
Aboriginal Traditions in the Treatment of Substance Abuse

Rod M. McCormick

University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the traditions and philosophy behind successful substance abuse treatment strategies used by Aboriginal people in Canada. Disconnection from cultural values and traditions have led to a painful and meaningless existence for many Aboriginal people who have turned to drugs and alcohol in an unsuccessful attempt to deal with their anxiety and pain. The discovery of meaning and the resultant healing for Aboriginal clients is being enabled through substance abuse treatment strategies that facilitate reconnection to cultural values and traditions.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit les traditions et philosophies sur lesquelles sont basées les traitements réussis utilisés par les peuples autochtones du Canada dans leur lutte contre les abus de la toxicomanie. L'abandon de leurs valeurs culturelles et de leurs traditions a abouti pour beaucoup d'autochtones à une vie douloureuse et privée de sens. Plusieurs se sont réfugiés dans la drogue ou l'alcool afin d'oublier, sans succès, leurs angoisses et leurs douleurs. Pour des clients autochtones, des traitements pour les toxicomanies permettant un retour à leurs valeurs culturelles et à leurs traditions conduisent à la découverte d'un sens à la vie et à la guérison en résultant.

Aboriginal people of Canada are currently reconnecting with traditional culture in a concerted effort to deal with the pain associated with centuries of cultural dislocation.* All too often in the past, this pain has been masked by the numbing effects of alcohol. Introduced by European traders in the 16th century, alcohol has taken a deadly toll on Aboriginal people. In Canada and the United States today there is a much higher rate of drug and alcohol abuse amongst Aboriginal people than that of the general population (Anderson, 1993; Beauvais, 1996). Almost three-quarters of all deaths caused by accidents and violence (e.g., suicide, homicide and fires) among Aboriginal people have been linked to alcohol (York, 1990). Used as a method of domination, early fur traders were able to exploit Aboriginal people by trading alcohol for furs and other goods (Duran, 1995; York, 1990). For many Aboriginal people the struggle against alcohol has been one of life and death. Upon returning to his home community an Aboriginal counsellor in British Columbia remarked: "The people's spirit was almost dead. Everything revolved around drinking" (York, 1990). This paper suggests

*It may be noted that the author has used the inclusive term "Aboriginal" in this text; it is interchangeable with the terms "Native," "Metis," "Indian" or "First Nations," and refers to the same people.

how Aboriginal people have been reconnecting with their "spirit" through culturally appropriate and effective treatment of drug and alcohol abuse.

MAINSTREAM TREATMENT APPROACHES

Attempts made by mainstream health service providers to assist Aboriginal people in recovering from alcohol and substance abuse has led to only minimal success. Ross (1992) argues that assistance measures taken by the majority culture to assist Aboriginal people have been, and continue to be, misguided and counterproductive. For various reasons, Aboriginal people tend not to use the services provided by the majority culture, and of those who do, approximately half drop out after the first session (Sue & Sue, 1990). It is thought that differences in value orientations between Aboriginal people and mainstream health service providers lead to different beliefs concerning the causes and solutions of mental health problems (Darou, 1987; McCormick, 1996; Trimble, 1981; Wohl, 1989). An obstacle to utilization of mainstream services by aboriginal people concerns differences in help-seeking behaviour. Wing and Crow (1995) describe two obstacles as cultural barriers to obtaining help. One obstacle is that for traditional Aboriginal people it can be very shameful and embarrassing to admit having problems of drug and alcohol abuse. This can prevent them from seeking help. Similarly, it may take Aboriginal people considerable time and experience in talking with a therapist before they can begin to establish an effective working relationship with that therapist. Trust and intimacy is not something that is freely shared with strangers. These examples illustrate some of the reasons that alcohol treatment programs based on the medical model favoured by many mainstream service providers often fail in their efforts with Aboriginal people.

ABORIGINAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ITS TREATMENT

The Aboriginal conceptualization of alcohol abuse and its treatment encompasses more than the biological and experiential explanation provided by mainstream medicine. To understand Aboriginal traditions in the treatment of substance abuse health professionals must also have an understanding of the metaphysical component of substance abuse. Duran (1995) states as follows:

Traditional Native people have a way to describe alcohol and the conceptualization of alcohol that differs from non-Natives. Alcohol is perceived as a spiritual identity that has been destructive of Native American ways of life. The alcohol "spirits" continually wage war within the spiritual arena and it is in the spiritual arena that the struggle continues (p 139).

For Aboriginal people spirituality can be described in terms of "getting beyond the self." It is only through getting beyond the self that humans are able to connect with the rest of creation. Creation is described in terms of family, community, culture, the natural world, and the spiritual world. Traditional cultural values provide Aboriginal people with the teachings on how to attain and main-

tain connection with creation. Many of the mental health problems experienced by Aboriginal people can be attributed to a disconnection from their culture. That disconnection was a 'deliberate' strategy utilized by various churches and the government of Canada in an attempt to assimilate Aboriginal people into Euro-Western culture. For many Aboriginal people, consumption of alcohol has been their attempt to deal with the state of powerlessness and hopelessness that has arisen due to the devastation of traditional cultural values. Research has demonstrated that cultural breakdown is strongly linked with alcohol abuse (Duran, 1995; York, 1990). Pedrigo (1983) believes that substance abuse is a survival mechanism for Aboriginal people whose culture and values have suffered due to assimilation. The degeneration of traditional culture experienced by Aboriginal people has led to the taking of desperate measures. According to one Aboriginal psychologist: "alcohol use and even suicide may be functional behavioral adaptations within a hostile and hopeless social environment" (Duran, 1995, p. 193).

AN EXISTENTIAL EXPLANATION

Many Aboriginal elders and healers believe that reconnection to culture, community and spirituality is healing for Aboriginal people. This belief makes perfect sense when one realizes that it was disconnection from these sources of meaning and support that made Aboriginal people unhealthy in the first place. A Euro-Western theory of psychotherapy that approximates this way of thinking is logotherapy (Frankl, 1962). As an existential-humanistic approach, logotherapy is based on the claim that the primary motivation for people is to obtain meaning in their lives. According to the theory, meaning can be obtained through sources such as spirituality, work, significant relationships with others, and contributing to one's community. Values are described as collective sources of meaning (Fabry, 1968). Values are the activities that provide meaning to families, communities, and whole cultures. A collectively oriented culture such as Aboriginal culture is more likely to provide sources of meaning to its members through family, community, and cultural values than is an individually oriented culture. To be disconnected from those values is to be disconnected from potential sources of meaning. In an individually oriented society such as mainstream Canada or the United States, meaning tends to be derived from individual activities and generally not from collective sources. This is because the individual is less likely to be influenced by family, community, or cultural values. Due to the increasing trend towards individuation the extended family, the church, and the state no longer have the influence on North American people that they once enjoyed (Fabry, 1968). Individuals must seek out meaning on their own. Failure to find meaning can result in existential anxiety. According to logotherapy, existential anxiety can be dealt with constructively if it is used as a means of motivation to enable people to take action to be connected to those activities that provide them with meaning.

Unfortunately, not everyone deals with anxiety in a constructive way. Existential anxiety can cause some people to feel sad and hopeless. Alcohol is one of the

ways people attempt to replace this sad and anxious feeling with an artificial state of happiness. For Aboriginal people this alternative became all too easy when faced with the abundance of alcohol provided by the early traders and others who wanted to take their land. The artificial 'spirit' found in alcohol has been used as a poor substitute for the real 'spirit' possessed by Aboriginal people who are connected to their culture and to creation. Wing and Crow (1995) found in their research that traditional aboriginal people believe that alcoholism is caused by a lack of spirituality. Hammerschlag (1993) writes of the effects of disconnection from spirit, culture and creation in his book entitled: *Theft of the Spirit*. Although the author initially describes the effects that this 'theft' has had on Aboriginal people, he also suggests that other cultures including the Euro-American culture have also experienced the effects of a loss of spirit. Aboriginal people of Canada are perhaps more aware of the effects of disconnection to cultural values because their loss has been the result of a transparent, relatively recent, and purposeful attempt at assimilation. The devastating effects of these attempts at cultural genocide have revealed to Aboriginal people the strong link between cultural dislocation and sickness. Alcohol abuse has simply been one symptom of that sickness. The path to wellness has also been revealed to Aboriginal people in this same link. Quite simply, it is reconnection to one's "spirit" or "culture" and their inherent sources of meaning. In a study examining the facilitation of healing for Aboriginal people of British Columbia, McCormick (1995) confirmed that reconnection to family, community, culture, nature, and spirituality was the primary source of healing for Aboriginal people. Connection to traditional Aboriginal culture and values means that a person must become connected to extended family, community, the natural world, the spirit world, in essence, all of creation.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Although alcohol abuse among Aboriginal people and the attempts at treatment of that abuse can be readily found in the research literature, what is much less evident is the description of successful substance abuse treatment strategies used by Aboriginal people. Brady (1995) believes that Aboriginal people have a rich heritage of healing strategies in dealing with substance abuse. For Aboriginal people, the solution is based on cultural and spiritual survival (Maracle, 1993). Cultural and spiritual revival has been the strategy used by the Aboriginal community of Alkali Lake located in Central British Columbia. This community employed traditional Aboriginal healers to help its members revive traditional dances, ceremonies, and spiritual practices. Community members were introduced to cultural activities such as pow-wow dancing, sweetgrass and sweatlodge ceremonies, and drumming. The treatment strategy used by the people of Alkali Lake has been copied by other Aboriginal treatment programs such as Poundmaker and Round Lake. The guiding philosophy of these treatment programs has been: "Culture is treatment, and all healing is spiritual" (York, 1990). The success of programs using this philosophy/strategy has been phenomenal. The community of Alkali Lake

alone decreased its alcoholism rate from 95% to 5% in 10 years. This was done through revitalizing traditional Aboriginal culture and creating a community atmosphere that no longer tolerated alcoholism as acceptable individual behaviour (Guillory, Willie, & Duran, 1988). Other successful programs have been described by Navarro and Wilson (1997) and Willie (1989).

Successful programs stressed traditional values, spirituality, and activities that enhanced self-esteem. Although most of the successful programs have been organized and run using First Nations values and approaches, it has been recommended that these values and approaches could be enhanced by a fusion with mainstream psychological techniques (Anderson, 1992). Similarly, mainstream mental health service providers can increase their capability of meeting the healing needs of all peoples by examining the healing wisdom of other cultures. Mainstream healers who are able to integrate the healing ways of others may create new and effective theory and practice (McCormick, 1997). It should be mentioned that mainstream techniques by themselves are of little use without an accurate knowledge of cultural context. Without a cultural context it is not possible to develop effective substance abuse prevention and treatment strategies (Trotter & Rolf, 1997; French, 1990). Fortunately, there has been a clear movement within the field towards culturally sensitive treatment models (Terrel, 1993). Other considerations in developing successful treatment programs are the inclusion of interventions that emphasize positive feelings of self-esteem and identity (Edwards & Edwards, 1988), and interventions for aboriginal youth that incorporate a meaningful rite of passage into adulthood (French, 1989).

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY OWNERSHIP

Interventions in Aboriginal communities can complement the movement towards self-determination by encouraging local initiatives in substance abuse treatment and intervention (Beauvais & LaBoueff, 1985). Considerable commitments have been made by many First Nations communities towards the treatment and prevention of substance abuse. This community involvement is essential if strategies are to work (Edwards & Edwards, 1988; Edwards & Seaman, 1995). The community must acknowledge that a substance abuse problem exists and be committed to and involved in addressing the problem. The substance abuser's family also plays an important role in effective treatment and prevention. For Aboriginal people the extended family is important in determining positive and negative behaviours (Trotter & Rolf, 1997). Johnson and Johnson (1993) through their survey found that the family was described by Aboriginal substance abusers as the second most effective intervention after spiritual support. When participants were asked the question; "What significant event or thing caused you to commit to be sober?", almost half (48%) of the respondents identified family as the cause. It can be argued that family is still the central institution in Aboriginal societies. Inside the family, norms of sharing and mutual support provided a safety net for every individual. As was stated earlier in this

paper, those norms were severely disrupted by assimilationist policies such as residential schools and the forcible removal of aboriginal children from their families through foster placement and adoption. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canadian Ministry of Supply and Services, 1996) continuously stresses the importance of family in Aboriginal society. Many Aboriginal people told the commission that the future they wish for is impossible unless the bonds of the family that give individuals and communities their stability are reclaimed and strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Many types of connection have been stressed in this paper, namely, connection to meaning, family, spirituality, and identity. The connection that cannot be emphasized enough is the connection to culture. The understanding of this connection is the reason why Round Lake Treatment Centre in British Columbia uses the motto "Culture is treatment" as its program motto seen on all of its correspondence. It is essential that both researchers and practitioners recognize this connection and incorporate culture into the field of aboriginal substance abuse treatment (O'Neill & Mitchell, 1996). Because substance abuse conflicts with traditional Aboriginal cultural beliefs about courage, humility, generosity, and family honour, cultural wholeness can serve as both a preventative and curing agent in substance abuse treatment (Brady, 1995; O'Neill & Mitchell, 1996).

Aboriginal people are currently developing strategies to deal with the pain of cultural dislocation and the resultant problem of substance abuse. These strategies utilize the community and family in providing culturally appropriate alternatives to abusing alcohol and drugs. Traditional cultural values, ceremonies, and healing techniques have been known to provide substance abusers with the knowledge and skills to attain and maintain a meaningful connection with creation. It is to these values and teachings that Aboriginal people are now turning to in an effort to let the "good spirits" guide them.

References

- Anderson, E.N. (1992) A healing place: Ethnographic notes on a treatment centre. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 9(3-4), 1-21.
- Anderson, B.M. (1993). *Aboriginal counselling and healing processes*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.
- Beauvais, F., & LaBoueff, S. (1985). Drugs and alcohol abuse interventions in American Indian communities. *International Journal of Addictions*, 20(1), 139-171.
- Beauvais, F. (1996). Trends in drug use among American Indian students and drop-outs: 1975 to 1994. *American Journal of Public Health*, 86(11), 1594-1598.
- Brady, M. (1995). Culture in treatment, culture as treatment. A critical appraisal of developments in addictions programs for indigenous North Americans and Australians. *Social Science & Medicine*, 4(11), 1487-1498.
- Canadian Ministry of Supply and Services. (1996) *People to people, Nation to nation: Highlights from the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. (MSS publication No. C96-980366-4). Ottawa, Ont.

- Darou, W.G. (1987). Counselling the Northern Native. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 21, 33-41.
- Duran, E., & Duran, B. (1995). *Native American postcolonial psychology*. Albany N.Y.: SUNY Press.
- Edwards, E.D., & Edwards, M.E. (1988). Alcoholism prevention/treatment and Native American youth: A community approach. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 18(1), 103-114.
- Edwards, E.D., & Seaman, J.R. (1995). A community approach for Native American drug and alcohol prevention programs: A logic model framework. *Alcohol Treatment Quarterly*, 13(2), 43-62.
- Fabry, J.B. (1968). *The pursuit of meaning*. Boston: Beacon press.
- Favel-King, A. (1993). The treaty right to health. In *The Path to Healing: Report of the National Round table on Aboriginal health and Social issues*. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Ottawa, Ontario. Canada Communication Group Publishing.
- Frankl, V. (1962). *Mans search for meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- French, L. (1989). Native American alcoholism: A transcultural counseling perspective. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 2(2), 153-166.
- French, L. (1990). Substance abuse treatment among American Indian children. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 7(3), 63-76.
- Guillory, B.M., Willie, E., & Duran, E.F. (1988). Analysis of a community organizing case study: Alkali Lake. *Journal of Rural Community Psychology*, 9(1), 27-36.
- Hammerschlag, C. (1993). *Theft of the Spirit: A journey of spiritual healing with Native Americans*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Johnson, J., & Johnson, F. (1993). Community development, sobriety and after-care at Alkali lake Band. In Canadian Ministry of Supply and Services. (1996) *People to people, Nation to nation: Highlights from the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. (MSS publication No. C96-980366-4). Ottawa, Ont.
- Maracle, B. (1993). *Crazy Water: Native voices on addiction and recovery*. Toronto: Penguin.
- McCormick, R.M. (1996). Culturally appropriate means and ends of counselling as described by the First Nations people of British Columbia. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 18(3), 163-172.
- McCormick, R.M. (1995). The facilitation of healing for the First Nations people of British Columbia. [monograph] *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 21(2), 251-319.
- McCormick, R. (1997). An Integration of healing wisdom: The Vision Quest ceremony from an attachment theory perspective. *Guidance and Counselling*, 12(2), 18-22.
- Navarro, J., & Wilson, S. (1997). Substance abuse and spirituality: A program for Native American students. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 21(1), 3-11.
- O'Neill, T.D., & Mitchell, C.M. (1996). Alcohol use among American Indian adolescents: The role of culture in pathological drinking. *Social Science and Medicine*, 42(4), 565-578.
- Pedigo, J. (1983). Finding the "meaning" of Native American substance abuse: Implications for community prevention. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 61(5), 273-277.
- Ross, R. (1992). *Dancing with a ghost: Exploring Indian reality*. Markham: Octopus.
- Sue, D.W., & Sue, D. (1990). *Counselling the culturally different: Theory and practice*. (2nd ed.). Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.
- Terrel, M.D. (1993). Ethnocultural factors and substance abuse: Toward culturally sensitive treatment models. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 7(3), 162-167.
- Trimble, J.E. (1981). Value differentials and their importance in counseling American Indians. In P. Pederson, J. Draguns, W. Lonner & J.E. Trimble. (Eds.). *Counseling across cultures*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Trotter, R.T., & Rolf, J.E. (1997). Cultural models of inhalant abuse among Navajo youth. *Drugs and Society*, 10(1-2), 39-59.
- Willie, E. (1989). The story of Alkali Lake: Anomaly of community recovery or national trend in Indian country? *Alcoholism treatment Quarterly*, 6(3-4), 167-174.

- Wing, D.M., & Crow, S.S. (1995). An ethnonursing study of Muscogee (Creek) Indians and effective health care practices for treating alcohol abuse. *Family and Community Health*, 18(2), 52-64.
- Wohl, J. (1989). Cross cultural psychotherapy. In P.B. Pederson, J.G. Draguns, W.J. Lonner, & J.E. Trimble. (Eds.), *Counseling across cultures*. (3rd edition) (pp.177-204). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- York, G. (1990). *The Dispossessed: life and death in native Canada*. London: Vintage U.K.

About the Author

Dr. Rod McCormick is a member of the Mohawk Nation and works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. He is also Director of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at the same university.

Address correspondence to Dr. Rod McCormick, First Nations Longhouse, University of British Columbia, 1985 West Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z2