Chapter 1

Introduction

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Aboriginal Values: People and Community

Historically, Aboriginals are people of community (Lee, 1992). Marriages join bloodlines in a conjugal family that provides the social, political and spiritual basis for all of its members. Grandparents serve as the leaders in these families, setting behavioural and spiritual norms. The adoption of unrelated elders as grandparents in cases where natural grandparents are absent illustrates the importance of the grandparent role. A flexible and extensive family system is the standard (Herring, 1989). Children are taught and cared for within this extended family system. They are guided towards a community perspective and spirituality is integrated into their daily education and socialization. Naming ceremonies establish a network of community members who will care for children and take responsibility for raising them. Substitute parents are confirmed in the event the natural parents become unable to care for their children. Aboriginal communities generally are encouraged to take responsibility for each other. Children, in particular, are viewed as gifts from the Creator and alternatives are sought when the immediate family can no longer care for them. Thus, families extend through bloodlines, ceremonial practices, adoptions and affiliations.

Cooperation and a unity with nature are an essential part of Aboriginal culture. This unity with nature is an extension of the unity of each individual with their family and community. Time is part of this interconnectedness. Individuals are tied to their ancestors through time and receive direction from these spirit guides. Correspondingly, individuals are taught to weigh their actions carefully, as they will have an impact on subsequent generations
Intergenerational knowledge is sought and prioritized for the collective well-being of community members. Thus, regard for others extends well beyond the present.

Moreover, there is a respect for the role that all entities of nature play in the larger universe (Lee, 1992). All living things have a spirit and have values and wisdom to impart. For example, trees symbolize honesty and the variety of colours and sizes of people in the world. Animals teach affection, companionship and self-sacrifice for others. They also teach the value of sex and how not to abuse this activity (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996): two beings joining together is natural and profound and provides for the continuation and evolution of creation. The relationship with nature is equal and reciprocal; everything has a place in the world. Thought and consideration for all living things are balanced with respect for the intricacies of nature.

This interrelationship with all living things naturally extends to all peoples of the world. All humans are part of a global community. Just as people can learn from the natural aspects of their environments, they can learn from people of different races and cultures. This sense of worldwide community not only works to reduce racism and ethnocentrism and to generate the common values of wisdom, love, respect, honesty, kindness and truth, but it also works to negate the repetition of past human atrocities. More importantly, individuals learn to draw on each other’s attributes, needs, values and similarities.

It is through the community and its teachings that individuals gain their sense of identity (Lee, 1992). A clear knowledge of where individuals come from, to whom they are related, and to which community they belong is essential to their concept of self and place in the universe. Recognition and balance of the aspects of personality are necessary characteristics of a healthy individual. The mental, physical, emotional and spiritual components of self must be integrated within the individual, just as individuals need to be integrated within families and communities, and in their relationship to the earth (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996). A positive sense of oneself and others is more easily achieved when living in a healthy environment.

In the Aboriginal concept, the features of personality are represented by the “hub”—a model of three concentric circles and four geographical directions (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996). The outer circle represents negative aspects of the self. The eastern direction of the outer circle represent feelings of inferiority and shame. These begin when, as children, individuals are made to feel powerless and
victimized. To the south is envy, which reinforces feelings of inferiority and leads to unhappiness and discontent. Resentment and unspoken negative feelings, signified by the western direction, can accumulate and cause illness and a negative attitude. The northern direction represents apathy and a lack of care for oneself and others.

The inner circle represents positive elements of the self. The eastern direction signifies general well-being and positive emotion, including the elements that feed physical and spiritual well-being. These elements provide energy and enable individuals to cope with stress. The southern direction represents the ability to have positive relationships with oneself and others. The western direction signifies respect for self, others and all things on the earth. Respect requires that people consider the consequences of their behaviour before they act. In this way, they become responsive to the other entities with which they share the earth. The northern direction represents the act of caring for self and others.

The third, innermost circle is half darkness and half light. The dark half symbolizes jealousy, which fills a person with possessiveness and a sense of being unfulfilled. The light half is the spiritual fire of life’s energy and the core energy of the individual. Thus, the inner and outer circles represent the means to heal and/or destroy. Perhaps it is the third circle which is most controversial, where the element of choice and opportunity exists. At this level individuals have the ability to enhance and heal themselves, their families and their communities. The challenge is to keep focused on the light in the circle and not become distracted or engulfed by the darkness.

Colonization and the Aboriginal Community
Colonization devastated the Aboriginal way of life at many levels and over several centuries. Military attacks against Aboriginal tribes were prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These attacks destroyed families, communities, and in some cases, tribes. In the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people were settled on reserves, restricting their lives and movements. Their sense of global community was shattered. The twentieth century introduced institutionalization of Aboriginal children in residential schools and foster care. Removing these children from their families and communities and forbidding their traditional way of life prevented them from learning traditional values and cultural customs (Herring, 1989). They had no opportunity to be raised with an extended family and to develop a sense of unity with nature and other people of the earth.
Through colonization a new European individualistic perspective was imposed onto Aboriginal life. The cohesive aspects of Aboriginal life diminished as traditional customs and spirituality were forbidden. The collectives of family and community, and the sense of relationship with all people and all of nature were disrupted. The Elders’ place in the community was negated through restrictions on cultural teachings. The extended family and sense of community was de-emphasized, while a focus on the nuclear family and individualism was accentuated. European ideas of the superiority of humans over all other living things was promoted. Moreover, Aboriginal women lost their place as decision makers and men became the dominant gender. Thus the balance of gender roles was interrupted and an aspect of Aboriginal life that had been revered for centuries disintegrated.

The effects of colonization continued into the twentieth century largely, but not only, through residential schools and institutionalized care. The movement of Aboriginal children from their homes into residential schools, and the mass placement of children in foster care and U.S. Caucasian adoptive homes during the 1960s and 1970s created a significant upheaval in the lives and development of Aboriginal children and families. Residential school and foster care placements took children away from their families and communities. Shame at being Aboriginal was instilled, as assimilation became the primary lesson taught in these institutions. Young minds were exposed to norms and values that further removed them from their community (Lee, 1992).

**Family Violence and Aboriginal People**

In recent years, family violence has become an issue of significant concern within the Aboriginal community. One of the unique aspects of family violence within this community is its link to the history of colonization. European ethnocentrism generated racist attitudes and discriminatory practices towards First Nations people. This racism is clear, for example, in the restriction of Aboriginal residences to reserves or to ghettos in Caucasian urban centres. Economic and social opportunities have been severely limited by both location and prejudice.

Aboriginal children who grew up in institutional care facilities such as residential schools suffered several forms of abuse. Psychological abuse occurred: speaking the language and following the traditions of their people were forbidden; they were forced to cut
their hair; their names were changed and their characters malign (Lee, 1992; McGillivray, 1997; Palmer and Cooke, 1996). Physical and sexual abuse was a common experience in residential schools; the extent of these abuses is only now being revealed.

Abuse, exposure to poor parenting models, and pervasive racism thus had severe adverse effects on the psychological and social functioning of many Aboriginal people. Their own lives became marked by violence and their children were often abused, neglected and sent into institutional care, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence. Given the history of colonization, abuse and violence, it is not surprising that Aboriginal people represent approximately 15 percent of the federal offender population in Canada (Correctional Service Canada, 1999), 49 percent of inmates in Manitoba, 68 percent in Saskatchewan and 34 percent in Alberta (Griffiths and Verdun-Jones, 1994). These figures are far greater than the overall Aboriginal population across Canada (4 percent). This level of imprisonment only serves to further disrupt many Aboriginal lives, leaving a new generation of Aboriginal youth to carry the impact of this history into their adult lives.

Community Response
Efforts to address family violence often fail because they do not consider the role of culture. For Aboriginal people, a culturally-based response is necessary and such a response requires the “intervention” of the community. Just as the community nurtures its members to become healthy individuals, it can also guide them through the process of healing from violence. The Aboriginal community has been undermined, but it has never ceased to exist; recently it has become a stronger influence in the lives of its members.

Within the last decade, the Aboriginal community has become increasingly involved in addressing the pattern of abuse and violence. A number of Aboriginal agencies service the community with programs and shelters for women, children and men who have been affected by family violence. Some of the programs available are based on mainstream theories and methods while others are Aboriginal-specific. Still others offer a blend of mainstream and Aboriginal-specific approaches, presenting mainstream content through traditional teachings and ceremonies. This volume presents two examples of blended programming. Chapter 5 presents the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Family Violence Program, a Winnipeg-based organization that provides blended programs for Aboriginal children, women and
men within the community, and for Aboriginal men incarcerated at the Stony Mountain Federal Correctional Facility. Chapter 6 presents the work of the Native Clan Organization’s Forensic Behavioral Management Clinic which provides a blended treatment program for Aboriginal sex offenders within the Winnipeg area.

Among the issues addressed in these programs are anger management, safety planning, parenting and sexuality. New more adaptive skills are taught in order to replace violent responses. Discussions of personal issues and experiences are typically conducted. In addition, there are often discussions of the effects of colonization: intergenerational abuse and dealing with racism. Aboriginal concepts of “Creator” and “Mother Earth” are used. The significance of these concepts and other Aboriginal teachings are part of the treatment process. Ceremonies such as sweat-lodges, smudges and feasts are incorporated into the process of support groups and individual counselling.

The goal of blended programs is to help victims and offenders regain a sense of balance within themselves. The inner self must become known and the inner core of spiritual fire kindled. For some, these programs are their first introduction to the idea of unity with nature and the global community, while others are reminded of the importance of this perspective. Part of the healing process is to acquire a balance with the various aspects of one’s personality and with all other living things in the world. Re-establishing balance requires that those who did harm to others become part of the victim’s healing. In this way the sense of community is not lost through the ostracism and isolation of some of its members. Chapter 4 of this volume presents a description of the Ganootamaage Justice Services of Winnipeg, an organization developed to provide alternative sentencing through the use of traditional and holistic Aboriginal methods for offenders who have committed non-violent crimes. The diversion program focuses on healing and restitution for both the offender and the victim. Thus, the victim is invited to be part of the offender’s healing. It is believed that this traditional approach, which maintains the link between the offender and his or her community, will reduce isolation and provide the vehicle for finding a path of healing and community reintegration. It is the intent of these programs to generate attitudes of care, respect and empathy, thereby making the Aboriginal community stronger and healthier. Community-based programs provide individuals with the courage to face the pain they have caused and experienced, and to explore and under-
stand their inner self. Healing from violence is a long-term process. The community provides the means and the support necessary to bring its members through that process.

The effects of colonization and racism has created a general need for healing among all Aboriginal people. Traditionally the community has come together to help its members heal. This process is being renewed through efforts to help Aboriginal people heal from violence. Culturally relevant programs reintroduce traditional methods to help individuals on the path of healing. These community-based efforts not only work to heal individuals, but allow the community to work together and heal as a whole, resulting in greater individual, family and community health.

**Current Needs in Dealing with Family Violence**

Despite current efforts, Aboriginal women and men have indicated that the response to family violence is still insufficient in a number of ways. First, the services for women and children need to be expanded to address the multidimensional nature of intergenerational abuse. There still exists a need to create more programs specifically designed for “women and anger.” While men have been socialized to express their emotions through anger, women have been taught to suppress anger. This suppressed anger has claimed numerous female victims. Many have sought solace from their unexpressed anger by internalizing it, where it is manifested through depression, suicide, mental illness, substance abuse, eating disorders and other compulsive coping behaviours. Witnessing violence during childhood combined with socialization towards submissiveness has left many women vulnerable to becoming involved in violent relationships in their youth and adult lives.

As well, the lack of services in northern and rural communities is especially evident, as families in crisis must leave essential support systems and their homes to travel to urban areas to access services. While services for women and children are insufficient, the programs for Aboriginal men, even in urban areas, are even more limited. Chapter 2 of this volume presents research conducted in the northern communities of the Swampy Cree Tribal Council, Alberta. Community members identified a lack of information about family violence and a need for more services to address the problem of family violence, particularly in northern rural areas.

As with other social systems, the justice system’s response to the needs of the Aboriginal community is being scrutinized. Chapter 3 of
this volume explores the experience of Aboriginal female victims of family violence and their views of the response of the justice system to family violence. Many of the women voiced a preference for incarceration of offenders along with family violence treatment. This preference may have stemmed from a need for validation and safety. These women appeared to equate justice with punishment and rehabilitation. However, it is becoming apparent that incarceration does not always improve chances for rehabilitation or healing. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss some alternative means by which rehabilitation and community re-integration can be accomplished.

Currently, through the *Correction and Conditional Release Act* (Sections 79 to 84), the Aboriginal community has the opportunity to participate with the justice system in amending service provision to better meet the needs of its people. Alternatives such as diversion projects, like the Ganootamaage Justice Services of Winnipeg discussed in Chapter 4, are being suggested and pursued. In some cases, the occasion presents itself for the modification of existing programs to formats that better reflect the Aboriginal experience. Opportunities for new initiatives must be recognized and taken advantage of to maximize the benefits to the Aboriginal community. Funding and resourcing from all levels of government need to be articulated and implemented to make development of policy, legislation and service delivery possible.

This volume presents a number of studies on the effects of colonization, the need for programming specific to and designed by Aboriginal people and the efforts made by the Aboriginal community to meet that need. Chapter 1 presents the current overview of family violence issues in relation to the Aboriginal community. Chapter 2 presents a study conducted by Elizabeth Thomlinson, Nellie Erickson and Mabel Cook that examined community perception of family violence services available in the northern communities of the Swampy Cree Tribal Council, Alberta. Chapter 3 summarizes a study on Aboriginal women’s experiences with family violence, their treatment within the criminal justice system, and their views of alternative measures of justice, completed by Anne McGillivray and Brenda Comaskey. In Chapter 4 the Ganootamaage Justice Service of Winnipeg’s diversion project is described by Kathy Mallet, Kathy Bent, and Wendy Josephson. This project provides alternative sentencing practices through the use of traditional holistic methods such as healing plans, ceremonies and the involvement of Elders. In Chapter 5 Jocelyn Proulx and Sharon Perrault discuss the
work done by the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Family Violence Program both within the community and in Stony Mountain Federal Correctional Facility, in providing a blend of mainstream and Aboriginal-specific programming to help individuals heal from family violence. Chapter 6 of the book is presented by Lawrence Ellerby and colleagues from the Native Clan Organization’s Forensic Behavioral Management Clinic. It outlines a program blend of mainstream and Aboriginal-specific approaches to Aboriginal sex offenders.

Communities are encouraged to transpose the information and experiences presented to enhance their provision of services. Post-secondary students will also benefit through having the opportunity to debate and discuss the benefits and pitfalls of Aboriginal-specific programming. It is also anticipated that the publication of this book will encourage individuals from the community and academe to collaborate and work together to solve the issue of family violence.