

December 06, 2018
(November Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Fran and I are putting together a book of pictures and stories of our 50 years of marriage. As I was thinking about and organizing the material I realized how valuable our 6+ years of correspondence has been for stories about our lives. For that I want to thank you for continuing the exchanges—and making sure that we keep it going even if we are late every so often. Did you realize that December 2018 will mark the completion of our 7th year of monthly correspondence? Fran added: “This means you were 14 when the exchange began”. Very impressive!!!

The value of this type of exchange is not just for our purposes, but according to the research I have seen, story-telling narratives are extremely important for building and maintaining one’s identity and sense of self.

I came across this point when I was doing some research on suicide—and especially adolescent suicide. The issue arose because the suicide rates are so high in some of the Indigenous communities and in rural towns in northern Québec. The researchers were trying to discover why this was the case.

Some of the most insightful and valuable research comes from multi-year studies of Indigenous adolescent suicide and identity in BC. Much of it was developed by Chandler and Lalonde: two researchers at UBC.

Chandler, M. J., & Lalonde, C. E. (2008). Cultural Continuity as a Moderator of Suicide Risk among Canada’s First Nations. In L. Kirmayer & G. Valaskakis (Eds.), *Healing Traditions: The mental health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada* (pp. 221–248). UBC Press. Retrieved from <http://web.uvic.ca/~lalonde/manuscripts/2008HealingTraditions.pdf>

As part of their research, they interviewed a number of non-Indigenous adolescents and Indigenous adolescents about their lives, how they viewed their future, and how they felt about themselves. They were surprised to find that many of the non-Indigenous teens responded to these questions in ways that are quite different from the Indigenous ones.

They characterised the non-Indigenous responses as “essentialist” in nature. They generally talked about themselves and their future using roles and publicly recognized categories that reflected bureaucratic positions. They often spoke of themselves using terms like student, waiter, worker, or artist and their future aspirations in terms like doctor, teacher, business person, computer programmer, manager, or performer.

The Indigenous teens, on the other hand, tended to speak about themselves with respect to stories about their family and community. The researchers characterized this as a “narrative” style. For example, when asked about who they were, they would speak of their parents and siblings, the place(s) where they were born and raised, and how they came to be doing what they are doing in terms of a story about their history. When speaking of their future aspirations, they would continue to use the story-telling approach—perhaps speaking of the way in which their mother, father, or some other relative had offered them an opportunity to work in their business, or acted as an inspiration for them to continue education in some way.

It is easy to see how the same life could be characterized in both ways. For example, I could describe myself as a retired professor, father, homeowner, grandfather, or many other terms of an essentialist nature. I could also describe myself as the son of Lilian and Peter Reimer, who was born and grew up in BC, then moved to Montréal for a job in 1972, and so on. The implications of the different styles are significant, however.

The essentialist style connects each person using it to the roles and categories of non-Indigenous society. It is useful for businesses and organizations because most of the essentialist categories represent people who are replaceable: if one applicant as a teacher is not acceptable then it is relatively simple to find another in the same category. Replaceability is a cornerstone of business-labour relations. It helps to keep costs down for businesses, for example, since they can easily find a replacement if the worker complains about the pay or working conditions. The formation of unions has traditionally been a key way in which workers reduce replaceability.

The narrative style, however, is not so flexible since it refers to a life trajectory which is unique and deeply connected to a particular time, place, and community. This is the characteristic to which Chandler and Lalonde point when developing their explanation for higher suicide rate among the latter. They point to the fact that if the characteristics of a person's (narrative-based) identity are based on a particular community, then public ridicule, stigmatization, or non-acceptance of that community takes away the value of that identity. Attacks or prejudice against Indigenous language, culture, communities, lifestyle, etc. removes the basis for the young people's self-worth and future aspirations, so when things become difficult for them, suicide becomes a viable option. They see little valuable continuity in their identity.

Chandler and Lalonde support their claim by collecting information from indigenous communities in BC regarding the number of culturally-focused events and programs and the suicide rates in those communities. They counted the number of cultural programs and ranked the communities from those that had none of these factors to those that had at least 8. They then plotted this information against the suicide rates and produced the following graph.

I was astounded by the way in which the suicide rate declined to zero as the number of factors increased. This suggests to me some clear policy and program initiatives that can be taken to reduce suicide – and generally improve the lives of those in communities with high suicide rates.

My colleague at Concordia who has been studying the high suicide rates in Northern Québec considers this explanation to work in these northern towns as the role of forestry and fishing declines. Young people (especially boys) can see little future for themselves in the service work or marginal-labour jobs they are offered. The work and pay are incompatible with their view of what it means to be a "man": i.e. earn enough to support a woman and family.

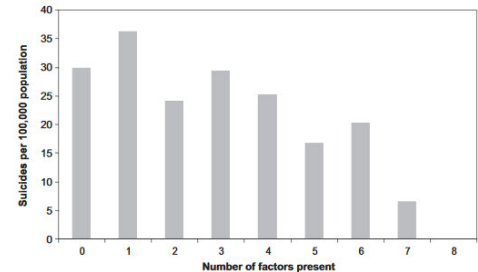


FIGURE 10.15 Suicide rates by number of factors present (BC, 1993-2000)

To me, it also provides a nice justification for passing on our family stories to my grandchildren and their children. We are fortunate that our history has not had the same negative reactions and actions directed to it so that our stories are relatively well-accepted—now. We shouldn't forget, however, that the migrants to Canada from eastern Europe and those with non-Christian religions (or the wrong version of Christianity) were disparaged, refused easy immigration, and were treated badly when they arrived. We see another round of this with the view and treatment of immigrants from Muslim, African, or other "undesirable" countries, unfortunately—even by those whose forefathers were immigrants themselves.

It's nice to know that the family storytelling is valuable—not only because I have enjoyed researching and writing about it, but maybe for more general social objectives. I assume that some of my family members will appreciate them, if not now, then later in their lives. Once again, I have my Mum and Dad to thank for putting together the photos and stories about our family. The family albums that they put together for their children and grandchildren have been invaluable for stimulating my curiosity and providing some answers to the questions that arise about our family histories. I have been happy to see the way in which they have also been used by our kids as their own questions arise.

I'm not sure if you and your brothers have made use of them to any extent, but at least they are there if you should become interested in such matters at a later part of your life. As the storytellers die, they will become even more important, I expect—that is why I often write them for my great-grandchildren as much as the current generations. For the time being, I just appreciate that some people enjoy them—whether they are in the form of the books we produce, the letters we exchange, or even my rants when someone is near enough to hear. Thank you for creating a venue for this to occur.

Love,
Bill