

# Suicide and Aboriginal Youth: Cultural Considerations in Understanding Positive Youth Development

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Cynthia Howard  
Laurentian University

## **Abstract**

*The importance of positive youth development cannot be overstated. We strive to foster healthy mental/emotional, social, spiritual and physical development in our children. Alarming high Aboriginal youth suicide rates in some areas call for an increased understanding of how protective factors and risk-taking behaviours influence youth development. This may help us develop strategies to increase positive outcomes for Aboriginal youth. This paper will provide an overview of the impact of loss of cultural continuity and identity on positive youth development.*

## **Suicide Rates and Juvenile Offences in Canada**

Suicide rates of Canadian adolescents differ significantly between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. Kirmayer (1994) states “Canadian Aboriginal peoples currently suffer from one of the highest rates of suicide of any group in the world” (p. 3). He further reports “over a third of all deaths among Aboriginal youth are attributable to suicide” (p. 3).

A Canadian Government Royal Commission Report in 1995, submitted by Nancy Miller Chenier, entitled “Suicide Among Aboriginal People” states that the suicide rates reported were felt to be an underestimation due to reporting and data gathering issues. The report states:

Although the true rate of suicide was considered to be higher than existing data suggested, the Commission estimated that suicide rates across all age groups of Aboriginal people were on average about three times higher than in the non-Aboriginal population. The suicide rate was placed at 3.3 times the national average for registered Indians and 3.9 times for Inuit. Adolescents and young adults were at highest risk. Among Aboriginal youth aged 10 to 19 years, the suicide rate was five to six times higher than among their non-Aboriginal peers (Magnitude of the Problem section, 2-3).

Suicidal behaviour is not the only area where Aboriginal youth fair less well than their non-Aboriginal counter-parts. Other high risk-behaviours including criminal activities are problematic with Aboriginal youth. This is reflected in the Canadian prison population that is over represented by those with Aboriginal heritage. According to a Statistics Canada report authored by Caverley (2005) entitled ‘Youth Custody and Community Services in Canada’:

In 2004/2005, there were about 31,700 young persons (aged 12 to 17 years) admitted to correctional services. Of those, 15,900 (50%) admissions were to custody and 15,800 (50%) admissions were to community supervision, with the majority (12,900 or 81%) of community supervision admissions being to probation.... Aboriginal youth are highly represented within correctional services. Nearly one-third of all females and just over one-in-five

males admitted to sentenced custody were Aboriginal. Overall, Aboriginal youth made up one-quarter of all sentenced custody admissions in 2004/2005, yet they represent approximately 5% of the total youth population (p. 1).

Why is it that there are poorer outcomes regarding positive youth development in Aboriginal youth compared to non-Aboriginal youth? Can we tease out some answers by sifting through what we know about both protective factors and risk factors impacting youth? Is there a way to better understand cultural differences that affect positive youth development?

### **Loss of Cultural Continuity and Identity**

It seems apparent that loss is an important aspect of suicidal behaviour, more specifically the loss of cultural continuity and identity. Health Canada (2005) in their report entitled “Acting on What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations” describes cultural continuity as follows:

Cultural continuity has to do with the transmission of knowledge, values and identity from one generation to the next. Where this transmission is conducted with a sense of individual and collective health and wellness, belief in an optimistic future, and ability to make decisions today for tomorrow, there will be cultural continuity. Culture and community are not static entities but constantly evolving and changing in response to changing social realities. As such, continuity does not mean simply maintaining the past or repeating actions prescribed by tradition, but re-creating and re-inventing communal practices in ways that maintain connections, honour the past, and incorporate a sense of shared history (p. 100).

This report also discussed identity and stated:

Sense of identity can be defined as being conscious of the specific group you are part of, in terms of language, values, beliefs and practices....The lack of a stable sense of identity in relation to other groups is a key risk factor for suicidal behaviour among First Nations and other Aboriginal youth (p. 87).

## Culture

Cultural differences often set Aboriginal youth apart from their non-Aboriginal peers, sometimes causing misunderstandings with detrimental results. The concepts of loss of identity, cultural continuity and culture are intricately woven together. In order to appreciate their impact on positive youth development an understanding of how culture influences people is necessary.

Jerome Bruner (1990) contends that we, as humans, have an innate drive to create meaning and it is the culture that we participate in that provides the experiences by which we construct our world and our 'meanings.' These meanings form our cultural identity as well as our individual identity. He believes we search for and are predisposed to make associations using language in order to create meaning in our lives. He discusses our pre-linguistic 'readiness for meaning.' This enables us to learn language; developing associations by using symbols (internalized) which then help us create meaning in our world. Participating in our culture is necessary in order to form associations and thereby create meaning.

Bruner's view is supported by Valsiner's (2001) idea of semiotic mediation conveying the idea that being part of a culture allows creation of meaning to take place. Vygotsky (1931) also believed that the environment and/or culture in which a child is raised helped determine the cognitive skills and patterns of thinking, which went into language development. Language then becomes the tool the child uses to think.

Keating and Hertzman (1999) discuss this "readiness for meaning" from a biological perspective. They contend that:

Critical periods are defined as periods during which the experiences of the organism will be encoded, especially in the neural system. Before and after critical periods, the same experiences will have little or no effect on the developing organism ... for some biological systems, there are very narrow and well-established critical periods. If the right kind of stimulation is not available at the right time, that system will simply not get hooked up (p. 11).

This concept is further explained in the research on biological embedding. Hertzman (1999) discusses the “hypothesis that spending one’s early years in an unstimulating, emotionally and physically unsupportive environment will affect the sculpting and neurochemistry of the central nervous system in adverse ways, leading to cognitive and socioemotional delays” (Keating & Hertzman, p. 31).

This lends support to Bruner’s idea of pre-linguistic readiness for meaning. Interaction between the individual and culture is bidirectional. Individuals create meaning through interaction with their culture that changes them. They in turn interact with culture causing cultural changes. This interaction between individuals and culture promotes cultural and individual progression.

### **Cultural Change**

What happens when this change is not gradual, but radical? Keating and Hertzman (1999), when discussing stresses on Canadian families, cite Keating & Mustard (1993) stating, “during periods of profound social change, such as the present, some sectors of society are at high risk of encountering a decline of social support and hence adequate nurturing of developmental needs” (p. 1). Bronfenbrenner (cited in Keating and Hertzman, 1999) adamantly proclaims that profound cultural changes are detrimental to youth. When examining the health and well-being of youth he discusses:

troubling scientific evidence that pointed to a societal breakdown in the process of ‘making human beings human’: ‘The signs of this breakdown are seen in the growing rates of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency and violence we have observed in youth in this nation in recent decades’...Today they have reached a critical stage that is much more difficult to reverse. The main reason is that forces of disarray, increasingly being generated in the larger society, have been producing growing chaos in the lives of children and youth (p.1).

Growing chaos seems to be an apt term for what is happening with our Aboriginal youth. They often identify with two cultures - their traditional

Native culture and the western non-Aboriginal culture. Canadian non-reserve and reserve youth are integrated into western culture especially when attending secondary schools, colleges and universities. At this time in history both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures are experiencing rapid, profound changes. The possibility exists that the challenges of living between or within two cultures while both of those cultures are experiencing upheaval may be greater than challenges faced when living within one culture as it undergoes profound change. Aboriginal youth are facing a weakening of their historical cultural grounding while they are entering into an increasingly chaotic, changing, present day western culture. Aboriginal youth often feel disconnected from both the dominant society and their traditional culture, at home in neither.

### **Attitude Towards Cultural Differences**

The magnitude of the cultural differences between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals are profound. That is not to say one is better than the other, just different. Differences cause misunderstandings. When members of one culture interpret behaviours of another culture, they do so through what Valsiner (2006) calls 'cultural myopia'. Valsiner believes that we, as individuals, have our own views and assumptions. These terministic screens, the lens through which we look, develop through interaction with our culture. When we view other cultures, it is through these screens, which inevitably colour our understanding creating paradigm blindness.

Investigating the cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture by putting aside culturally myopic perspectives of the dominant western culture is difficult. It is however one of the keys to gaining an understanding of why Aboriginal youth fare less well than their counterparts. It may also be a beginning to understanding how we can foster positive youth development for this population, giving us clues as to both risk and protective factors that will make a difference with this population.

### **Positive Youth Development**

Prior to the exploration of positive youth development, children and adolescents were often studied from the perspective of pathology - trying

to figure out how to fix what is seen to be wrong. The focus has been to look at the problems, weaknesses and negative aspects. In contrast to the 'pathological view' positive youth development "takes a strength based approach to defining and understanding the developmental process. More precisely, it emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people" (Damon as cited in Benson et al., p. 895). In order to gain insight into the concept of positive youth development it is necessary to look at both protective factors and risk factors.

### **Protective Factors**

Benson et al. (2006) define protective factors as "safeguards identified in epidemiological research that help individuals cope successfully with risk" (p. 901). These factors can be protective from the following two perspectives: positive asset development, and buffering against and/or reducing risk.

Protective factors function through community, schools, family, peers and the individual. Some factors include community involvement, caring community, engagement in school, safety, family support and caring, role models, positive peer influence, honesty, integrity, responsibility, interpersonal competence, self-esteem, agency, sense of purpose, and belief in a positive future.

It is generally thought that the more protective factors a person possesses the better the outcome. Benson et al. (2006) describe the concepts of vertical and horizontal pile-up as follows. Vertical pile-up

has to do with the additive or cumulative nature of the elements called assets. The assumption is that 'the more assets the better'.... adolescents with more personal and social assets...have a greater chance of both current well-being and future success (p. 908).

Horizontal pile-up refers to the idea that "the more settings that adolescents experience reflecting these features, the more likely they are to acquire the personal and social assets linked to both current and future well-being" (p. 908).

## Risk

Boyer (2006) states “risk is defined in the developmental literature as engagement in behaviours that are associated with some probability of undesirable results” (p. 291). While learning to take risks is necessary for human development (an infant risks falling when learning to walk) other risk-taking behaviours can be detrimental. Risk-taking behaviours (seen as increasing during adolescence) include alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, drug use, sexual behaviours, dangerous driving, interpersonal peer aggression, school misconduct, theft, lying, gambling, and criminal acts.

Risks factors associated with suicide in Aboriginal youth were assessed and presented in the Royal Commission Report, submitted by Nancy Miller Chenier, (1995). “The Commission report identified four groups of major risk factors generally associated with suicide; these were psycho-biological, situational, socio-economic, or caused by culture stress. Culture stress was deemed to be particularly significant for Aboriginal people” (The Contributing Factors section, ¶ 1).

### *Psycho-biological Factors*

In addition the report states:

“while mental disorders and illnesses associated with suicide (such as depression, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia) were documented less often among Aboriginal people, community health providers suggested that unresolved grief may be a widespread psycho-biological problem” (The Contributing Factors section, ¶ 2).

It is perhaps significant that although mental disorders and illnesses were less documented, unresolved grief was suggested as a predominate factor. Grief is a reaction to loss, and unresolved grief can be debilitating. As a culture, Aboriginal people are facing the loss of their culture, identity and many of their people through suicide; a grief that has not been resolved.

*Situational Factors -*

The Commission goes on to state:

Situational factors were considered to be more relevant. The disruptions of family life experienced as a result of enforced attendance at boarding schools, adoption, and fly-out hospitalizations, often for long-term illnesses like tuberculosis, were seen as contributing to suicide. To this was added the increasing use of alcohol and drugs to relieve unhappiness. Studies of Aboriginal people who have committed suicide have found that as many as 90% of victims had alcohol in their blood. Brain damage or paranoid psychosis as a result of the chronic use of solvents is reported as a major factor in suicides by youth. (The Contribution Factors section, ¶ 3)

Situational factors displaced Aboriginal people, plucked them out of their culture and dropped them into a new and foreign culture. Residential schools forbade any use of their mother tongue, traditional ceremonies or discussion of their values or beliefs. This was often accompanied by sexual, physical and emotional abuse. As a mental health counsellor, I had the honour of listening to residential school survivors who finally gave voice to their experiences. Many survivors had not been able to disclose prior to our sessions. Their information was given in trust to form their psychological impact statements. These were presented in class action suits in the past few years and reflect the horror these people, as children, suffered and the damage caused. These experiences led to mistrust of the dominating culture, loss of language and knowledge of their own culture, having to hide one's participation in their culture (including language use and beliefs) and feelings of alienation, shame and despair. Generations of individuals have felt disconnected from their own culture and not part of the dominating culture. In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's idea of the growing chaos in children's lives, Aboriginal people, their youth in particular, are in crisis.

*Socio-economic Factors*

Miller Chenier in The Royal Commission states:

Socio-economic factors, such as high rates of poverty, low levels of education, limited employment opportunities, inadequate housing, and deficiencies in sanitation and water quality, affect a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal people. In conditions such as these, people are more likely to develop feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that can lead to suicide. (The Contributing Factors section, ¶ 4)

Keating and Hertzman (1999) discuss developmental health or well-being in the context of physical and mental health, behavioural adjustments, literacy and mathematics achievement. They report that “in societies that have sharp social and economic differences among individuals in the population, the overall health and well-being is lower than in societies where these differences are less pronounced” (p. 3). Research indicates that Canada’s socioeconomic gradient is steep. This means that as a society, overall developmental health outcomes are lower. The portion of the society that is impacted most significantly is that of the lowest income, which is often the Aboriginal population.

*Cultural Stress Factors*

The Royal Commission states:

Cultural stress is a term used to refer to the loss of confidence in the ways of understanding life and living that have been taught within a particular culture. It comes about when the complex of relationships, knowledge, languages, social institutions, beliefs, values, and ethical rules that bind a people and give them a collective sense of who they are and where they belong is subjected to change. For Aboriginal people, such things as loss of land and control over living conditions, suppression of belief systems and spirituality, weakening of social and political institutions, and racial discrimination have seriously damaged their confidence and thus predisposed them to suicide, self-injury and other self-destructive behaviours. (The Contributing Factors section, ¶ 5)

It has been established that culture is one of the most significant underpinnings of our identity and development as human beings. The impact of this degree of cultural stress on Aboriginal people, particularly adolescents is paramount.

### **Cultural differences: Understanding cultural underpinnings**

From a cultural perspective, the differences between traditional Aboriginal society and non-Aboriginal society are fundamental and deeply rooted. When exploring cultural differences what begins to emerge is a vast difference in the underpinnings of cultural values, beliefs and traditions. What we, as societies, need to realize is that there may be some differences in the risk and protective factors from what we might expect.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the cultural differences the following story is conveyed by Ross (1992), a Crown Attorney working with First Nations in remote North-Western Ontario. A Mohawk tribe from Tyendingaga was hosting a sports function, with Cree from James Bay attending. It is customary Mohawk (agricultural) tradition that more food than could be consumed be presented as a way of demonstrating generosity and wealth. Cree who are hunter-gatherers always eat everything offered to demonstrate respect for the successful hunter and his generosity. Ross writes:

Needless to say, a problem arose when these two sets of rules came into collision. The Cree, anxious to show respect, ate and ate until they were more than a little uncomfortable. They considered the Mohawk something akin to gastro-intestinal sadists intent on poisoning them. The Mohawk, for their part, thought the Cree ill-mannered people intent on insulting the Mohawk generosity....The significant point is that each group believed that the other was *intentionally* being insulting and disrespectful when, in fact, each group had been going to great pains (especially the Cree!) to show exactly the opposite. The problem lay in the fact that each group could only see the other through its own rules, could only interpret the behaviour of others from within their own perspective (p. 2-3).

This story illustrates two important points. First, members of a given culture have a “culturally myopic view” of cultures they are not part of. This leads to misunderstanding and incorrect judgements. Second, Aboriginal people are from different tribes with different customs. Believing that all Aboriginal people are the same because they are Aboriginal would be like saying that English and French people are culturally the same because they are white.

Ross discusses five underlying principles guiding Aboriginal reality that are very different from the guiding principles of western culture. These are: 1) the ethic of non-interference, 2) the ethic that anger not be shown, 3) the ethic respecting praise and gratitude, 4) the conservation-withdrawal tactic, and 5) the notion that the time must be right. It is important to understand that these guiding principles have been culturally engrained over a very long time. When discussing the ethic of non-interference Ross states:

the ethic of non-interference is probably one of the oldest and one of the most pervasive of all the ethics by which ... Native people live. It has been practised for twenty-five or thirty thousand years, but it is not very well articulated (p. 14).

The ethic of non-interference, simply put, means that you never interfere in any way with the rights, privileges and activities of another person. It is considered rude and is forbidden. This includes dealing with children. They are not told what to do. Aboriginal parents often raise their children without set bedtimes, rules regarding homework and school attendance, etc. Children learn through experience, through doing.

Role models are used, ideas may be put forth through story telling but decisions are left to the individual. When this is seen through the myopic vision of the dominant culture parents are often viewed as unfit or uncaring. Ross states Aboriginal people “are very loath to confront people. [They] are very loath to give advice to anyone if the person is not specifically asking for advice. To interfere or even comment on their behaviour is considered rude” (p. 15). Note here that even commenting on behaviour is a violation of the ethic of non-interference.

It is believed that the ethic that anger not be shown developed thousands of years ago as a survival tactic. People lived in close quarters and had to work together supporting one another. “There was a sacrifice of individual feeling and their expression and discharge for the sake of the group unity” (p. 33). According to Ross, this is often reflected in courtroom when witnesses refuse to testify, not wanting to embarrass families. By western standards, it is often seen as non-cooperation.

The third ethic concerns praise and gratitude. Native people often show appreciation by requesting continuation of their contribution, not by giving overt verbal praise. This ethic also has its roots in survival. The lack of overt praise is often seen by outsiders as a lack of caring or ingratitude when in fact it is just the opposite.

The ethic of conservation-withdrawal also goes back to survival issues. Traditionally, in times of stress and danger it was extremely important to think things through, to do thorough mental preparation before taking action. To do otherwise could be fatal. Native youth follow this learned response as a way of coping, which can be seen when they are arrested. Ross states:

the greater the unfamiliarity of the new context, the more pronounced will be the withdrawal into physical immobility and silence....A few have been observed to enter into an almost catatonic state and to remain there for days at a time, prompting any number of mis-diagnoses (p. 42).

The final ethic discussed by Ross is the ethic that the time must be right. Again, it can be understood from a survival perspective that there is a right time to hunt, fish, and gather. When the time is “not right” to hunt etc., it is time to prepare mentally and physically. This is complementary to the ethic of conservation of energy and withdrawal as time to think.

Understanding the cultural underpinnings of Aboriginal society is mandatory when dealing with issues of positive youth development, specifically in regards to risk behaviours and suicide. Addressing the issues using values, beliefs and perspectives that are counter to their cultural

traditions have not worked. Something must be done; the dilemma is to figure out what.

### **Revisiting the Stats; The rest of the story**

Statistics show that Aboriginal youth have a higher suicide rate than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This however, is painting all Aboriginal tribes and bands with the same brush. A closer look presents a different picture. Chandler and Lalonde (1998), when reporting on suicide rates in British Columbia found:

In over half of the communities studied (111 of 196) there were no known suicides during the targeted five-year period, while the remainder contains communities which suffer rates of youth suicide some 500-800 times the national average. Obviously, if there is something about the lives of certain First Nations communities that is conducive to, or serves as a protective factor against, suicide, it cannot be something that is equally true for all First Nations people (p. 207).

It becomes important then to understand what forms of knowledge and practices are effective in Aboriginal communities with low suicide rates. Further exploration of how knowledge transfer can occur with other communities must keep in mind that within these communities there are different languages, beliefs, customs and cultures.

### **An Alternate Approach**

Focusing on problems faced by Aboriginals from a “pathological perspective” has not solved them. Therefore, we need to turn to strengths that can be fostered on both an individual and community level. Current literature indicates that a return to traditional practices is a path toward improved mental health and reduced suicide. Kirmayer, Simpson and Cargo (2003), in their review of mental health and Canadian Aboriginal people, state:

There is clear and compelling evidence that the long history of cultural oppression and marginalisation has contributed to the

high levels of mental health problems found in many communities. There is evidence that strengthening ethnocultural identity, community integration and political empowerment can contribute to improving mental health in this population. (p. 15)

Other researchers have looked more specifically at what the differences are between Aboriginal communities that have no reported suicides and those that have extremely high rates. Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde (2007) investigated Aboriginal youth suicide rates in British Columbia finding that rates varied from one community to another. They found language to be an important factor in cultural continuity:

The results reported demonstrate that not only did this simple language-use indicator prove to have predictive power over and above that of six other cultural continuity factors identified in previous research, but also that youth suicide rates effectively dropped to zero in those few communities in which at least half the band members reported a conversational knowledge of their own “Native” language (p. 392).

Promoting traditional cultural identity, including language, and traditional beliefs and values is a proactive approach. Spirituality is also found to be important. Unfortunately, spirituality is often viewed as unscientific. Spirituality is however, an important component in the healing of Aboriginal communities.

For centuries, Aboriginal people have understood the importance of prayer and ceremony. Until recently there was no “hard scientific evidence” that native traditional ceremony was beneficial. Wagemakers Schiff and Moore (2006) studied the impact of the sweat lodge ceremony on dimensions of well-being. Results indicated “an increase in spiritual and emotional well-being of participants was directly attributable to the ceremony” (p. 48). Support for the importance of spirituality is found in the Health Canada Report (2005). It states:

Spiritual inter-relatedness with Creation is kept strong through cultural belief systems and practices. The cultural spiritual belief system works from and with whole person wellness. When

one aspect or energy of the person is not in balance, the cause is treated to regain balance--balance of the whole person as well as balance within Creation. Spirituality, therefore, is an important partner in the prevention of suicide. Where traditional societies are still able to operate with their own value system, they can also maintain positive physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health. Life is in balance, and there is order, harmony and control....Most striking is the emptiness found in our youth at risk, which is often masked temporarily by another culture or spirituality....That is why the values which guided our ancestors must be restored and honoured in our communities. Without them we will continue to witness adolescent suicide as the most painful expressions of our loss of tradition, culture and belief in ourselves (p. 96-97).

## **Conclusion**

Suicide is a problem of the individual as well as a problem of society. Not only are adequate, culturally appropriate mental health services needed for the individual, change is needed at a community level. There are strengths within Native communities that serve as protective factors against suicide. It is time for non-Aboriginals to be supportive in a non-imposing way, offering support while allowing Aboriginal communities to share amongst themselves to find solutions. Bringing together community members from various bands to share ideas and concerns is imperative. Bands with low or zero suicide rates have important knowledge and practices that can be implemented in other communities. With bands supporting each other and non-Aboriginal people giving support in culturally appropriate ways, death from suicide can, perhaps, be reduced or eliminated. Finding ways to understand one another and honour each other's differences is an important first step.

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Emerging Paradigms for Aboriginal  
Social Work Practices***

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*The Native Social Work Journal is registered with the Canadian  
Association of Learned Journals*

Volume 7, November 2010

© 2010 Native Social Work Journal

Published by the Native Social Work Journal  
Laurentian University  
Sudbury, Ontario

Printed by the Laurentian University Press  
Sudbury, Ontario

Cover Artwork by Leland Bell

ISSN 1206-5323  
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**NISHNAABE KINOOMAADWIN  
NAADMAADWIN**