

Storytelling as a Method of Knowledge Mobilization in Indigenous Community-Based Research

There are many Indigenous knowledge mobilization methods within Community-based participatory research. However, there is one that has a close relationship to oral storytelling and is commonly used in Indigenous communities; this is the use of fiction and storytelling as a means of representing the experiences of participants in a study. This summary will focus on the research paper “Telling Stories: Exploring Research Storytelling as a meaningful approach to Knowledge Mobilization with Indigenous Research Collaborators and diverse audiences in Community-based Participatory research” by Julia Christensen, which focuses on the experiences of Indigenous women from Northern Canada experiencing homelessness and the lessons learned from Christensen’s choice of research dissemination.

Julia Christensen is an associate professor at Queen’s University in the Department of Geography and Planning and was a Canada Research Chair in Northern Governance and Public Policy from 2017 to 2022. Christensen was born and raised in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (Denendeh), On Chief Dygeese territory. She self-identifies as a second-generation settler. She completed her BA in Geography and International Relations at the University of British Columbia and her MA in Geography at the University of Calgary. Her PhD in Geography was completed at McGill University. Christensen is dedicated to researching the intersecting social, cultural and health dimensions of geographies. She specializes in research with northern Indigenous communities and the geographies of home and homelessness, health, colonial formations, northern urbanization, and cultural safety in health and policy. She has adopted arts-based methods as a mode of knowledge mobilization, such as found in creative writing, oral storytelling, and digital storytelling.

Christensen’s doctoral research project, “Homelessness in a Homeland” examined the geographies of homelessness in Yellowknife and Inuvik. Having lived in Yellowknife and volunteering as a support provider with people experiencing homelessness there, she developed many long-lasting relationships which she used as a starting point for collaboration in her project. The fieldwork of her study took place between 2007 and 2009. Christensen began disseminating her research in the North in 2008 when she came across a call for contribution to an issue in *The Northern Review*, a research journal published in Yukon that was entirely devoted to literary representation of the North. Christensen wrote [“The Komatik lesson”](#) which was published in *The Northern Review* in 2009. She completed her thesis on [“Homelessness in a Homeland”](#) in 2012, and an article was published in the [Canadian Geographies Research Journal](#) in May of 2012. She examined the experience of utilizing storytelling as a means of knowledge mobilization in her research.

“The Komatik lesson” is a fictional story that was later presented orally. It explores the themes and common experiences described by research collaborators. The story is written in the first-person perspective of the main character, Clara, an Indigenous woman who is from a small remote Northern community and is forced to relocate to a woman’s shelter in Yellowknife after a violent encounter with her common-law partner. Clara decides to return to her home community after six months of struggling with living at the shelter and being away from her family. Clara is comforted on her last night in Yellowknife by a roommate’s story of living through a perpetual cycle of journeying between her home community and Yellowknife and living through life with a violent partner, a lack of stable housing and a desire to reunite with her family.

I wanted the story to portray the ways in which a host of factors intertwine in many northern women’s lives, manifesting themselves in homelessness, domestic violence, chronic housing

shortages in rural settlement communities, the child welfare system, and the social support services in larger centers such as Yellowknife and Inuvik. (Christensen, 2012)

Christensen highlighted three key areas that should be developed more to better fit within an Indigenous methodological framework. The first key area was the narrative choices and representation. Though she has always found that first-person fiction is suitable for research storytelling, upon reflection Christensen felt unsettled by the choice to write as an Indigenous woman as a non-Indigenous person but acknowledges “though writing in the first-person is not necessarily a *wrong* narrative choice, it is one that must be approached with consideration for the storytelling objectives” (Christensen, 2012).

The second area that Christensen highlights as needing more development is authorship. She acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge is presented collectively. “The Komatik lesson,” though inspired by research collaborators, is a single-authored piece by the researcher. She thinks that research storytelling with Indigenous communities should be co-authored with the collaborators or that collaborators should have the opportunity to tell their own stories. She explains that “it is through collaborative, participatory efforts that the real potential of research storytelling as an Indigenous methodology may be realized” (Christensen, 2012).

The third gap highlighted by Christensen is between written stories and Indigenous oral storytelling traditions. She explains that “The Komatik lesson” would not have been as impactful had she not read it aloud. “Nevertheless, the potential for research storytelling as an Indigenous methodology might be further advanced through experimentation with oral storytelling as a mode of research dissemination” (Christensen, 2012).

Research storytelling is an effective, thought-provoking and emotion-evoking mode of delivering knowledge and allows the reader to understand the experiences of the collaborators in community-based research projects. Christensen’s ability to explore the challenges accompanied by written storytelling when working with Indigenous communities allows others to take these areas for development into consideration. With these considerations, research storytelling needs to be more widely recognized as an effective method of knowledge mobilization.

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Citations

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