Incorporating Cultural Identity into Mental Health Treatment of Aboriginal Youth:

Bridging the gap between research and practice

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Ontario Shores 3rd Annual Research Day - Whitby, ON
Territorial Acknowledgement

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Native Canadian Centre of Toronto

FIRST PEOPLES’ CULTURAL COUNCIL

Centre for Youth & Society

Aboriginal Nations Education Division (ANED)
Aboriginal Pride and Success Through Education
Funding

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
The Canadian Constitution recognizes three distinct groups of Indigenous People: First Nation, Inuit and Metis.

There are approximately 1,182,505 Indigenous people living in Canada.

More than half are living in an urban environment.
Context of Mental Health

Indigenous peoples in Canada have shared experiences that contribute to poor life-transitions, mental health, education and employment such as:

- Historical and current colonization
- Intergenerational trauma
- Traumatic legacy of residential school abuse
- Poverty
- Social stressors
Mental Health: A pressing issue in Indigenous communities

- First Nation youth commit suicide at rates six times higher than non-Aboriginal youth in Canada (World Health Organization, 2002).

- Violence against Aboriginal women is an epidemic where Aboriginal women are 3.5 times more likely to experience violence than other Canadian women (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2009).

- Incarceration rates for Aboriginal adults is estimated to be 10 times higher than non-Aboriginal adults (Correctional Service Canada, 2010).

- The cause of death due to Alcohol is 3 times higher than the general Canadian population (National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2000).
Mental Health Services are Underused by Indigenous People

Although there is a high need for mental health services, they are underused by the Indigenous community.

- Research suggests that this is due to services that do not include Indigenous knowledge, culture and spirituality and are framed predominantly through a Western approach to healthcare (medical model - illness focused).

- Cultural factors need to be taken into account when addressing mental health issues of Aboriginal peoples (i.e. identity development).
Holistic Approach to Mental Health & Healing

- Holistic approach in an Indigenous context means incorporating the spiritual, the emotional, the physical and the mental ways of being into psychotherapy.
Indigenous Perspective on Mental Health and Healing

Current mental health services need to be adapted to meet the needs of Indigenous people:

• Holistic conception of mental health involving a healthy balance of four aspects of well-being: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual (King et al., 2007).

• Revitalization and recovery of Aboriginal cultures, traditions and ways of knowing (Kirmeyer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003).

• Indigenous identity development and the ways that one views themself as an Indigenous person also contributes to wellbeing and mental health.
Rationale

• Nuk'an'twal' ku ama means "helping each other to do good" in Lil'wat, the language of the First Nations people of Mount Currie in British Columbia.

• Stronger together: Helping each other to strengthen and sustain Indigenous youth identity and cultural knowledge is a partnership project that connects cross-sector and multi-disciplinary academics and community organizations who have histories of exceptional work with Indigenous youth.
Purpose of this Research

- The partnership investigates cultural identity awareness and development for Indigenous youth, utilizing traditional knowledge processes and methodologies.
Background

• Indigenous scholars and educators agree that the development of cultural awareness and identity are vitally important processes for children and youth, yet little is known about these processes from the perspectives of the youth themselves (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Berry, 1999; Richardson, 2006).

• Research has not addressed Indigenous identity development and the impact that culture and education has on how youth identify themselves as an Indigenous person (Maina, 1997; Mihesuah, 1998; Sinclair, 2007; Young et al, 2007).
Research Questions

• How do Aboriginal youth in Toronto understand and relate to their cultural identity?

• What community services and supports in Toronto do Aboriginal youth require for mental health promotion around cultural identity and wellbeing?
Indigenous identity has multiple elements, including: Context, language, self, family, spirit, and relationship (Berry, 1999; Carriere, 2007; Lalonde, 2002).
Methodology

• The depth and detail focus of the research question requires a qualitative methodology that emphasizes co-construction and meaning-making in context.
Narrative Approach

More specifically, a narrative orientation is appropriate to conduct this study.

• Indigenous peoples usually describe themselves as having an oral-based story telling tradition (Medicine-Eagle, 1989).

• Another reason for using a narrative approach for this research is the conception of narrative inquiry as a “relational methodology” when used in an Indigenous context, where the application of Native ways of knowing demonstrates how Indigenous epistemology can influence knowledge and practice in research (Barton 2004, p. 519).
Community Partnerships & Ethical Principles

• Community partnerships and ethical principles are integral to this study design.

• Our experiences as researchers in Aboriginal communities have underscored the necessity of respectful and reciprocal relationships.

• Further, Stewart’s (2008) research suggests the adoption of an Indigenous research paradigm could support Native communities to more effectively deal with their healing issues.

• Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) & Community RA
Data Collection

- One focus group with 11 participants was conducted.
- Individual Interviews were conducted with 4 Indigenous youth.
Focus Group Questions

1. We are interested in learning about cultural identity for Aboriginal youth. How do you think Aboriginal cultural identity affects how youths see themselves?

2. What people or situations do you think have had an influence on youth today?

3. What community services would support youth cultural identity and overall wellbeing?
Data Analysis

- The focus group data was analyzed during the focus group.
- Individual interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed using a constant comparative model that was adapted for Aboriginal populations by Dr. Stewart.
Metathemes : Focus Group

Early Influence

Community

Identity

Education

Mainstream Culture

Indigenous Culture
Results - Community

• Access to Indigenous knowledge and education to foster a positive identity.

• Aboriginal youth with a negative association to Indigenous culture or who have “dismissed” their culture, may not have access to or be interested in participating in traditional culture or teachings.

• If not involved in their community, there can often be challenges to participating in traditional ceremonies.

• Aboriginal youth who are active in their communities take pride in being an Aboriginal youth, and that it creates opportunities as well as provides a sense of belonging.
Results – Early Influence

- Importance of early childhood influence of family, community and authority figures (both positive and negative) on each participant's resulting level of connection to culture and their identity
Results - Education

• Mainstream education is not sensitive to Indigenous ways of knowing.

• The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum would help Aboriginal youth foster a sense of belonging, combat racism, and show history from an Aboriginal perspective.
Results – Identity & Mainstream Culture

• Aboriginal youth have internalized negative stereotypes of Native people (e.g., Aboriginal youth are less valued than non-Aboriginals, they are products of violence and substance abuse, undervalued Indigenous culture, view themselves as lazy, etc.).

• Until Aboriginal youth heal from impacts of colonization, they will continue to be disempowered despite having a positive cultural identity.
Results – Identity and Indigenous Culture

- Aboriginal youth who are resisting the negative stereotypes have reconnected to their Indigenous culture. Traditional Healers, Elders, and their families are key to building cultural foundations.

- Engaging in Indigenous culture is rooted in being shown how to participate in traditional events such as sweats, naming ceremonies, language classes, and rites of passage.

- Cultural identity gives Aboriginal youth direction and purpose, as well as increases the likelihood of positive futures (e.g., education, employment, having a voice in Aboriginal affairs).
Individual Interviews

Participants were asked:

1. We are interested in learning about cultural identity for Aboriginal youth. How does your Aboriginal cultural identity affect how you see yourself?

2. What people or situations have had an influence on who you are today?

3. What challenges and barriers have you experienced due to your Aboriginal cultural identity?

4. What community services would support your cultural identity and overall wellbeing?
Metathemes: Interviews

- Community
- Traditional Involvement
- Peers
- Racism
- Identity
Metatheme: Community

- Involvement
- Identity
- social support
- Diversity/ Strength
- Ostracism

“We can all come together and be a community based on … commonalities- speaking for me and my friends- we all come from somewhere else and we are strong in our identities and where we come from. We can all get along and joke around and make fun. At the end of the day we know that there are differences too.”
Metatheme: Peers

• Positive Factors

• Negative Factors

“I think it’s having people to talk to. They might not even be Ojibwe, they could be Cree or Mi’kmaq. It’s having someone to talk to with spirituality. To me it is the same no matter what kind of tribe. It’s kind of the same practices, beliefs and everything.”
Metatheme: Identity

• Geography
• Cultural history
• Learning traditional skills
• Development
• Advocacy
• Family

“If you don’t know yourself or where you come from or who you are- your ancestry or where your parents or grandparents are from than you really don’t know who you are so knowing that history definitely influences who I am and I feel confidence with who I am.”
Metatheme: Racism

- Colonization
- Systemic
- Visibility
- Responses

“They would say things like “savage” or just getting called names. Things like ‘why don’t you drink another bottle.’”
“I just know I’m Native with Native views. In a way- it does affect me- I don’t have many non-Native friends. It affects my personal life. I choose other Native people to spend time with.”
# Meta-themes

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<td>• Isolation</td>
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<td>• Systemic barriers</td>
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Recommendations

• Hybridism

“….more diversity in the community- because we are diverse. There are Cree people, black people, people from out east and in a way, there services are helping me, but it would be nice if it was something that I could relate to.”

• Awareness

“It would help me to have more of an understanding of Ojibwe or Cree people- or any Native. It would give me a better understanding of what happened throughout our history and how someone else (older) dealt with this.”
Implications

• This research will serve to improve the knowledge of identity and culture within the Aboriginal community centers and service providers.

• Experiences from Aboriginal young people will provide a better understanding of identity development and the mental health needs in regards to cultural healing for Aboriginal youth.
In Conclusion…

• Racism and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people continue to be a major issue for Aboriginal youth, as they are ostracized and isolated from mainstream society.

• The influence of family, community, and knowing the history and background of one’s ancestors, especially at a young age creates pride and strengthens Indigenous identity for youth.

• Connection to culture through ceremony, language, peers and involvement with other community members strengthens identity as an Aboriginal youth.
MIIGWETCH!!!!
MAHSI-CHO!!!
THANK YOU!!!
MERCI!!!
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