

## **A Perspective on the Fragmentation of Services to Aboriginal Youth<sup>1</sup>**

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The purpose of this paper<sup>2</sup> is to promote a transformation in how government and non-Aboriginal policy makers and funders support Aboriginal youth. The transformation would lead to strengthened Aboriginal communities and families and an enhanced array of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal youth. The proposed process of change would also include a recognition of the desire of many Aboriginal individuals, communities and organizations to restore balance to their lives and to move in the direction of self-determination and self-governance.

### **MYTH OF YOUTH AS A HOMOGENEOUS CULTURE**

Aboriginal youth, especially in urban settings, frequently find they have more in common with mainstream youth than with their own communities of origin. This is not to say that Aboriginal youth necessarily prefer mainstream culture and values. Rather, this common exodus from traditional cultural values is a consequence of the historical process of colonization.

As a result of this tendency of youth, across cultures, to seek out "youth-centred environments," government officials within departments, ministries, and non-Aboriginal community service organizations are often quick to assume that all youth have the same basic needs. The definition of these needs is based on Western/Euro-Canadian ideas about community resulting from the historical and social implications of the way in which Canada was settled.

The shared need of youth for food, safety, clothing, and shelter appears, on the surface, to differ little across cultures. Even here, however, at the level of basic elemental needs, it is not safe to assume that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities are simply interchangeable.

The pre-contact Indigenous cultures were especially marked by their variety and distinctiveness. With the advent of mass media, however, circumstances that formerly reinforced the unique advantages of distinct Indigenous nations and supported culturally specific approaches to youth by Indigenous and mainstream societies, now appear to be at risk of being lost.

In short, there is no one homogeneous Aboriginal or Indigenous culture in Canada or North America. The multiplicity of distinct cultures and languages necessitates consultative processes with each

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Aboriginal community by all levels of mainstream bureaucracy about how services for youth are re-integrated into communities.

## **YOUTH: CHILDREN IN TRANSITION TO BECOMING ADULTS**

How do children survive adolescence to become adults? This is an important question to ask because, sadly, many Aboriginal youth do not survive adolescence to become productive members of their communities.

Despite the best of intentions, governments, academics, professionals, and mainstream social and health services have done little to prevent Aboriginal youth from either taking their own lives or engaging in other risky and life threatening parasuicidal behavior.

Research by Chandler & Lalonde (1998) on First Nations youth suicide in British Columbia<sup>3</sup> serves to illuminate an alternative approach to what has been a perplexing and seemingly unsolvable social policy conundrum.

According to these researchers, self- and cultural- continuity plays a role as a protective factor against suicide. To briefly summarize these findings, Chandler and Lalonde found a strong relation between the suicide rate of First Nations youth in B.C. and the extent to which specific First Nations communities were engaged in one or more of six activities used to characterize efforts to rebuild or maintain cultural continuity, including attempts to achieve a measure of:

- **self-government**
- **title to traditional lands**
- **community control of education**
- **community control of health**
- **maintenance of cultural facilities**
- **local control of community protection (i.e., police / fire)**

The degree to which communities engaged in one or more of these activities was highly predictive of youth suicide rates – that varied from 800 times the national average to a low of zero.

In interviews with teens who had survived earlier suicide attempts, a small handful (15 percent) did report, as common sense conceptions of suicide dictate, that they “did it” because they had a dismal view of themselves in their future. Surprisingly, however, an overwhelming 80 percent reported that they simply did not have a view of themselves in the future at all. In other words, the cultural context which optimally provides some basis of a continuous view of “self,” and as narrated by the continuance of their communities, was simply absent.<sup>4</sup>

The study strongly demonstrates that Aboriginal youth suicide rates are not, in and of themselves, an issue. The alarmingly high rates of Aboriginal youth suicide exist in environments devoid of processes

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Chandler and Christopher Lalonde. “Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada’s First Nations.” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35 (2): 191-219 (1998).

<sup>4</sup> F. Storey. Personal communication with Michael Chandler.

which support cultural continuity. Youth suicides are almost non-existent in certain First Nations pursuing the continuity of their own culture on many fronts.

Another way of looking at the issue of cultural continuity for Aboriginal youth is to think about how adolescents and young adults figure out what, if any, place there will be for them in the future.

The Crisis of Identity for Aboriginal Youth:

Youth are at a stage in their lives when they are exploring the ramifications of becoming responsible for their own decisions. They are going through what developmental psychologists refer to as an identity crisis. In the process, they need to ask questions like:

- **Who am I?**
- **Who will I be in the future?**
- **Where do I belong?**

Aboriginal youth need to identify with their Aboriginal community in order to provide them with a sense of belonging and a cultural context for formulating a sense of identity as Aboriginal persons.

If, however, their cultural community has been all but assimilated into a foreign culture to which they can not relate, or if they have been alienated from their culture of origin, then Aboriginal youth will have no sense of belonging. Their lack of a sense of future is the consequence of this alienation process.

As a result of chronic and inter-generational assaults on their sense of personal and cultural persistence, these youth will experience great difficulty envisioning a future that holds any acceptable place for them. Common self-statements would be, "I'm a loser" and "I'm lost." Youth, in turn, act as though neither they nor their community and culture have a viable future. Suicide and suicidal behavior become live alternatives to the pain of feeling cut off from a liveable future.

Destruction of family and community has resulted in the loss of a way of extending their personal identity and their culture into the future. With each suicide, there is also the tangible, here-and-now loss to an Aboriginal community of the promise of a productive community member. The consequence for governments is the over-utilization by Aboriginal youth of mainstream social, health, and corrections services (i.e., youth-in-crisis approaches) and an under-representation of Aboriginal youth in the mainstream education and economic systems.

The significance for government officials of the Chandler & Lalonde research results is that the solutions to the Aboriginal youth suicide dilemma appear to lie not in the creation of an ever-escalating number of prevention and intervention programs. Rather, the solution to this problem is in the engagement of Aboriginal youth and their communities in efforts to recover from the effects of colonization and in the movement of the Aboriginal community toward self-determination and culturally appropriate institutions of self-governance.

Aboriginal youth are never adequately served by the Western/Euro-Canadian approach which declares that services to the individual have primacy over holistic services to communities.

This approach treats individuals as discrete units separate and apart from their community and results in the continual fragmentation of Aboriginal community and culture and an endless series of failed attempts to impose non-Aboriginal ways of doing business.

Responding to the crises of Aboriginal youth in isolation from issues encountered in the pre-adolescence years further encourages fragmentation of community and family structures. This response, generally unsuccessful to date, condemns such services to a crisis mode, and weakens an Aboriginal community's ability to provide an environment in which youth can thrive.<sup>5</sup>

Governments have made concerted attempts to address complex social questions regarding Aboriginal youth and their communities. Rarely, however, has this labour borne fruit. The message to the mainstream is clear: Aboriginal youth do not thrive apart from community and family. Without a strong connection to community and commonly held cultural views (for example, *I am Haida*, *I am Nuu-chah-nulth*, *I am Cree*, *I am Métis*) nothing seems to work.

So now we must ask ourselves, what could be an approach that works?

## **CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH**

Some institutional economies of scale (i.e., large hospitals and universities) necessarily require that Aboriginal and mainstream governments share responsibilities. However, for the vast majority of social, health, and correctional services, Aboriginal youth, we argue, will be better served through culturally-appropriate services provided by communities of origin or urban Aboriginal communities of convenience.

## **COLLECTIVITY AND INDIVIDUALISM**

Government officials are generally expedient by nature. They have a finite amount of resources to spend and a certain time within which to spend them. Who gets to employ these resources on behalf of a community?

Within the mainstream of Canadian society, proposal calls are announced and organizations are chosen to deliver services based on who can write the best proposal, who is more cooperative, who has connections, who is best organized or has developed administrative capacity, etc.

This method of operating, of getting government dollars to "my" organization so that "my" particular interests will be served, is contrary to the fundamental organizing principle of Aboriginal culture and community which, as the Supreme Court of Canada in the *Delgamuukw* (1997) decision recognized, is *collectivity*. In contrast, mainstream Canadian culture has as its underlying precept the notion of *individualism*. The post-European experience in Canada has been defined by individuals who have coalesced to form geographic and economic communities of convenience.

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<sup>5</sup> See generally Vol. 3 of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1996).

## **GETTING TO THE INTENDED RESULT**

It is not until we contrast this most singular difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture that we catch a glimpse of how culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal youth might be provided. Certainly this had to be one of the desired outcomes envisioned by national leaders with the launch in 1999 of the *National Aboriginal Youth Strategy*.<sup>6</sup>

## **WHAT CAN MAINSTREAM GOVERNMENTS DO?**

The *National Aboriginal Youth Strategy* reflects an awareness of this unique difference between the Aboriginal and mainstream Canadian culture. The *National Aboriginal Youth Strategy* also suggests that governments and national Aboriginal leaders strive for a broad joint policy mechanism – a mechanism that would work against the fragmentation of Aboriginal communities and services; a fragmentation which regularly denies positive outcomes to Aboriginal youth.

In an ideal world, decisions about which Aboriginal organizations received funding to serve youth would no longer be based on a "best proposal" or the "throw money in the air" approach, both of which require Aboriginal communities and organizations to fight over scarce or shrinking government funding. Such free-for-all processes fly directly in the face of a desire on the part of Aboriginal communities to work together toward consensus-based decisions, especially where services for children, youth, and families are concerned.

## **STRENGTHEN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES TO SERVE YOUTH**

The foregoing analysis recommends that federal, provincial and territorial governments adopt a broad community-strengthening approach<sup>7</sup> which recognizes the inherent responsibility and cultural imperative of Aboriginal communities, rural and urban, First Nation, Metis, and Inuit, to engage in collective consensus-building and decision-making.

Adopted formally as working policy by all governments and implemented over the next five to seven years, this approach would require bureaucracies to seek out a consensus from Aboriginal communities in order to establish which organizations were mandated to provide services for youth. This would also provide an interim process for mainstream governments until such time as Aboriginal institutions of self-governance resumed this broad social policy function.

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<sup>6</sup> "The National Aboriginal Youth Strategy was developed by a national working group consisting of representatives from provincial and territorial governments, five national aboriginal organizations and the federal government." (From the preface.) Available from [http://www.aaf.gov.bc.ca/aaf/pubs/naysdec17-99\\_.htm](http://www.aaf.gov.bc.ca/aaf/pubs/naysdec17-99_.htm).

<sup>7</sup> See the *Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Services* (1999), Ministry for Children and Families, Province of British Columbia, as an example of a broad strategic policy approach to strengthening the capacity and authority of Aboriginal communities to develop and deliver their own services. Available from <http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/aboriginal/services1.pdf>.

Without a community-strengthening strategy, governments in each jurisdiction will continue to create more categories of services, more boxes, more stove pipes, more fragmentation, all in well-intentioned but misdirected activities to support Aboriginal youth.

Both Aboriginal and mainstream governments and communities share the common goals of increasing employment and school completion, and of reversing the downward spiral among Aboriginal youth of increasing rates of suicidal behaviors, substance abuse, involvement with the sex trade, and contact with the justice system.

### **UTILIZE EXISTING RESOURCES AND CAPACITY (STUDIES, MODELS, AND PROGRAMS) DEVELOPED BY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

Over the years, much work has been undertaken by Aboriginal communities and organizations in an attempt to have a positive impact on outcomes for youth. As discussed in this paper, previous approaches developed to implement these programs by mainstream governments have been largely ineffective.

However, a serious body of work exists which can assist Aboriginal communities and youth to create program approaches which could be effective if implemented in a climate conducive to self-determination.

### **THE WAY TOWARDS**

In sum, there is a way out of the present conundrum for both Aboriginal and mainstream Canadians. This alternative would require, not increased efforts at assimilation as some national media commentators have recently suggested, but an acceptance of the cultural differences highlighted in this report – differences that can be pressed into service to build responsible and respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

The lesson learned about the recent past ought to be that “doing to” or “doing for” has not worked in the Aboriginal context. As policy makers and activators, we need to recognize that our responsibility requires us to walk down a different path.

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