimination removed.

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