

Article

Is Active Voice Enough? Community Discussions on Passive Voice, MMIWG2S, and Violence against Urban Indigenous Women in San José, California

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Abstract: Men commit violence against Native American women at higher rates than other racial or ethnic groups. When violence against Indigenous women is discussed and written about, it is often in passive voice. Several scholars note the problem of using passive voice to talk about violence against women, but there is little research on how women themselves understand passive voice as connected to the violence perpetrated against them, and we found no literature on how Native women understand passive voice. This research asks how urban Native and Indigenous women understand passive language in relationship to violence. The authors, who are all members of the Red Earth Women's Society (REWS), took up this conversation with urban Indigenous women in San José, California, in a year-long series of meetings that culminated in three focus-group discussions (FGD)/talking circles (TC) where Native women expressed their understanding of passive language and violence against Native women. From these exploratory talking circles, we found that Native women's understanding of passive voice aligned with previous research on passive voice, but also contributed new insights.

Keywords: Native American; American Indian; Indigenous; violence; MMIW; colonization; passive voice; focus groups; talking circles; women; gender violence



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1. Introduction

Men commit violence against Native¹ women at higher rates than all other racial or ethnic groups² (Abinanti et al. 2020; Anderson et al. 2018; Bailey and Shayan 2016; Joseph 2021; Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2019; Rosay 2016). Over 84 percent of Native women experience violence in their lifetimes, and over half experience sexual violence in their lifetimes (Rosay 2016). Non-Native men commit the majority of violence against Native women, with 97 percent of Native women experiencing interracial violence, and 35 percent experiencing intraracial violence (Rosay 2016). In addition, murder is the third leading cause of death among Native women and girls who are ten to fourteen years of age (Joseph 2021; Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2019; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019). Tribal nations and urban Indigenous communities have been fighting for many years to have these issues addressed.

In April of 2021, Deb Haaland, the first American Indian to hold the office of the United States Secretary of the Interior, formed the Missing and Murdered Unit (MMU) under the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide leadership on missing and murdered American Indian and Alaskan Native people. The MMU expanded the work of the Presidential Task Force on Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives established in 2019. In 2020, Savanna's Act (Public Law Number 116–165) and the Not Invisible Act (Public Law Number 116–166) were enacted to address violence against Indigenous women, specifically in response to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two spirit people (MMIWG2S).

When MMIWG2S are written about in the media and academia, the race and gender of the perpetrator are often omitted. Although it has been established that the perpetrators of violence against Indigenous women are primarily non-Native men, the omission of information about the perpetrator leaves open certain questions: Who committed the murders? Who raped? Who harmed? When unstated, the perpetrator is often assumed to be Native men, particularly given that the majority of sexual violence and homicide in other racial groups is committed intraracially. However, unlike other racial groups, the majority of violence against Native women is committed interracially, by non-Native men. Passive language, or passive voice, is used to obscure the race and gender of the perpetrator. This article investigates how urban Indigenous women understand passive voice in relation to violence against women.

2. The Red Earth Women's Society: Research Background

The Red Earth Women's Society (REWS) is a grassroots organization in San José, California, that was started by Kelly Gamboa. The authors³ have been a part of this group for several years. REWS was previously called Motherhood is Sacred, but the name was subsequently changed to the Red Earth Women's Society. The group is centered around the issues faced by urban Indigenous families, particularly mothers, women, and girls. REWS members all identify as Native American or Indigenous, with some members who are enrolled in their tribe and other members who are not enrolled. The group's different projects over the years were important to group members and in line with maintaining the integrity of Native families. In 2019, REWS wanted to highlight the impact of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people (MMIWG2S) on Native families and to advocate for the state and county to recognize MMIWG2S.

In 2019, REWS began community conversations around MMIWG2S that led to a series of events called "Indigenous Women Are Sacred". REWS collaborated with the Indian Health Center of Santa Clara Valley, the Santa Clara Office of Women's Policy, and the Native American Student Organization (NASO) at San José State University to produce a wide range of events that took place during the month of May in 2019.

Because of REWS' work on MMIWG2S, the group was contacted in 2020 by the Kelly and Jack Baskin Foundation, an organization built around gender and racial equity issues, to work on some informational materials, such as handouts and email templates, that reframed MMIWG2S conversations from passive voice to active voice. REWS operates by consensus, and it is not structured hierarchically; there is no chair, president, or secretary of the group, so before taking on any research or project, the entire group discusses the project, and sometimes we work on a project with the entire group, such as the 2019 MMIWG2S project, and for other projects, interested members form a subgroup to work on a specific issue. The larger group entrusts the subgroup to complete the project and report to the larger group periodically. The group decided to take on research of passive language and MMIWG2S through a volunteer subgroup. In this article, we discuss the findings related to the work the subgroup conducted, specifically the three talking circles on passive and violence against Indigenous women.

3. Passive Language

Scholars have engaged in research on the use of passive language, also called passive voice, to describe men's violence against women since the 1980s (Clark 1965; Henley et al. 1995; Lamb 1991; Penelope 1990). When a sentence is written in active voice, the order of the arrangement of the sentence is subject, verb, then object (SVO), and when a sentence is written in the passive voice this order is reversed to object, verb, then subject (OVS), therefore changing the focus of the sentence from the subject to the object. Numanbayraktaroğlu (2020) wrote of this shift from active to passive voice in this way: "the passive is a construction that transforms the surface structures of a sentence by elevating its object to the subject position" (p. 3). To illustrate the transformation from active construction to passive construction, take the following sentences:

- (1) A man raped a woman.
- (2) A woman was raped by a man.

The first sentence is in active voice (SVO), and the focus of the sentence is on the man who raped a woman. In the second sentence, written in the passive voice, the man and the woman are both in the sentence, but the focus has shifted from the man to the woman.

Penelope (1990) argued that using passive voice to write about men's violence against women serves to shift our attention away from men and the violence they commit and to diminish men's responsibility for said acts. Penelope noted when a sentence is in passive voice, it is more likely truncated to remove the agent, becoming an agentless sentence. For example, the second sentence from above could be truncated to form an agentless sentence:

- (3) A woman was raped.

This truncation, Penelope noted, obscures men as the perpetrators of violence against women.

Katz (2006) utilized Penelope's work to demonstrate how the shift from active to passive voice can further lead to pathologizing the survivor. Katz (2006, p. 107) wrote the following sentences by way of example:

1. John beat Mary.
2. Mary was beaten by John.
3. Mary was beaten.
4. Mary was battered.
5. Mary is a battered woman.

The first sentence is written in active voice (SVO), with a clear perpetrator, John, and a clear survivor, Mary. The second sentence is rewritten in passive voice (OVS), which shifts the focus from perpetrator to survivor, from John to Mary. Katz noted: "Not coincidentally, John is at the end of the second sentence, which means he is close to dropping off the map of our consciousness. By the third sentence, John is gone, and it's all about Mary. In the final sentence, Mary's very identity—*Mary is a battered woman*—has been created by the now-absent John" (p. 108).

Henley et al. (1995) utilized the following three sentences as examples of how men's violence against women can easily be changed from an active to a passive to a truncated (agentless) sentence:

- (1) In the U.S. a man rapes a woman every 6 min.
- (2) In the U.S. a woman is raped by a man every 6 min.
- (3) In the U.S. a woman is raped every 6 min.

In the first active-voice sentence, the focus is on men who are raping women, and in the second passive-voice sentence, the focus has shifted to women who are being raped, and by the third truncated, passive-voice sentence, men are completely absent.

Several scholars have investigated the use of passive voice in written accounts of men's violence against women (Northcutt Bohmert et al. 2019; Lamb 1991; Lamb and Keon 1995; Meyers 1997; Numanbayraktaroğlu 2020; Fernandez et al. 2020; Frazer and Miller 2009). Lamb (1991) reviewed 46 journal articles that described instances of men inflicting physical violence against their female partners and found that male authors, and male authors writing with female authors, were more likely than female authors to use passive voice to avoid assignment of responsibility to male perpetrators. Henley et al. (1995) reviewed thousands of newspaper articles from 1981 to 1991 looking at five verbs (thanked/forgave, touched, robbed, raped, and murdered) and the surrounding content of the verbs looking for active, passive, and passive-truncated sentences. They found writers used passive voice more often when writing about men's sexual violence against women.

Scholars have noted several consequences of using passive voice to write about violence against women (VAW): it shifts attention from the perpetrator to the survivor; it shifts culpability from the perpetrator to the survivor; and readers are less likely to blame the perpetrator (Penelope 1990; Bohner 2001; Henley et al. 1995; LaFrance et al. 1997). In order to investigate if the use of passive or active voice affected the readers comprehension

and/or interpretation of the material, Henley et al. conducted another study where they had 54 college students read mock news articles on murder, rape, battery, and robbery written in passive and active voice. After reading the articles, students rated how responsible the victim and perpetrator were for the incident. In addition, they had students fill out a composite scale of 71 questions from several surveys to assess acceptance of violence against women. They found that when students, both male and female, read articles about rape written in passive voice, they were more accepting of rape myths and physical abuse of women. When the authors looked at how passive voice affected readers' attribution of survivor harm and perpetrator responsibility, they found that women's attribution did not change when reading the story in passive or active voice, but men's attribution of harm was affected by passive voice. Men attributed less harm to the survivor and less responsibility to the perpetrator when they read stories using passive voice.

Beyond investigating men's violence against women, several scholars have looked at how passive voice serves to take agency away from or ascribe negative attributes to minority groups (Dozono 2020; Jimenez 2020; Van Dijk 1988, 2013). Van Dijk studied the headlines of newspaper articles in the Netherlands and found that minority groups were rarely written about as having agency, and when they were attributed agency, it was for a negative act. Of particular interest for our research is Dozono's (2020) discourse analysis of tenth-grade social and geography curriculum in the state of New York. One of the curriculum areas Dozono studied was author's use of passive voice in framing Europeans and non-Europeans. Dozono (2020) found that the impact of using passive voice in these texts produced two outcomes: "First, passive sentences regarding European actors downplay European violence and accountability. Secondly, by employing the passive voice to the actions of non-White peoples, the authors downplay the agency of non-White colonized actors, and their capacity to be subjects" (p. 13).

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical models we utilized for thinking through this research include Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), Participatory Action Research (PAR), and refusal as outlined by Tuck and Yang (2014a, 2014b).

4.1. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) have been utilized as theoretical frameworks for over twenty years (Israel et al. 1998; Wallerstein et al. 2019). CBPR and PAR are often described as both a theory of research and as a method for conducting research (Minkler and Wallerstein [2003] 2010; Mitchell 2018; Wallerstein and Duran 2010; Wallerstein et al. 2019). There is not one definition of CBPR, as Wallerstein and Duran noted: "Several definitions of CBPR circulate widely" (Wallerstein and Duran 2010, s40). In fact, CBPR and PAR are often used interchangeably (Schneider 2012) and sometimes combined into Community-Based Participatory Action Research (Shadowen et al. 2020; Branquinho et al. 2020; Jarrott et al. 2021). Minkler and Wallerstein provide a helpful history of participatory research and note the many different names used in the literature: "the long list of terms representing this new participatory research paradigm, which links applied social science and social activism, has been fairly daunting, and the nuanced differences between them are often difficult to decipher" (Minkler and Wallerstein [2003] 2010, p. 26).

Although there is not one definition for CBPR or PAR, in 1998, Israel et al. (1998) articulated eight core principles of participatory research. The authors discussed how participatory research had its roots in the field of public health but was also connected to the social sciences and to feminist studies. Israel et al. (1998) noted the use of terms like action research, participatory action research, participatory research, cooperative inquiry, action science/inquiry, participatory evaluation, empowerment evaluation, and feminist research. The authors argued "Despite differences among these approaches . . . each is explicitly committed to conducting research that will benefit the participants either through

direct intervention or by using the results to inform action for change” (Israel et al. 1998, p. 175). From these different participatory methodologies, Israel et al. (1998) synthesized eight key principles (pp. 178–80):

1. Recognizes community as a unit of identity.
2. Builds on strengths and resources of the community.
3. Facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research.
4. Integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners.
5. Promotes a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities.
6. Involves a cyclical and iterative process.
7. Addresses health from both positive and ecological perspectives.
8. Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners.

Our research attended to many of the above points. For example, point two, “build[ing] on the strengths and resources of the community”, was something we paid attention to from the beginning of the project. For example, we did not have any outside researchers involved. REWS had members who were university students, faculty, and a part of several local and national Indigenous organizations, so we had the privilege of conducting all of the work internally. Similarly, point three, “facilitat[ing] collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research”, was already embedded in the project since REWS was both the community group and the academic partner. We wanted not only to make sure the research was collaborative, but also that what we did was “for the mutual benefit of all partners” (point four). The need to make sure our research benefited the women who took part in the discussions and our larger community was on our minds at every step of the research. This idea of benefiting the community was something we took seriously.

In addition to the eight key principles of CBPR outlined by Israel et al., LaVeaux and Christopher outline an additional nine principles for doing research with American Indian tribes (LaVeaux and Christopher 2009, p. 7; Mitchell 2018, p. 382; Petrucka et al. 2012):

1. Acknowledge historical experience with research and with health issues and work to overcome the negative image of research.
2. Recognize tribal sovereignty.
3. Differentiate between tribal and community membership.
4. Understand tribal diversity and its implications.
5. Plan for extended timelines.
6. Recognize key gatekeepers.
7. Prepare for leadership turnover.
8. Interpret data within the cultural context.
9. Utilize Indigenous ways of knowing.

These nine principles provide a framework for academics working with a specific tribal nation. Since we were not working with one nation, but rather with urban Indians, some of the points were not as relevant while others were foundational. For example, from the beginning of the project, we “Acknowledge[d] historical experience with research and with health issues” by recognizing its often-negative impact on Indigenous communities. However, we were not committed to “work to overcome the negative image of research”. It was important to us to acknowledge the harms done by research and do our best to not cause harm through our work, but we were not trying to change the minds of participants on the value of research. This issue came up at the beginning of the TCs when we went over the consent notice and who would have access to the transcripts. For example, it was important to our group that people outside of REWS not have access to the transcripts.

4.2. Refusal

“... analytic practices of refusal provide ways to negotiate how we as social science researchers can learn from experiences of dispossessed peoples—often painful, but also wise, full of desire and dissent—without serving up pain stories

on a silver platter for the settler colonial academy, which hungers so ravenously for them” (Tuck and Yang 2014b, p. 812)

The refusal to “serve up pain stories” played a central role in our research from project development to what we included for publication. As noted in the previous section, CBPR and PAR were helpful for our research, yet it was Tuck and Yang’s methodology of refusal that was foundational to our project. Tuck and Yang’s writing on the need to think critically about academic research builds on a long history of American Indian scholars who have written about the harm researchers have caused and continue to cause in Indigenous communities (Deloria 1969; Ramirez 2007; Simpson 2007; Tuck 2009, 2010; Tuck and Yang 2014a, 2014b; Smith 1999; Wolfe 1999). Researchers have harmed Native communities in ways that range from the misuse of blood samples and genetic information (Harmon 2010; Tuck and Yang 2014b) to the collection of stories that should not be shared (Simpson 2007; Tuck and Yang 2014a).

Tuck and Yang (2014a) argue we must situate social science research as part of settler colonialism: “once social science research is understood as settler colonial knowledge, nothing less and nothing more, it then makes sense why limits must be placed on it” (p. 238). The limits they propose are situational, meaning they need to be decided by the community. As outlined by Tuck and Yang (2014a), refusal methodology is not a refusal of all research, but rather a dynamic understanding of settler colonialism, the academic industrial complex, the power dynamics between researchers and over-researched populations, and a willingness to limit not only what is researched, but also what is shared from research. Tuck and Yang outline three axioms to guide refusal (Tuck and Yang 2014a, p. 224)

1. The subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain;
2. there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve;
3. research may not be the intervention that is needed.

All three of Tuck and Yang’s axioms impacted how we conducted our work. Over the course of the project, we thought a great deal about axiom one, “the subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain” (p. 224). We did not want to contribute to what Tuck and Yang call the “pain archives” of academia. Tuck and Yang elaborated on axiom one: the “academe, formed and informed by settler colonial ideology, has developed the same palate for pain” (p. 229), and they go on to call this “the fetish for pain narratives” (p. 230). We did not want to be agents for the university’s pain fetish. One way we tried to limit this was by consciously asking questions that did not solicit stories of trauma or violence, and when all participants shared their personal stories of violence anyway, we specifically did not include individual stories in this article. In addition, our limiting of certain stories was bolstered by axiom two: “there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve” (p. 224). We knew there were going to be things shared in the TCs that we could not publish because they were not our stories to share, and as Tuck and Yang noted, “there are some stories that the academy has not yet proven itself responsible enough to hear” (p. 232).

In addition to the first two axioms, the third axiom, “research may not be the intervention that is needed”, continues to be a topic with which we struggle. We decided to intervene with an academic article for the passive voice part of the TCs because we felt this was an important intervention into the discourse on passive voice. This article is not the primary work we conducted after finishing the talking circles. We are all still part of REWS, and we know we are responsible for actually doing something for our community with the stories and recommendations shared. For example, after the TCs were finished, we held a six-week series of workshops, which were led by REWS and community members, that centered on different ways of healing trauma. This was done specifically to address any harm caused by the communal sharing of stories of trauma, which even though it was an aspect we had not foreseen, we nonetheless knew we were responsible for the harm and for address it.

5. Methods

REWS served as both community partner and academic partner in the conception, design, and implementation of the study, and in analyzing the data obtained from the study. In some ways this makes our work on the margins of traditional CBPR or PAR, which is often led by community researchers in collaboration with community partners.

5.1. Research Development

Although REWS decided to take on the passive language project, there was a lot of discussion around what kind of research, if any, was appropriate. We began a year-long series of internal discussions with REWS members. We had at least eight meetings over the 2020 year which lasted from 1–3 h, were not recorded, and were exploratory discussions between group members. After several months of meeting, our group had more questions than answers. Some of the questions that came up were: What is passive language? Is active language important? If active language is important, is it important to Native people? Do we have the right to talk about how to frame any language regarding MMIWG2S without consulting the larger urban Indian community? For those enrolled in their tribes, should we talk to our tribes? What impact will this work have on our community? Will we be hurting our community in any way by talking about this? These were just some of the questions we engaged with in these conversations.

The question REWS kept coming back to was whether we should speak to the issue of passive language without consulting the larger urban Indian community. The consensus was that we should not make suggestions on passive language to other Native and non-Native organizations without holding a series of conversations open to the larger community of urban Indigenous women in San José. In alignment with this, we held a series of three meetings open to the larger urban Indian community in the Silicon Valley area, which were referred to as community conversations (CC), talking circles (TC), and/or focus-group discussions (FGD). In this article, we will refer to the conversations primarily as talking circles (TC) because it most accurately describes the way participants interacted with each other and the facilitators. In addition, many of the women had taken part in talking circles in the community, so the format of listening to each other without correcting or competing was familiar to all participants. Several different Indigenous groups in the Bay Area use talking circles and it is also a format used in research with Indigenous peoples (Kovach 2019; Strickland 1999; Di Lallo et al. 2021; Haozous et al. 2010; Dawson et al. 2017).

5.2. Recruitment and Structure

Recruitment for the talking circles was by REWS members through word-of-mouth and the REWS Facebook page. Participants registered for the talking circles through a Qualtrics' survey link. On the Qualtrics survey, we collected tribal affiliation, email addresses, and local addresses for sending a USD 25 gift card that was sent after completion of the research. We used the Qualtrics survey to create an email list to send the consent notice and a zoom link for the TCs.

5.3. Participants

We had three talking circles, with three to eight participants in each discussion and two facilitators, for a total of fifteen participants. All participants were located in the Bay Area, almost all in San José, and all were over eighteen years of age, with a range from early twenties to early seventies. All participants self-identified as women and American Indian, Native American, or Indigenous from several different Native nations, primarily from within the United States, but also from two tribes in Mexico. The group included individuals who were enrolled in their tribe and those who were not enrolled.

5.4. Format of TCs

We conducted three talking circles (IRB number 21088), each between 90 and 120 min in length. All TCs were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified for personal information.

Prior to the TCs, REWS decided that only the subcommittee members would have access to the transcripts, and any products, both community facing and academic, from the TCs, would be approved through consensus by the REWS subcommittee ahead of publication. The subcommittee retains the right to deny in whole or in part the publication of anything related to the talking circles.

We began the talking circles with a discussion of the consent notice and answered any participant questions around how the information would be used, who had access to the information, and who would control the transcripts and published products, both academic and for the community. After the consent notice was shared with participants, and questions answered, we moved to the topic of passive voice. Facilitator's screen shared a few slides on passive voice and active voice, including definitions and three example sentences using passive voice and then those same sentences using active voice.

After the example sentences, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions on how community members understood passive language in relation to MMIWG2S and violence against Native women. In addition, participants were asked to discuss what kinds of solutions to the problem of MMIWG2S they wanted from Native and non-Native organizations and institutions.

5.5. Thematic Analysis

In order to have some coding consistency across the researchers prior to coding the transcripts, we read and discussed an article on thematic analysis by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). From our discussion, we decided to code the TCs independently of one another using inductive analysis without a preexisting coding frame ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#); [Patton 1990](#)). We initially looked at the data set at a semantic level, looking at the explicit meanings expressed by participants. After inductively coding separately to come up with observations and possible themes, we met several times to share our understanding of the conversations. Although we coded separately, we understood, as Braun and Clarke note, that "researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#), p. 84). In fact, our research team valued our connectedness to the work, to one another, and to the urban Indigenous community. We understood this connectedness as a strength of the work.

Initially, the research team came up with several themes from the TCs around violence against Native women, MMIWG2S, and community solutions, but after discussions with the larger REWS group, we decided to separate out the questions on passive language and code them separately for our initial community publication and article. There were several reasons for this decision. The first, and probably the most salient for our team, was that we did not expect participants to share so much of their own trauma. Participants entrusted us with their stories, and we wanted to take time to explore the most appropriate way for us to care for their stories. The second reason was that the content on passive voice was quite different from the rest of the conversations. Therefore, for this initial article we present the results from the latent thematic analysis of only the responses to the questions on passive language. We will produce a community report, and possibly an additional article, on the themes from the rest of the questions asked in the focus groups, which centered around MMIWG2S and community solutions to violence against Native women.

6. Results

The first question we asked participants was if they felt passive language was connected or not connected to violence against Native women. All participants felt passive language contributed to violence against Native women, as noted by the following participant:

"I don't think, I know passive language contributes to the problem of violence against Native women" (TC1)

There were three themes specifically connected to passive language. Participants understood passive language to be part of the larger process of colonization. The three

themes were connected to participant's understanding of how passive language specifically fits into their lives as Indigenous women.

1. Passive Language "Is a Strategy of Colonization".
2. Passive Language Protects White Men.
3. Accountability: Acknowledge the Full Truth.

6.1. *Passive Language "Is a Strategy of Colonization" (TC2)*

Looking at participants comments on the questions about passive language, the first theme that emerged was passive language was seen as a strategy of colonization and genocide. This participant noted the way passive language is part of colonization in the way the full story is not told:

"It's been a strategy of colonization . . . not telling a full story and to kind of boil things down to somewhat of an intellectual description, the bare minimum, seems to be the approach of mainstream, and I'm talking about our experiences, about things that have happened to us as Indian people" (TC2)

Another participant pointed out that when we use passive language, we shift our attention away from the perpetrator of violence and genocide:

"To use passive language, we don't need to pay attention to who did this, who colonized, who killed, who committed genocide" (TC1)

Similarly, there was a conversation around how the violence American Indian people experienced was similar to the experiences of European holocaust survivors, noting both groups survived holocausts, as this participant noted:

"If we are serious about never having another Auschwitz again, then we need to use active language not passive language" (TC1)

In this same discussion, another participant related the need to continually fight against colonization, citing their participation in the Walk for Justice, which was a Native-led resistance against Junipero Serra being put up for sainthood by Pope Francis:

"I think that connects a lot to what has happened recently to what happened with Junipero Serra when he went up for Sainthood, and what happened with the Walk for Justice which fought against his sainthood" (TC1)

Some women understood passive language as contributing to colonization by the erasure or invisibilizing of Native people, as noted by these women:

"I would also add that the passive language makes people invisible. So that even though you're talking about something . . . it's a person without agency, it's a person without responsibility, it's a situation that just happens" (TC1)

"I mean there's so much erasure that happens that I don't even know how to articulate it sometimes, because we're not seen in so many different spaces, and we're fighting and we have history and legacy of ancestors and elders" (TC2)

6.2. *Passive Language Protects White Men*

Participants understood the use of passive language as a way to omit the gender and race of the perpetrator, specifically to protect white men. These participants noted the way passive language is used in the conversation on missing and murdered Indigenous women to elide the fact that this is an issue of white men perpetrating the majority of this violence, as these two women noted:

"I think that, in terms of this whole conversation about missing and murdered Indigenous women, I don't think there's the clarity that a lot of that conversation is about people outside of our ethnicity. There isn't the understanding that this is white men . . . I don't think that there's that understanding that we are one of the few populations where it's happening outside of our communities" (TC3)

“I would also add that for the perpetrator it protects them because, like we said, it doesn’t talk, like when they say you know MMIW is so prominent, but it doesn’t talk about how it’s non-Natives who commit these crimes, and so it protects kind of the person who is perpetrator, right”? (TC3)

Another way participants felt white men were protected was by shifting the blame from them to Native women, as noted by these participants:

“When passive language is used, the people responsible for the action are not stated as responsible for the action. Instead, the victim is. It’s as if the victim were at fault, this is also very much related to white supremacy” (TC1)

“It protects specifically white males, right. It’s used to talk about the victim and probably what she did wrong instead of talking about . . . who did the action” (TC3)

Participants connected the way passive language was used to describe white men’s violence against Native women similar to how it was used to describe white men’s violence against other communities of color, as this participant noted:

“Because I think you’re not actually acknowledging the person. And their identity and who they are, and what actually occurred and it’s kind of like no different than when you say, “George Floyd died”. No, he was murdered. and I think there’s a distinct difference” (TC3)

6.3. Accountability of Passive Language: Acknowledge the Full Truth

The next theme that we saw in all focus groups was around accountability and acknowledging the full truth. Participants stressed that passive language meant we do not hold perpetrators accountable, as this woman noted:

“And thinking about passive language, how there is no accountability from the perpetrator, the perpetrator’s nonexistence” (TC1)

Women connected passive language to taking away power from survivors, as noted by this participant:

“This stuff about passive language is that it takes away power too, and it gives power to somebody else that doesn’t have to be held accountable” (TC3)

In addition to holding white and non-Native men accountable, women noted that they wanted society and the educational systems held accountable. They wanted the “full truth” to be written about and told, as these women noted:

“So much of the story is left out, and so . . . it’s about holding accountable, you know, society” (TC2).

“It brings me to think about how we have our social science and history curriculum for K through 12 and how passive language is similar to how some truths are left out of our history. And that contributes to the history we understand, the history we work on, and how we . . . understand our past” (TC1)

In addition to telling the “full truth”, several women noted the need to acknowledge past harms done to Native communities. This participant noted by not acknowledging current and past harms, we are allowing people to stay comfortable:

“We don’t make people get uncomfortable. We don’t make people say the name. We don’t call out people for what has happened and continues to happen” (TC3)

Similarly, this participant framed it as not acknowledging historical trauma, the trauma of ancestors:

“It comes down to like how things are portrayed and usually our lives as Indigenous peoples having experienced not only trauma like in this lifetime, but in our past lifetimes through our ancestors. It’s often like looked over, and it’s easier to consider it as less problematic to not blame or acknowledge the full truth” (TC3)

7. Discussion

Indigenous women's understanding of passive voice from these exploratory discussions align in some ways with previous research on passive voice, and in other ways contribute new insights.

Women in the TCs felt passive voice shifted the blame for violence away from perpetrators. In addition, passive voice was seen as a way to not hold perpetrators accountable. Both of these understandings are supported by previous research on passive voice (Clark 1965; Lamb 1991; Penelope 1990). One woman in the TCs stated, "And thinking about passive language, how there is no accountability from the perpetrator, the perpetrator's nonexistence" (TC1), which is reminiscent of Penelope's (1990) research on how passive voice often not only shifts attention away from the perpetrator, but also truncates the sentence to completely cut the perpetrator from the sentence, hence the "perpetrator's nonexistence" (TC1). Connected to shifting attention away from perpetrators is the shift of attention to survivors with the use of passive voice, which was an area discussed in all focus groups. As one participant noted, "the people responsible for the action are not stated as responsible for the action. Instead, the victim is. It's as if the victim were at fault" (TC1). This shift in culpability from the perpetrator to the victim by using passive voice is also documented in the research (Penelope 1990; Bohner 2001; Henley et al. 1995; LaFrance et al. 1997).

Another area discussed in all focus groups was that passive voice was understood as part of colonization, genocide, and white supremacy. Dozono (2020) is one of the only authors we found who discussed passive voice in relation to these issues. Dozono (2020) wrote, "The passive voice becomes imbued with the power of whiteness, further hiding European violence and disempowering non-Whites" (14). Dozono (2020) reviewed tenth-grade social studies textbooks and found one of the ways they erased European culpability and failed to acknowledge non-white people's agency was through the use of passive voice. Dozono's findings are echoed by one of the TC participants who noted, "To use passive language, we don't need to pay attention to who did this, who colonized, who killed, who committed genocide" (TC1).

One area not seen in the literature that came up in all three talking circles was how passive voice specifically protects white men. This was something stressed in all three discussions. Given that Indigenous women are one of the few groups violated primarily by men outside of their racial group, namely by white men, this understanding is salient. Much of the literature on passive voice focuses on using active voice to name men as the perpetrators of sexual violence against women to mitigate harm caused by passive framing, which is important, but would not be sufficient when writing about violence against Indigenous women. To demonstrate how more than active voice is needed, the sentences below work in reverse from a truncated sentence in passive voice to a sentence with a specific agent in active voice:

- (1) "An Indigenous woman was raped".
- (2) "An Indigenous woman was raped by a white man".
- (3) "A white man raped an Indigenous woman".

The first sentence is in passive voice and has been truncated to remove the agent, the next sentence is still in passive voice but is not truncated, and the third sentence is in active voice with the specific perpetrator named. Yet, this active, agent-included, untruncated sentence, which is the touted as the most desirable sentence form, does not address some of the points brought up by Indigenous women, such as colonization and the culpability of the larger society in perpetuating violence against Indigenous women. Several participants noted that it is not just individual perpetrators that need to be held accountable, it is also society, as this participant noted: "So much of the story is left out, and so . . . it's about holding accountable, you know, society" (TC2). With the understanding of holding society accountable, shifting to active voice and including the individual perpetrators of violence would be helpful, but it would not be enough to address the culpability of society.

Connected to the notion of holding society accountable is the call to acknowledge the “full truth”. For participants, the full truth includes the need for accurate and inclusive history that not only includes teaching about colonization, but also recognizes sovereignty, Indigenous resistance, and survivance. The distinction between passive and active language is not just about language but about erasure. This idea of erasure and invisibility were topics brought up in all of the TCs and in the REWS year-long series of inter-group discussions. Many REWS members brought up the exhaustion of fighting continual erasure on so many different fronts, such as in the K-12 curriculum, in university coursework, and in the workplace. Active language is important for addressing parts of erasure, such as making sure perpetrators are held accountable as the actors of violence, but other areas, such as teaching accurate history and acknowledging sovereignty, cannot be addressed by simply reconstructing sentences from passive to active voice.

It is worth noting that we left part of our article title, “Violence Against Urban Indigenous Women”, in passive voice. Why? Why did we not rewrite this in active voice as “Men’s Violence Against Urban Indigenous Women”? Or as “White Men’s Violence Against Urban Indigenous Women”? What is gained or lost by the rewriting? The benefit of rewriting would be to more clearly call out the perpetrator of intimate partner violence and keep our attention on white men rather than Native women. What would be lost? It seems many of the points made by the Indigenous women in the TCs would be lost. By shifting the focus to the individual, we would lose the structural element of the violence faced by Indigenous women, such as societal violence, state violence, historical violence, colonization, land loss, land violence, sovereignty violence, and community and intergenerational harm from settler colonialism and white supremacy. For an excellent discussion on the structural underpinnings of violence against American Indian women, see the work of Sarah Deer ([Deer 2009, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019](#)).

8. Conclusions

After a year of discussions in the Red Earth Women’s Society, community talking circles, and conversations amongst ourselves on passive language, we found reshaping passive voice to active voice an important step in holding non-Native perpetrators accountable for the violence they commit against Native women. In addition, we felt compelled to resist the temptation to flatten the discourse around violence against Indigenous women from the larger structural issues to the narrower focus passive or active voice, men’s violence, white men’s violence, or even gender violence. The larger structures of violence against Native women are similar in some ways to the violence faced by women from other racial groups, including rape, sexual assault, and murder, but the magnitude, etiology, and current circumstances are often quite different ([Deer 2009, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019](#); [Deer and Warner 2019](#)).

Unlike other racial groups, Native women have faced generations of state violence, from slavery and land dispossession to termination and relocation. Part of the very reason there are so many American Indian people in San José is because it was one of the relocation sites in the 1950s. Relocation was an initiative by the federal government to move American Indians off reservations by giving them one-way tickets from reservations to cities across the United States ([Deer 2010](#); [Ramirez 2007](#)). The myriad forms of violence committed against Native women therefore cannot be flattened to men’s violence against women, for in doing so, we would elide the culpability of the state, of teachers, of academia, of the media, and of the many other perpetrators of violence against Indigenous women.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This research was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of San José State University (IRB 21088) on 24 April 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Consent notices (IRB 21088). were given to all participants via email after they signed up for the FGD. In addition, before the FGD were recorded, the consent notice was shown on the screen and read aloud by de Bourbon. Before going forward with the discussion, participants who had questions were given time to discuss any concerns, such as where the recordings would be housed and who would have access to the data.

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Notes

- ¹ Indigenous, Native American, Native, American Indian, and Indian are used throughout the text (Deer 2019; Ramirez 2007).
- ² In the United States, American Indian is a racial, ethnic, and sovereignty category. who are enrolled in their tribe are members of a tribal nation, hence it is also a designation of sovereignty.
- ³ The authors are also referred to in the text as we and the researchers.

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