

## Aboriginal Identity as a Catalyst for Healing

Deidre Gregory

### Abstract

*Canada's Aboriginal people connect history to their loss of identity, grounded in Nation based languages and beliefs. Recovering from colonization requires healing wounds that festered during residential school and the 60's scoop. Treating family violence and addictions is more than an individual reality for many of today's Aboriginals. It is a prerequisite for entire Nations to recover their individual and group identities as survivors of Western trauma.*

Canada's Aboriginal people come from a diverse culture; many languages and beliefs exist within the different Nations. Although there are variances within the different Nations, there is a shared need for healing. Aboriginal people have been faced with several traumatic events since the arrival of the first settlers in the late 1400's (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). These traumatic events can be traced back to first contact or colonization, the time through residential schooling and the 60's scoop, the effects of which are still evident in family violence and addictions. Learning the Aboriginal history and understanding the traumas will be disheartening for many; it is the knowledge that is gained that will be restorative. Learning about one's Aboriginal identity can be a catalyst for healing.

### Colonization

Colonization in Canada refers to the time when the first settlers arrived in North America. It was during this time that the settlers began to strip Aboriginal people of their cultural identity and land (Lavallee & Poole, 2009). Colonization brought about many changes for Aboriginal people; the introduction of new technology, diseases, and religion changed their lives forever. Once the settlers began to establish themselves in Canada, treaties were made and signed with the Aboriginal people. The treaties were made with the intent of removing Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, in order to facilitate settlement and the exploitation of natural resources by the settlers (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006).

Aboriginal identities suffered greatly with the onset of colonization. Prior to contact, the Aboriginal peoples lived off the land and had a spiritual connection to it. The land was used for survival: Aboriginal people hunted and gathered for foods and medicine. The dispossession of traditional lands was traumatic for the identities of Aboriginal people. The first Aboriginal people who were encountered were the Beothuk of Newfoundland; within 300 years colonization rendered them extinct (Waldram et al., 2006; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Identities such as the Beothuk vanished; those that survived colonization remain wounded.

Healing Aboriginal identities from the effects of colonization will vary according to experience and memories. The history is the first place to start, learning the history of Aboriginal people from the perspective of Aboriginals. There is a natural grieving process that will occur with any loss, and with colonization came many losses. For some Aboriginal people, healing can occur naturally, particularly if traditional Aboriginal ceremonies are practiced. Aboriginal ceremonies and beliefs give people a safe place to suffer. The Sweat Lodge is one such ceremony that promotes natural healing (Wagemakers Schiff & Moore, 2006). There are many other ceremonies and teachings that will help facilitate the healing process.

## **Residential Schools**

The residential school system marks a dark time in Canadian history. The first three residential schools in Canada were built in the 1880's under the leadership of Sir John A. Macdonald, who was both Minister of Indian Affairs and Canada's prime minister (Sinclair, Littlechild, & Wilson, 2012). The schools were funded by the government and run by the church; their goal was to civilize and Christianize the Aboriginal children. The children were forcibly removed from their families and, most times, their communities (Dion et al., 2003; Sinclair et al., 2012).

The trauma continued once they reached the residential schools, which were usually located a great distance away from their home communities. The residential schools were overcrowded and underfunded. The children experienced another separation once they arrived: they were divided according to gender. In most cases siblings were not allowed to speak to each other and were punished when they did (Sinclair et al., 2012). The traumas experienced damaged their identities, but with the recent report of "They Came for the Children" by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2012), healing is now taking place.

On June 11, 2008, Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada, delivered a statement of apology, on behalf of Canadians, for the Indian residential school system. The apology was the first step in healing that dark time in Canadian history. Prior to the apology, a settlement agreement was made, and as a result the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed. One goal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to educate all Canadians on the Indian residential schools system (Aboriginal Affairs, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation, n.d.). On October 24, 2012, The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, delivered a keynote speech to participants attending the "Creating a New Legacy Aboriginal Health & Wellness Conference" (Sinclair, 2012). The message given in the keynote speech was regarding finding one's self or identity. One must answer four questions:

1. Where do I come from?
2. Where am I going?
3. Why am I here?
4. Who am I?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has given Aboriginal people a safe place to learn about and heal their identities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission members listen to individual stories and they see the healing take place right before them (Fontaine, 2010).

## **The 60's Scoop**

The 60's scoop is one symptom of the residential school system. In the attempt to assimilate Aboriginal children, many teachings were lost, specifically traditional parenting values. Lack of parenting skills and family values left Aboriginal families in a dire predicament. Aboriginal parenting and families were greatly affected by this period, referred to as the 60's scoop: a time during the 1960's and 1970's when Aboriginal children were literally scooped from their parents or caregivers and placed in predominantly non-Native homes (Stevens, 2006). The Children's Aid Society, or present day Child and Family Services, was a key player in this ordeal that still has emerging effects.

Although the best interest of the child was in mind, the effects have shown to be traumatic on Aboriginal identity. Since then, those 60's scoop children have become parents and grandparents. The reactions are different, with some wanting to find out where they come from and others who cannot understand their identity (Lavallee & Poole, 2009). Some lost family connections to parents, siblings, and their communities. The losses of the 60's scoop are now being recognized and healing is beginning.

One way to begin the healing from the 60's scoop is to break the cycle of the number of Aboriginal children in care of Child and Family Services (Stevens, 2006). Breaking that cycle begins with education and understanding the history or intent behind the 60's scoop. Some themes that need to be considered when choosing healing methods are to include the whole family, to use traditional values, and to use ceremonies (Archibald, 2006). These considerations would be beneficial to the healing journey and positive identity.

### **Family Violence and Addiction**

Colonization, residential schools, and the 60's scoop experienced by Aboriginal people have resulted in the negative coping mechanisms of violence and addiction. In Canada, the substance abuse rate is one of the highest among Aboriginal people (Niccols et al., 2009). Aboriginal peoples' reactions are the result of not having the ability to control or escape the situations (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). The feeling of powerlessness is then taken out on other family or community members through violence, also called lateral violence. The Aboriginal population has a high rate of violence, with Aboriginal youth suicide considerably higher than other Canadian youth (Waldram et al., 2006). All are the result of unhealthy coping mechanisms.

The practice of Aboriginal traditional values and ceremonies has no room for violence or addiction. With the emerging trend of prescription drug use among Aboriginal peoples, ceremonies become unavailable to people that are actively using (Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, Laing, & Veugelers, 2013). In order to attend ceremonies, people need to be free of drugs and alcohol. Aboriginal people and families continue to suffer, with the children being the most vulnerable. Aboriginal youth in Canada also suffer high rates of violence and substance abuse (Crooks, Chiodo, & Thomas, 2009). In 2009, Statistics Canada reported that 13% of Aboriginal women reported being victims of violent crimes and were three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be victims (Statistics Canada, 2009).

There are several ways of healing from violence and addictions, and as a result maintaining a positive Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal specific treatment programs have become available for issues such as alcohol, substances, and violence (Niccols et al., 2009). In Aboriginal-specific programs, traditional ceremonies not only taught but practised as well, such as sharing circles. Sharing circles are organized talking sessions used for the purpose of healing (Hart, 2002; Waldram et al., 2006). Like the 60's scoop, violence and addictions can be overcome by breaking the cycles.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Aboriginals have proven to be a resilient people and have begun to learn about the connection of their history to their loss of identity. Colonization brought on many changes, foremost of which was a distinct Aboriginal identity. The residential school system attempted to assimilate Aboriginal children, but instead left intergenerational trauma throughout the entire Aboriginal population. The 60's scoop tried to save the Aboriginal children, but in reality it disrupted the family systems and identities of Aboriginal people. Violence and addiction were learned as coping mechanisms. Learning about Aboriginal identity can be a catalyst for healing. Utilizing Aboriginal healing methods will be beneficial for a positive identity.

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### **About the Author**

*Deidre Gregory is an Ojibway woman. She completed her Bachelor of First Nations and Aboriginal Counselling degree from Brandon University in 2009. She is now working toward her Master of Education degree with a specialization in guidance and counselling.*