

Title: Guideline for Lakehead University Researchers: Sharing Circles**1.0 PURPOSE**

Historically, sharing circles were not used in or for research because of their absolute confidential nature. Sharing circles were traditionally used for purposes such as a sentencing decision for someone who may have committed a crime, or dealing with another very significant individual matter, or a broader community problem (M. Donio, personal communication, October 12, 2025).

When seeking to collect data, researchers can use focus groups with Indigenous communities and peoples. For best practices in the use of focus groups for data collection in a research ethics framework, please see our [Focus Group Guideline](#).

This guideline outlines the ethical considerations for researchers at Lakehead University who wish to conduct studies using **circles** as an Indigenized research methodology. This guideline is intended to be used in conjunction with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 2022) and all relevant institutional policies. This guideline serves as a resource to assist researchers in the development of their Research Ethics Board (REB) applications and to guide them in ethical practice.

Please note that all research involving human participants must receive formal approval from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to starting any research activities, including participant recruitment or data collection.

As you will see throughout this document, we emphasize that sharing circles are flexible, relational, grounded in respect, and vary across cultures and traditions (Hunt and Young, 2021).

2.0 RESEARCH ON CIRCLES AS INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There is an existing body of research that theorizes circles as a methodology that brings together “Indigenous ways of knowing and Western ways of conducting research, specifically qualitative inquiry” (Lavallee 2009).

Researchers who wish to incorporate circles into their projects should review and cite the relevant research from Indigenous scholars in their applications, and carefully consider which methods identified in the research are most appropriate for the participating community and the research questions being asked.

The following is a sample of research on the subject:

- Hunt, S. C., & Young, N. L. (2021). “Blending Indigenous Sharing Circle and Western Focus Group Methodologies for the Study of Indigenous Children’s Health: A Systematic Review.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211015112>
- Kovach, M. (2021). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Second edition). University of Toronto Press.
- Lavallée, L.F. (2009). “Practical Application of an Indigenous Research Framework and Two Qualitative Indigenous Research Methods: Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 21-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800103>
- Nabigon H., Hagey R., Webster S., MacKay R. (2000). “The Learning Circle as a Research Method: The Trickster and Windigo in Research.” *Native Social Work Journal*, 2(1), 119-143. <https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/jspui/handle/10219/461>
- Rothe J. P., Ozegovic D., Carroll L. J. (2009). “Innovation in Qualitative Interviews: “Sharing Circles” in a First Nations Community.” *Injury Prevention*, 15(5), 334–340. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.2008.021261>
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books.
- Tachine, J. J., Yellow Bird, J., & Cabrera, N. L. (2016). “Sharing Circles: An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching with Groups of Indigenous Peoples.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1).
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing.

3.0 WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: SHARING CIRCLES

In accordance with Chapter 9 of the TCPS 2 (2022), researchers conducting studies with Indigenous peoples must engage with the relevant community's leadership or governing authorities before beginning the research. This engagement is separate from and in addition to institutional REB approval, and reflects a commitment to relationship-building with the community. As part of the review, Lakehead University's REB will ask you about your community engagement (or engagement plan) and how the principles of **Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession** (OCAP®)(if followed by the community) are being respected and upheld in the design and execution of your research project. The OCAP Principles must be integrated into the project's research design and governance as stipulated by the First Nations Information Governance

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Centre (FNIGC). These principles affirm the right of First Nations to own and control data about their

communities. Researchers must follow and respect the community's wishes regarding Indigenous data sovereignty.

Indigenous scholars and community leaders have reclaimed and asserted Indigenous ways of knowing as valid and robust research methodologies (Kovach 2021, Smith 2021). It is important to emphasize that a sharing circle is not a "focus group" with a different name. It is a distinct research method rooted in specific cultural protocols and worldviews (Kovach 2021). The sharing circle's integrity depends on being guided by the community and led by recognized Elders or Knowledge Keepers, in accordance with local traditions and expectations (Hunt & Young, 2021).

This community-led approach ensures that the research environment honours local oral traditions, spiritual connections, and interaction styles, such as the use of a talking piece, specific directional movement (clockwise or counter-clockwise), and the inclusion of opening ceremonies or prayers (Lavallée, 2009; Nabigon et al., 2000; Rothe, Ozegovic, and Carroll, 2009). Researchers are expected to learn and apply these protocols through direct engagement with the communities they work with, recognizing that practices vary by Nation and region (TCPS 2, 2022, Chapter 9).

Sharing circles are not simply data collection tools; they represent a culturally rooted approach to research that centers relationality, respect, trust, and collective meaning-making (Kovach, 2021). As such, they cannot be undertaken without the permission, leadership, and ongoing involvement of the local Indigenous community. Researchers using this method must commit to building genuine, sustained relationships and ensuring the work meaningfully gives back to the community, while recognizing and upholding the cultural responsibilities that accompany this methodology (Tachine, Yellow Bird, and Cabrera, 2016).

4.0 TO INCLUDE IN YOUR LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY REB APPLICATION

When reviewing research that employs sharing circles as an Indigenous research method, the REB is going to want to know why this Indigenous research method was chosen, along with a community engagement plan, and how the OCAP Principles are being upheld. Additionally, the REB will want to know that the sharing circles are typically facilitated by an Indigenous person (e.g., an Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or Indigenous researcher) who has the appropriate lived experience, cultural knowledge, and community recognition to lead the circle. Lived experience and community recognition are considered essential forms of expertise, and facilitation is expected to be guided and supported by local Elders or community leadership. It is assumed that all relevant cultural protocols will be followed.

Questions?

For further questions about the ethical review process, please contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.

5.0 REFERENCES

- First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). The OCAP® handbook: Ownership, control, access, and possession. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://fnigc.ca/ocap-handbook/>
- Hunt, S. C., & Young, N. L. (2021). “Blending Indigenous Sharing Circle and Western Focus Group Methodologies for the Study of Indigenous Children’s Health: A Systematic Review.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211015112>
- Kovach, M. (2021). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Second edition). University of Toronto Press.
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- Nabigon H., Hagey R., Webster S., MacKay R. (2000). “The Learning Circle as a Research Method: The Trickster and Windigo in Research.” *Native Social Work Journal*, 2(1), 119-143. <https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/jspui/handle/10219/461>
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- This document is intended to provide guidance within the Canadian context, specifically with respect to research involving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples and communities, and is grounded in Canadian Indigenous research ethics and governance frameworks, including OCAP® principles. While we recognize that sacred and circle-based practices exist globally and are used in other fields (e.g., peace-making circles in peace and conflict studies), this guidance is specific to the Canadian FNMI context.
- AI tools (Google Gemini and Grammarly) were used to help prepare this document, and several people carefully reviewed the content to ensure it accurately represents the information.

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