From Taboo to Epidemic: Family Violence Within Aboriginal Communities

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Published online: 11 March 2014
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Abstract The research presented in this paper highlights the rising incidents of family violence in Aboriginal communities and the lasting and damaging effects of colonialism on the Aboriginal peoples and promotes awareness for those individuals who work closely with the Aboriginal communities. In addition, this paper presents an overview of two primary theories related to Aboriginal family violence, so as to emphasize the complexities surrounding this issue. Family violence within Aboriginal communities has specifically seen a paradigm shift from pre-colonialism to post-colonialism, moving from a rare occurrence to one that has been estimated to impact approximately 65 % of the Aboriginal populations in Canada. Factors such as a transient lifestyle, substance abuse, economic status, and gender inequality have been found to increase the risk of experiencing family violence or domestic abuse. These factors, in addition to a long history of colonialism, have created a state in which Aboriginal families are more vulnerable to the occurrence of family violence. The epidemic of family violence in Aboriginal families is further compounded by underlying racism, lack of cultural competency, and a general misunderstanding of Aboriginal worldviews by service providers.

Keywords Aboriginal family violence · Social work · Theories · Social learning · Colonization theory · Colonization

Introduction

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996), eight in ten Aboriginal women have experienced some form of violence or woman abuse. The report also

states that by age 16, 51 % of Aboriginal women have experienced some form of sexual assault, and 27 % have experienced a form of physical assault (RCAP 1996). In addition, Aboriginal women are eight times more likely, as compared to non-Aboriginal women, to be murdered at the hands of their spouse (Baskin 2006). While violence against all women is unacceptable and an infringement on human rights (United Nations 1948), the severity of violence that Aboriginal women are exposed to is especially disheartening and tragic.

Family violence defined by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) relates to the abuse of power within the family dynamic including those relationships which are dependent and built upon trust (vol. 3). Abuse can occur in a various number of ways and can include, but are not limited to, physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial/economic, and spiritual abuse. Physical abuse encompasses all forms of physical force used against another individual that may result in injury or harm (ACWS 2012; Bopp et al. 2003). Often emotional and psychological abuses are used interchangeably, as both are directed at the person's sense of self. Emotional abuse, however, includes behaviors such as name-calling and put-downs, whereas psychological abuse is comprised of actions such as bullying and intimidation, isolation, and manipulation (ACWS 2012; Bopp et al. 2003). Financial or economic abuse occurs when money and monetary transactions are used as a form of control over an individual. An example of financial abuse is forcing the victim to give all her monies to the abuser so as to make her financially dependent (ACWS 2012; Bopp et al. 2003). Lastly, spiritual abuse is defined as actions that undermine a person's faith or religious beliefs (ACWS 2012).

It is important to note that within an Aboriginal context, the ideology around woman abuse is shifted away from the individualistic point of view, which is often held by Western society. Baskin (2006) highlights the holistic and communal worldview that many Aboriginal communities hold. This worldview extends into the realm of woman abuse, which is

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more commonly referred to as family violence by Aboriginal people and defined as a “serious abuse of power within family, trust or dependency relationships” (vol. 3) (Baskin 2006; RCAP 1996). Violence that is inflicted on a woman radiates and impacts all those around her, including her children, her partner, her family, and her community. Therefore, to fully understand the impact of family violence on Aboriginal peoples, it is vital to look beyond the individual and incorporate the role of family, community, and history.

Having provided a brief explanation of what family violence entails and the number of women and families it impacts, this paper aims to address several key factors. First, the paper explores the history of family violence within Aboriginal communities, demonstrating the once taboo nature of violence against women and child. Secondly, the paper examines the shift of family violence and the impact of violence on the individual, family, and community. Third, an investigation into the etiologies of family violence and the theories, which surround the phenomena, is explored. Lastly, this writer hopes to demonstrate how the history of family violence within Aboriginal communities has shaped the modern day issue and how this impacts social work and social work practice.

It should be noted that while this paper focuses primarily on family violence towards Aboriginal families in Canada, the pervasiveness of violence towards women and children is not to be underestimated or disregarded worldwide. While minimal research has been done in other countries, such as the USA, on family violence against Aboriginal women, the partial research that was available did correlate with Canadians’ findings. Aboriginal women are at a higher risk of experiencing family violence due to lower socioeconomic income and loss of resources, gender roles, and family structure as a result of colonization (Malcoe et al. 2004). As global research on the severity of family violence in Aboriginal communities is sparse, this paper should further be used in conjunction to bring awareness and prompt additional research in other countries.

History

While research has shown that family violence within Aboriginal communities is currently a topic of concern, literature surrounding Aboriginal communities prior to colonization states that family violence was a rare occurrence (Baskin 2006; Bopp et al. 2003). Within Aboriginal communities, gender roles were not ranked hierarchically but rather considered to be complementary, and the central role of the woman was reflected in the religious or spiritual context of their community (Baskin 2006). Women and men each had distinct roles within the community and family. Women were in charge of caring for and teaching children, medicine, and held respected spiritual roles. Men looked after the community;

they provided through hunting, protected the community, and worked in unison with the women to implement political decisions (Baskin 2006).

Anderson (2001) indicates traditional ideology made violence against women and children a taboo. These same Aboriginal traditions and values highlighted the sacredness of women, children, and elders (Brownridge 2009). Women were regarded as the givers of life and thus were capable of bringing new spirits into our world from the creator (Brownridge 2009; Baskin 2006). Children and elders were also held in high regard as the innocence and youth of children meant they had just come from the spirit world. Elders were instilled with knowledge and were connected to the spirit world, as they would soon be descending back to the creator (Baskin 2006).

The proscribed nature of family violence within Aboriginal communities meant that on the rare occurrence when abuse occurred, it was dealt with in a swift and communal manner (Anderson 2001; Bopp et al. 2003). Literature indicates when family violence did occur, members of the community confronted the male and it was dealt with as a community issue (Brownridge 2009). Examples throughout the literature, based on the community, give indications that family violence was met with violence in return (often at the hands of women) (Anderson 2001). Other forms of discipline included scarring, banishment, humiliation, demotion in hunting parties, and, if repeat offenses occurred, death (Anderson 2001).

The scarcity of family violence in conjunction with a communal and altruistic way of life was the norm for the majority of Aboriginal communities prior to colonization. Colonization as defined by LaRocque (1994) is the “process of encroachment and subsequent subjugation of Aboriginal peoples since the arrival of Europeans” (p. 73). This entailed the loss of lands, resources, self-autonomy, and culture (LaRocque 1994). With the European settlers came condemnation of the Aboriginal way of life and the implementation of Westernized values and beliefs, including the shift and propagation of patriarchy (LaRocque 1994).

Aside from the initial colonization from European settlers, there were two other detrimental events that shattered the holistic and traditional way of Aboriginal living: the Indian Act of 1876 and the creation of residential schools. Both were created as a means of assimilation and eradication of the Aboriginal way of life. The Indian Act created artificial bands and essentially gave the Canadian government and non-Aboriginals a legal means of controlling Aboriginal people and thus stripping them of any rights and self-autonomy (Menzies 2007). A later stipulation which supported the Euro-Canadian culture and succeeded in further stripping Aboriginal woman of their matriarchal role was the propagation that women were the property of men (Carter 2003). The Indian Act viewed women as inferior to males and therefore were no longer entitled to communal decision making, voting, or any business related to the band (Carter 2003).

The alteration in the role of the Aboriginal woman is a fundamental factor in the paradigm shift of Aboriginal traditions. When women lost their status and rights within Aboriginal communities, they also lost their ability to provide and to speak towards the well-being of their families (Anderson 2001). This supported a detrimental spiraling effect, whereby Aboriginal woman became dependent on an economy they had no control over and on Aboriginal men who were being swayed by European settlers that they were more entitled and superior to women (Anderson 2001). These practices of demonizing the Aboriginal woman, her role in the family, her sexuality, and her ability to be a parent, were further transmitted through residential schools (Anderson 2001).

The rise of residential schools, starting as early as the 1840s, forcefully took Aboriginal children from their families, communities, and culture (Menzies 2007). Children were placed in designated institutions whereby they were indoctrinated into a Euro-Canadian lifestyle, with a heavy emphasis being directed towards assimilation (Baskin 2006). Residential schools specifically are said to be one of the leading causes of family violence among Aboriginal communities due to the abuse that the children endured (Bopp et al. 2003). Many of the children suffered horrendous acts of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse often resulting in death (Menzies, 2007).

Wade (1995) highlights a number of various strategies implemented by residential schools in the assimilation of Aboriginal children into a Westernized way of life. Children were isolated, placed under strict surveillance, physically punished, propagandized, neglected/starved, and humiliated (Wade 1995). These schools deprived children, who would later become parents, of proper parenting skills, love, healthy relationships, and role modeling (Baskin 2006). What they learned as children was all they knew later on as parents, and this set the stage for much of the family violence we see today among Aboriginal families. McKenzie and Morrisette (2003) add that residential schools created a life of uncertainty and lack of identity, which is often referred to as “the residential school syndrome.”

With the implementation of colonization, the Indian Act, and residential schools, the loss of traditional values, roles, and beliefs began (Baskin 2006). These three acts created a triadic relationship, whereby Aboriginal people lost their identities, roles, traditions, and language (Puchala et al. 2010). Women, children, and elders were no longer revered; men were stripped of their dignity and made to feel helpless as their families were torn apart, and over the years, much of the traditional Aboriginal way of life was lost (Menzies 2007; Anderson 2001).

What Aboriginal Family Violence Looks Like Today?

In 2009, Statistics Canada (2009) reported that approximately 67,000 Aboriginal women across Canada had self-reported

experiencing some form of violence or violent victimization within the last year. Among these women, almost two thirds (63 %) were between the ages of 15 and 34. This accounts for almost half of all females that identify as being Aboriginal within the ten provinces of Canada (Statistics Canada 2009). Furthermore, violent victimization according to Statistics Canada only entails sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault, excluding the other forms of abuse such as emotional, psychological, financial, and spiritual and therefore underrepresentation is most likely reflected. In addition, the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2001) states 57 % of Aboriginal women who were abused reported their children had been witnesses of the abuse.

When violence against Aboriginal women is compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, Aboriginal women are three times more likely to experience family violence (Statistics Canada 2009; Brownridge 2009). Aboriginal women are seven times more likely to be choked, threatened with a weapon, and severely beaten (Puchala et al. 2010). Statistics regarding the abuse Aboriginal women experience varies based on the literature. Brownridge posits that anywhere from 12.1 to 91.1 % of all Aboriginal women will encounter some form of partner violence. Meanwhile, Puchala et al. (2010) estimated the number closer to 65 %. The growing concern around family violence, spousal homicide, and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada has sparked consciousness-raising events such as annual stolen sisters events and awareness campaigns via Amnesty International (Amnesty International, Canada 2000).

The impacts of violence against Aboriginal women are extremely detrimental as they extend further than just the individual. On a micro-level, the effects from abuse vary from woman to woman, but some of the emotional and psychological impacts of violence against women include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, self-harm, sleep disturbances, low self-esteem, anxiety, panic attacks, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and memory issues (ACWS 2012). Many of these women sustain long-term physical injuries as well. Physical issues have been related to joint pain, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain syndrome, gynecological disorders, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, and, in extreme cases, death (Todd and Lundy 2006).

When exploring the impacts of family violence on a micro-level, the effects on children should also be examined, as research illustrates more than half of all mothers abused state their children were witnesses to the violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2001). Bopp et al. (2003) emphasize that children exposed to family violence are just as likely to experience posttraumatic stress disorder as their mothers. In addition, children can display physical, emotional, social, and school-related symptoms to family violence (Bopp et al. 2003). Some examples include venereal disease, frequent

headaches and/or stomachaches, unprovoked hostility, depression, abusing others, alcohol and drug abuse, running away from home, difficulties in school, and poor concentration (Bopp et al. 2003).

Moving onto a macro and more comprehensive level, the effects of family violence can be seen within the family, community, and even in the stereotypes that Western society holds regarding the Aboriginal population. For starters, violence supports the breakdown of the family system and is modeled to children as an acceptable behavior in relationships and in every day life (ACWS 2012). The harmful effects of violence on children have been well documented in literature. Studies have shown that children living in violent homes are 12 to 14 times more likely to be abused by their mother's partner and are 45–70 % more likely to be physically and sexually assaulted (Bopp et al. 2003). In addition, these children are at greater risk of experiencing emotional and physical harm, depression, anxiety, attachment issues, and self-harm behaviors (Vine et al. 2006). The violence that children witness in the family home acts to perpetuate the cycle of violence and the intergenerational trauma experienced by the Aboriginal people (Bopp et al. 2003).

Lastly, family violence within an Aboriginal community can be seen as a sociological characteristic (Bopp et al. 2003): one that has been referred to as “culture of violence,” the lived experiences which become a characteristic of a community (Bopp et al. 2003). Within a community and a societal context, violence against women works to disseminate the internalized oppression carried throughout the generations, further enhances the segregation among the community into violent (associated with shame and guilt) and nonviolent homes, and maintains the associated violent risk factors attributed to Aboriginal communities (Cheers et al. 2006). The structural oppression and disadvantages stream out into larger Westernized societies manifesting as racism, discrimination, pathologizing, and promoting existing stereotypes (Baskin 2006).

Literature by Bopp et al. (2003) has compared family violence within Aboriginal communities to a disease such as cancer. Bopp et al. explain much like cancer; family violence thrives on social and community determinants, which make a community more susceptible to the culture of violence. The determinants of family violence need to be examined and addressed on all three levels (individual, family, and community) in order for any kind of transformation to ever be successful (Bopp et al. 2003).

Theories on Causation

After exploring the plight around family violence in Aboriginal communities, the complexity of the situation becomes more apparent. Violence against Aboriginal women, families, and communities is intertwined on varying micro, mezzo, and

macro levels. There have been many theories hypothesized to date around the phenomenon of family violence, ranging from the attempt to explain individual behaviors to sociocultural factors to the historical trauma experienced by Aboriginal communities (Bopp et al. 2003). While it is not plausible to explore every theory on family violence, this paper gives a brief account of the role of social learning (theory) in the perpetuation of family violence while providing a more in-depth view at colonization theory. Colonization theory is given a greater emphasis in this section as it offers a closer look at the intergenerational trauma entrenched in Aboriginal history and communities (Alaggia and Vine 2006; Bopp et al. 2003).

While these theories are the focus of this section and have specifically been identified as key theories when examining family violence in Aboriginal families, it should be mentioned there are additional theories on anger control, power, psychopathology, sociology, and developmental–ecological (ACWS 2012). In addition, many of the factors which place Aboriginal families at risk also extend to the larger non-Aboriginal population. Factors such as being a young female, living a transient lifestyle, economic status, substance abuse, witnessing abuse in the family home, and living in societies where gender roles are rigid with prevalent gender inequalities are all characteristics which can increase one's risk of experiencing family violence (Todd and Lundy 2006; Statistics Canada, 2006). There is no one universally agreed upon theory to explain family violence regardless of the population.

Social Learning

The social learning theory, also referred to as the intergenerational transmission of violence, stipulates that violence is a learned characteristic (ACWS 2012). Children who are raised in violent homes begin to normalize the acts of violence within a relationship setting. Through inappropriate modeling, these children grow up conditioned to believe that violence is an acceptable means of communication and a characteristic of relationships (Alaggia and Vines 2006; Alberta Council of Women's Shelters 2012). Examples of social learning are riddled throughout current Aboriginal experiences of family violence. The narrative of an anonymous man taken from Bopp et al. (2003) states,

I promised my wife I would never hurt her like my dad hurt my mom. He would slap her till she begged him to stop. I swore (when I was about ten) that I would kill him if he didn't stop hurting her. Sometimes he dragged her around the house by her hair. And he was always hyper-jealous. He tried to turn us kids against her. “She's a lying, cheating slut,” he told us. “Was there a man here? Was there another man in the house?” He would

twist our fingers till they seemed like they would break, or pinch us real hard. Sometimes we told him “yes” to make him stop. One time our dad grabbed my sister and spun her around by the neck until she peed her pants. I broke my promise. In the very first month of marriage I blackened my wife’s eye. (p. 3).

Based on the evidence presented on intergenerational trauma, due to residential schools, the Indian Act, and colonialism, social learning theory is a popular choice in the explanation of Aboriginal family violence. Anderson (2001) reports a vicious cycle of violence, and degrading women was implemented through the church and the state. Abused boys and girls who were the product of residential schools and abusive foster homes carried their learned practices into the future and their families (Anderson 2001).

McKenzie and Morrisette (2003) identified three types of trauma experienced by Aboriginal children within residential schools, which had lasting impacts on later parenting. First, children experienced a lack of love in most of their major relationships, with caregivers and authority figures (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). Second, children were denied any cultural expression representative of Aboriginal culture. Third, children were deprived of the experience of knowing what family was and what it meant to be a part of a family (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). The loss of these three factors meant children grew up without the opportunities to experience positive and nurturing bonds, those necessary and fundamental in later parenthood (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003).

It should be noted that some scholars have found a weakness in this theory when applied to Aboriginal communities as well as non-Aboriginal communities. The theory of social learning does take into account the fact that not all individuals who come from violent homes progress onto be abusers, nor do all females later end up in violent relationships (Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters 2012; Brownridge 2003). Supporters however have counter argued that regardless of those who do not become abuser, researchers cannot negate the actuality that childhood exposure to violence increases future risk of engaging in violent behavior (Straus 1991).

Colonization Theory

The remainder and perhaps the most emphasized of the etiology section will focus on colonization theory. This paper stresses the importance of this theory as it tends to take a more holistic approach to the family violence experienced within Aboriginal communities. Colonization theory examines the historical context in relation to Aboriginal family violence and how it has impacted the individual, the family, and the community. Colonization theory, often labeled and grouped

together with other theories of oppression, is seen as one of the leading theories when looking at family violence among Aboriginal communities (Alaggia and Vine 2006). This theory states that due to traumatic historical events, oppression has been internalized among the population and passed on from one generation to the next (Alaggia and Vine 2006).

Within an Aboriginal context, colonization theory would propose that violence occurs due to the effects of colonialism and generations of structural oppression. Western society ultimately brands this population as problematic and dismisses their issues as pathological when in reality it is intertwined with historical complexity (Alaggia and Vine 2006). The oppression experienced by Aboriginals has been internalized throughout the years and now manifests within their thoughts, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and relationships (Puchala et al. 2010). The historical trauma and experiences are then passed on from one generation to the next and, thus, perpetuates the cycle of intergenerational trauma (Brownridge 2009).

Colonization theory would posit that on an individualistic level, the historical trauma has stripped the Aboriginal person of their identity, culture, and traditional roots (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). This has led to a variety of harmful coping strategies, including drugs, alcohol, and abuse (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). The Aboriginal person has come to internalize the oppression he/she has faced as an individual and as a member of the Aboriginal group (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). In addition, the Aboriginal woman once seen as a strong matriarchial figure within the Aboriginal community is now demeaned and isolated to the role, imposed by colonialism, the “drunken squaw” (LaRocque 1994; Anderson 2001).

As explained through social learning theory, the role of the family has also drastically changed as a result of colonization. Many children raised in residential schools and foster homes, robbed of tradition and love, grew up to model the same relationships they experienced. Bopp et al. (2003) provide six ways in which families are impacted through family violence. As Aboriginal families are better represented as an interconnected system, comprised of siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, and cousins, the likelihood that family violence is occurring will soon be known to multiple members (Bopp et al. 2003).

Second, the response to family violence from varying members of the family will be dependent on their own personal experiences with abuse (Bopp et al. 2003). If the family is united and has been able to resolve some of the trauma it has endured, then support and intervention is more likely to be helpful and sympathetic (Bopp et al. 2003). On the other hand, if the family (immediate and extended) environment is toxic with unaddressed trauma, a history or current patterns of abuse, and weak familial bonds, there is a greater chance that support will be denied (Bopp et al. 2003). In these situations, family members may place blame on the abused individual,

convince them to stay quiet, or refuse to acknowledge the family violence all together (Bopp et al. 2003).

Fifth, abuse within one household can easily disseminate into the household of another family (Bopp et al. 2003). Bopp et al. state examples of this occurrence when female family members attempt to protect the victim but are then victimized for speaking against loyalties held by their partners to the abuser. Finally, family violence impacts children within the family (Bopp et al. 2003). As already noted, children who are exposed to family violence are at greater risk of becoming abusive in the future. The child who grows up continuously exposed to violence may soon become the teenager who abuses and assaults their cousins, nephews, nieces, and younger siblings (Bopp et al. 2003). Given the ways family violence can spread, it becomes easier to recognize and coincide with the comparison of family violence to cancer of Bopp et al. Both are aggressive, progressive, and deadly and if not confronted and addressed swiftly the likelihood of it being stopped decreases (Bopp et al. 2003).

Lastly, the role of colonization on the Aboriginal community is not difficult to bear witness to. Aboriginal people are overrepresented in the welfare systems and the in the criminal justice system (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). The unemployment rates of Aboriginal peoples as compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts are three times higher, and on some reserves, 90 % of the residents are unemployed (McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). In conjunction, the stress of unemployment has been theorized to impact a male's sense of masculinity and their ability to provide for the family leading to outbursts of violence (Todd and Lundy 2006). In addition, Aboriginal populations are also more inclined to have lower levels of education and are overall younger than other populations in Canada (Brownridge 2009; Todd and Lundy 2006).

Colonization theory in essence incorporates key aspects of many individual theories to family violence as well as social learning. It hypothesizes the historical trauma is passed on throughout generations, spreading isolation, sadness, anger, hopelessness, pain, and internalized oppression (Menziez 2007). The impacts of trauma affect the individual (i.e., low self-esteem, lack of a sense of belonging, feelings of abandonment), the family (i.e., family violence, lack of bonding between family members, perpetuation of negative stereotypes by caregivers), and the community (i.e., a high prevalence of substance abuse among community members, lack of cultural opportunities and traditions, internalized oppression from one group member to another) (Menziez 2007; Mullaly 2010).

It is noteworthy that Brownridge (2003, 2009) addresses two weaknesses in colonization theory. The first is that the theory is only applicable to the Aboriginal population on a macro-level (much like social learning theory). Colonization theory cannot explain why some Aboriginal males are violent

and some are not. In the same respect, the theory cannot account for why only some Aboriginal women experience violence despite their ancestors having experienced the same historical trauma (Brownridge 2003). Secondly, Brownridge (2009) states colonization theory is difficult to prove. Since the theory is rooted in the historical nature of a population, it is difficult to investigate the prevalence of violence prior to events such as colonization, the Indian Act, residential schools, and the "sixties scoop."

Implications for Policy and Practice

Having holistically examined family violence and how it has transitioned from a taboo phenomenon of the past to a modern day epidemic within Aboriginal communities, it is quite transparent that steps need to be taken to begin addressing this "cancer" (Bopp et al. 2003). With a large portion of Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence and the intergenerational trauma being disseminated throughout communities, it is vital that service providers begin taking necessary steps towards being helpers in Aboriginal communities. Unfortunately to date, with some breakthroughs, the interventions for family violence offered in Canada come from a predominantly Westernized and nonindigenous standpoint (Baskin 2006). Given the collective intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal communities, it is of little surprise there is hesitation to accept and reach out for help using Western remedies. It has been the experience of the Aboriginal people that many of the social services, pledged to aid marginalized groups, tend to be guided more by underlying racism, a lack of cultural competency, and a general misunderstanding of Aboriginal worldviews, beliefs, and traditions (Baskin 2006; LaRocque 1994).

In support of the hesitation put forth by Aboriginal peoples, Williams and Ellison (1996) assert that non-Aboriginal individuals who have not been properly educated in Aboriginal traditions, customs, and culture operate the majority of social service agencies. Williams and Ellison propose a priority be placed on the service provider's education, specifically in regards to Aboriginal traditions, beliefs, history, and norms. Only in doing so can social workers truly begin to understand the ramifications of assimilation and the grief and loss the Aboriginal community may be experiencing (Williams and Ellison 1996). Through this increased knowledge, collaborative initiatives can then be created to help stop the cycle of violence within Aboriginal communities.

Several recommendations and considerations have been put forth to service providers that work with Aboriginal peoples and communities. First and foremost, acknowledging the traumatic history faced by Aboriginal communities is essential and pertinent in their healing (Bopp et al. 2003). Aboriginal family violence is a communal issue and cannot be remedied

using an individualistic Westernized model of therapy or counseling. For instance, family violence for an Aboriginal woman or child is a shared occurrence and affects all those around them and thus should be treated so in the healing journey (Baskin 2006).

Secondly, it is important to incorporate key elements of the Aboriginal culture, not only in addressing family violence but also in any work done in conjunction with those who identify as Aboriginal. Key components such as spirituality and the incorporation of elders in healing are vital (Stevens 2010; Brown and Languedoc 2004). Stevens defines spirituality as “that sense of connection to something greater than self” (p. 184) and reiterates that for some Aboriginal peoples, spirituality is a key component in the restoration of identity, resilience, and purpose. It is all too common for non-Aboriginal helpers to overlook the importance of spirituality in the journey to healing (Damiamakis 2001).

Additionally, the incorporation of Aboriginal elders into the healing process is also another area often overlooked when interacting with Aboriginal clients. Elders are held in high regard and are thought of as spiritual leaders and teachers within Aboriginal communities (Brown and Languedoc 2004). Literature highlights that the modeling provided by elders is crucial in representing respectful ways of communicating, listening, and sharing among Aboriginals (Brown and Languedoc 2004). Puchala et al. (2010) stress the kindness, compassion, and lack of judgment offered by elders. This helps to create an open space where women, men, children, and community members can come and share their journey, regardless of what role they played within family violence.

The third recommendation in working with Aboriginal communities is the growing need for service providers to acknowledge the cultural continuum associated with individuals who identify as Aboriginal (Williams and Ellison 1996). To date, there are four styles of living: traditional, marginal, middle class, and pan-Indian (Williams and Ellison 1996; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). Each style of living requires a different approach for the helper and should be adapted to how the individual identifies and what they are most comfortable with (Williams and Ellison 1996; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003).

According to Williams and Ellison (1996) and McKenzie and Morrisette (2003), traditionalists live in agreement with the traditional customs and norms of the Aboriginal culture. These individuals are aware and subscribe to the balance between them and the environment (Williams and Ellison 1996). Literature reveals interventions for those who identify as traditionalists will need to integrate ceremony and rituals, for the restoration the balance and harmony (Williams and Ellison, 1996). In relation to family violence, these are the individuals where the inclusion of family members is especially important. For example, the voices of Aboriginal women in Baskin’s (2006) work, *Systemic oppression, violence*

and healing in Aboriginal families and communities, were very adamant that they were uncomfortable with treatment that excluded the abuser and separated their family.

On the opposite side of traditionalists are those who identify as pan-Indian. These individuals wrestle with attempting to reestablish their lost traditions and to find a common ground where they are comfortable in their own variation of what it means to be Aboriginal (Williams and Ellison 1996; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). Their cultural expression often entails a mixture of various traditional aspects, referred to as “a reformation of tradition” (Williams and Ellison 1996; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). Williams and Ellison highlight it is valuable for service providers to find a way to mesh Westernized interventions with traditional means, as this group is the least likely to reach out to Westernized social agencies.

Individuals who identify as either marginal or middle class are those who are stuck somewhere in the tug-of-war between traditional culture and the Westernized white culture (Williams and Ellison 1996; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003). Marginal and middle class individuals are at the greatest risk of sociocultural stress, as they have not yet reconciled with which side they identify with the most and likely do not feel a true sense of belonging in either culture (Williams and Ellison 1996). As these individuals are torn between the two worlds, they are also the group that is most likely open to Western medicine and ways of healing (Williams and Ellison 1996). Considerations for working with marginal and middle class Aboriginals rely on building a trustful relationship, whereby the social worker can try to identify or work through with the client (Williams and Ellison 1996). More specifically, this means jointly finding an intervention the individual is most comfortable with (Williams and Ellison 1996). This can be difficult as each individual is different, and finding the right balance between the two worlds may require additional time, patience, and understanding.

Finally, as a reminder to the profession of social work, it is pertinent that we remember the importance and value of relationships in Aboriginal culture and communities. This is especially true when enacting the role of the helper around vulnerable topics such as trauma and family violence. For many Aboriginal peoples, relationships define human life, help them to make sense of the world they live in, and are the means by which they accumulate knowledge and truth (Hart 2002). Stevens (2010) and Hart (2002) accentuate that relationships are about reciprocity; it is about a mutual sharing and understanding. The relationships we enter when working with Aboriginal peoples bind us “beyond the office door” and ask that we, social workers, do our best to understand all the areas and realms which impact Aboriginal peoples and communities (Stevens, 2010). This includes reexamining ourselves and the beliefs and assumptions we carry in our work.

Conclusion

The Aboriginal population in Canada makes up approximately 4–5 % of the national population (Hick 2010), and yet they are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and the child welfare system (Baskin 2006). Their unemployment rates are three times higher than other populations in Canada and even Aboriginal writers are calling the culture of violence experienced within communities an epidemic (Bopp et al. 2003). Clearly, the historical trauma and family violence experienced by Aboriginal populations requires a call to action and as current literature has proven that Westernized methods of intervention are ineffective it is time for social workers to reevaluate their roles, interventions, and methods (Baskin 2006). It is time for us, helpers, to move beyond Western ethics and promote step-by-step manuals and listen and truly become involved in the voices and beliefs of the Aboriginal peoples. If we hope to ever put an end to the cycle of violence within Aboriginal communities, and any society, we need to start stepping out of the box and ascribing to other way of knowing and healing.

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