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## Healing Through Culture for Incarcerated Aboriginal People

Ashley Hyatt

MA, University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding author: [ashley.e.hyatt@gmail.com](mailto:ashley.e.hyatt@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Statistically, Aboriginal people in Canada are over-represented in prisons throughout the country. While representatives from the Canadian government recognize that the Aboriginal incarceration rates are an issue, they have failed to find a solution. A link has been found to demonstrate how the erosion of Aboriginal culture through the legacy of residential schools has contributed to the current inflated Aboriginal incarceration statistics (Waldram, 1997). As such, cultural healing in prisons may be a crucial factor for Aboriginal inmates' rehabilitation. Cultural healing can be implemented in prisons by: providing inmates with access to Elders, allowing Elders to perform ceremonies, providing inmates with access to sacred medicines, and increasing the number of healing lodges and sacred circles.

*Keywords:* Aboriginal, incarceration, culture, cultural healing

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## Contextualizing the Reviewer's Position

I am writing from the perspective of a non-Aboriginal person who is presently focused on learning and immersing myself in the area of Aboriginal psychology. My work and position come from that of a non-Aboriginal student who is working towards becoming a mental health professional. As such, my work presented here does not represent the voice of Indigenous people, and only represents my personal thoughts and interpretations of the discussed content.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify where my perspective comes from. I am predominately of English, Irish, and Scottish descent. I was raised in the city of Brantford in South-Western Ontario. Brantford is in the heart of Six Nations territory, right along the Grand River, and as a result, I was introduced to Aboriginal people, cultures, and issues at a young age. My Six Nations acquaintances instilled in me an interest to become more involved in the Aboriginal community. As a result, I am presently studying and researching in the area of Aboriginal psychology for my graduate work at the University of Toronto. I am deeply interested in creating and nurturing respectful relationships with the Aboriginal community both as an aspiring counsellor and researcher. In addition, I aspire to further benefit the community through my work in these areas. My research involvement with the Aboriginal community in Toronto has expanded my research interests to include the areas of education and employment issues, cultural identity, and culturally appropriate programs and resources. Thus, this work is important to me as I aspire to become a counsellor and researcher in the Aboriginal community.

## Introduction

It is well documented that Aboriginal people are over-represented in prisons across Canada (Hayman, 2006; Perreault, 2009; Rymhs, 2008; Waldram, 1997). Statistics Canada reported in 2008 that adult Aboriginal people made up 18% of the provincial/territorial prison population (but only 3.1% of the national population) and this number continues to rise (Perreault, 2009). In fact, the Aboriginal prison population exceeds their general representation in all of the provinces and territories (Perreault, 2009). In Perreault's 2009 report, he cited three factors as the basis for the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons: age, education, and unemployment. The Aboriginal population is one of the youngest and fast-growing populations in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013a). Thus, age is a key factor as most incarcerated Aboriginal people are between 20-years and 34-years (Perreault, 2009). In general, people with lower completion levels of education are more likely to be incarcerated (Brennan, 2012) and many Aboriginal people in prison have not completed high school (Perreault, 2009). Finally, many Aboriginal people who are incarcerated are unemployed (Perreault, 2009) but employment also contributes to the incarceration of non-Aboriginal inmates (Brennan, 2012). In fact, age, education, and employment are also factors that contribute to the incarceration of non-Aboriginal populations (Brennan, 2012). As the three factors outlined in Perreault's 2009 report to explain the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons are also key factors in the incarceration of non-Aboriginal people, it appears that age, education, and unemployment alone do not adequately address nor explain why Aboriginal people are disproportionately incarcerated. What Perreault (2009) does not explain is the historical role of stigmatized oppression and colonization and how these factors contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons. Thus, the question remains, how is it that Aboriginal people became so over-represented in Canadian prisons?

## Factors That Contribute to Incarceration

### The legacy of residential schools

To begin, many Aboriginal people have lower educational levels than non-Aboriginal people. The obstacle to educational achievement originated with residential schools, which were in operation from the mid-1800s until the end of the 1990s (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002; Blackburn, 2012; Chansonneuve, 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and communities and were required to attend residential schools (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; RCAP, 1996). The residential schools were used as a form of cultural genocide, oppression, and exploitation (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). To elaborate, the goal of the residential schools was to achieve cultural assimilation (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002; Blackburn, 2012). In order to eradicate Aboriginal cultures, Aboriginal children were prohibited from speaking in their native languages, many children were isolated from their families and communities, any acts of Aboriginal spirituality were banned, as were all activities associated with Aboriginal culture and tradition (Blackburn, 2012). If children were caught engaging in any traditional activities, they were forcibly punished (Blackburn, 2012; RCAP, 1996). Furthermore, education was not the goal or focus of the residential schools. Very few students advanced past a grade six level and the quality of education the students received was subpar (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). Instead, children trained for employment in the areas of domestic work, agriculture, and manual labour (Blackburn, 2012; Milloy, 1999). Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse was also rampant within residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002; Blackburn, 2012; RCAP, 1996; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

The damage incurred through residential schools is pervasive. Presently, the negative effects of residential schools impact those who attended these schools as well as those who did not attend via intergenerational trauma (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009; Chansonneuve, 2007; Menzies, 2008). Intergenerational trauma is best understood as a continuation of the negative effects of the residential schools, which are passed down to other family members in a cycle (Bombay et al., 2009; Chansonneuve, 2007; Menzies, 2008). The impact of intergenerational trauma is typically felt throughout entire communities and can include, but is not limited to: poor parenting skills (which can negatively impact mental health), neglect, abuse, hopelessness, inability to feel/express love, inability to trust others, loss of cultural identity and connections to the cultural community, addictions, and loss of cultural pride (Bombay et al., 2009; Chansonneuve, 2007).

However, Aboriginal people in the Canadian mainstream education system continue to encounter barriers that prevent them from participating equally in the education system by means of having non-Aboriginal people set the standards for education (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2011; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). As a result, the present educational system does not support Aboriginal ways of knowing, creates isolation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, further erodes Aboriginal culture and identity, leads to the devaluation of Aboriginal culture, and creates an environment where Aboriginal students face discrimination and racism (Preston et al., 2011; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Thus, schools both historically and presently continue to be negative environments for some Aboriginal people in Canada. While it has been acknowledged that education is key for successful integration into the workforce and society (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003), the fact remains that there

are still several barriers to education for Aboriginal people. As a result of the legacy of the residential school system, most of the incarcerated Aboriginal population has not completed high school (Perreault, 2009). This failure is a reflection of mainstream society by way of producing toxic education environments, which have negatively impacted Aboriginal people for hundreds of years.

### **Employment barriers**

Coinciding with educational outcome is employment potential. It has been observed that employment, income, and job prospects increase with education levels (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Furthermore, education credentials are commonly used as screening tools for employers so that even if the job does not require higher levels of educational attainment (i.e., high school diploma is required, not a university degree), applicants who have additional education credentials are more likely to be employed (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The practice of employers hiring applicants with more education occurs because mainstream society tends to regard educational attainment as “a mark of social capability and, conversely, hold less regard for persons who have limited educational attainment” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 114). However, Statistics Canada reported in 2009 that the unemployment rate among Aboriginal people was 43% and for non-Aboriginal people 31.9% (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Many Aboriginal communities have relied on resource-based industries, including fishing, forestry, and mining, for employment opportunities. However, the recent decline in these resource-based industries has resulted in diminishing employment opportunities for Aboriginal people (Ommer, 2007; White, Maxim, & Gyimah, 2003). The dwindling work opportunities have left many families struggling to get by on a day-to-day basis, while the cost of living continues to climb.

The fact that Aboriginal people are under-employed is not surprising as only 9.8% of Aboriginal adults between the ages of 25-years and 64-years have a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2013b). In comparison, 25% of Canadian adults between the ages of 25-years and 64-years have a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2012). Furthermore, the Aboriginal population is much younger (average age 25.5-years) than the non-Aboriginal population (average age 35.4-years) (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). In fact, recent research by Stewart and Marshall (2011a; 2011b) examined Aboriginal youth’s experiences of the supports, challenges, and barriers they have faced in their quest to find sustainable work. Obstacles in the workplace, such as systemic racism and job training, are reported barriers to Aboriginal people obtaining meaningful employment (Stewart & Marshall, 2011a, 2011b) and as limiting factors to succeeding in the workplace (Juntunen et al., 2001). Furthermore, participants expressed solutions to employment challenges that would build on their existing strength of cultural identity to help them resist the colonial oppression they experienced systemically.

Thus, when the legacy of the residential schools, oppressive work conditions, and the young age of the Aboriginal population are considered in accord with the history of colonialism, it becomes clearer that systemic barriers are contributing to unemployment and the Aboriginal incarceration statistics.

### **Systemic barriers**

A key factor to the disproportionate incarceration rate of Aboriginal people, which is not mentioned in the Perreault report, is the loss of Aboriginal culture (Martel, Brassard, & Jaccoud, 2011; Martel & Brassard, 2008; Waldram, 1997). In 1884, the Canadian government passed legislation that made participating in Aboriginal ceremonies illegal (Martel et al., 2011; Waldram, 1997). The legislation

was expanded upon in the following years and prohibited participation in potlatch feasts, sweat lodges, and the sun dance (Waldram, 1997). This legislation was part of an effort to assimilate as well as “civilize” Aboriginal peoples (RCAP, 1996; Waldram, 1997). Although these laws were repealed in 1951, the cultural damages were already incurred (Waldram, 1997). The combination of this detrimental legislation and the residential schools means that some Aboriginal people today have “no knowledge of traditional spirituality, language, and in some instances, culture. The Elders who harboured traditional knowledge, have dwindled in number and fewer young people have been inclined to pick up their mantle” (Waldram, 1997, p. 8). Thus, some Aboriginal inmates enter Canadian prisons with more concerns than non-Aboriginal inmates including: unhealthy communities, lack of positive role models, little understanding of Aboriginal cultural and spirituality, loss of pride in their Aboriginal identity, the need to heal from direct traumatic experiences and intergenerational traumatic experiences of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, troubled interpersonal and familial relationships, lack of formal education, and a lack of job skills (Champagne, Torjesen, & Steiner, 2005; McMaster, 2011; Nielsen, 2003; Ruge, 2006). As such, for some Aboriginal inmates, developing the tools to succeed outside of prison includes re-connecting to their Aboriginal culture to heal and to be rehabilitated (Nielsen, 2003).

## Spirituality in Prisons

Despite the recognition that healing needs to occur through reacquainting Aboriginal people with their cultural traditions (Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997), this has been difficult to implement within Canadian prisons. The year 1983 was the first year that Aboriginal spirituality, in the form of a sweat lodge, was permitted to be practiced within the walls of a Canadian prison (Waldram, 1997). However, it was not until the late 1980s that Aboriginal spirituality and Elders were given equal status with other religions (Martel et al., 2011; Waldram, 1997). Despite the fact that Aboriginal spirituality has been given equal status, Elders still face challenges in the prisons. To begin, for security purposes, some Elders have their sacred objects searched before they are granted entry into the prison (Waldram, 1997). The practice of searching through Elders’ sacred objects is problematic; sacred objects should not be handled by anyone, except the owner (Correctional Service of Canada, 2015). Additionally, several Aboriginal spiritual practices occur in natural surroundings, and many Elders have struggled to adapt these ceremonies to occur within the confines of the prison walls (Waldram, 1997). Many ceremonies require a significant amount of preparation (e.g., food and fasting), in addition to the ceremony itself (Huber, 2010; Waldram, 1997). As such, Aboriginal ceremonies do not conform to the idea of one-hour Sunday worship as it can take several hours or days to carry out (Huber, 2010; Waldram, 1997). For example, it is traditional for members of the Ojibwa First Nation to participate in a four-day spring fast in solitude (Huber, 2010). For Ojibwa inmates, preparation is necessary in order to follow traditional protocols. This includes spending time thinking about themselves and their lives without consuming any food or water, starting four months before the spring fast occurs (Huber, 2010). While the prisoners are able to spend four days with the Elder leading the spring fast, they are not able to leave the prison’s grounds or be in isolation (Huber, 2010). Furthermore, Aboriginal youth inmates in the Burnaby Youth Secure Custody Centre must wear leg shackles when attending sweat lodges (Grosse, 2006). The reasoning behind the shackles is due to the fact that in 1999 a prisoner escaped (Grosse, 2006). Additionally, the sweat lodge is located outside the prison’s secure perimeter and is contained only by an eight-foot-tall barbed wire fence (Grosse, 2006). Despite the use of shackles, there is a policy of having a minimum of one prison guard present in the sweat lodge during the ceremony (Grosse, 2006).

Financial barriers present additional difficulty in terms of carrying out Aboriginal spirituality in prisons. Across Canadian prisons, there are not enough Elders and spiritual leaders available to inmates and those who are available tend to be underpaid (Makin, 2012; Waldram, 1997). Elders also struggle to hold spiritual ceremonies as “sweat lodge ceremonies are scheduled around other programming; the resources to acquire wood and rocks run out . . . [which] leads to a high turnover among Elders and spiritual leaders” (Waldram, 1997, p. 219). The lack of funding has been attributed to the fact that Aboriginal inmates are so over-represented in Canadian prisons (Makin, 2012). As a result, the sheer number of Aboriginal inmates has created a shortage of funding to provide proper cultural services across Canada (Makin, 2012).

Furthermore, there are some Elders who are opposed to conducting ceremonies in prisons. Some of this hesitation stems from adherence to cultural protocols which outlines how ceremonies are to be conducted, especially the outdoor ceremonies, and who can handle sacred objects (Waldram, 1997). Thus, the prison system has created an environment which some Elders believe is inappropriate for these sacred objects and ceremonies (Waldram, 1997). Finally, some Elders may be reluctant to perform these ceremonies in prisons as many inmates are struggling with substance abuse and may not be able to adhere to cultural protocols regarding abstinence (Stewart, Elliott, Kidwai, & Hyatt, 2013). The alternative to cultural programming offered by Elders is cultural programming offered by non-Aboriginal employees (Martel, Brassard, & Jaccoud, 2011). The non-Aboriginal staff who run these programs undergo training and receive certification (Martel, Brassard, & Jaccoud, 2011). However, the process of learning Aboriginal culture from someone who is not Aboriginal has been met with skepticism in terms of questioning how well non-Aboriginals can understand the shared history of living in isolated communities as well as understanding how spiritual ceremonies should be conducted (Martel, Brassard, & Jaccoud, 2011).

## Healing From Trauma

Unfortunately, substance abuse, addiction, and mental health concerns based on traumatic experiences are some of the most common problems among Aboriginal inmates (Butler, Allnut, Kariminia, & Cain, 2007; Krieg, 2006; LaPrairie, 1996; Putt, Payne, & Milner, 2005; Thakker, 2013). However, there are ways to facilitate healing of both addictions and mental health concerns in prisons via cultural healing, which involves a combination of cultural practices and learning the history of colonization (Duran, 2006; Waldram, 1997). To begin, Elders play a large role in the cultural healing process. Elders are frequently reported to be the reason that many Aboriginal inmates reconnect to their cultural identities, by providing cultural histories and traditional teachings (Wilson, 2002; Nielsen, 2003). In prisons, Elders are the gateway to spiritual ceremonies, such as sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, or sun dances (Nielsen, 2003). The Elders also offer guidance to the inmates on ways to prepare for the ceremonies, such as fasting requirements, an explanation of what will happen during the ceremony, and the ceremony’s purpose (Nielsen, 2003). Likewise, the Elders provide medicines for the ceremonies, such as tobacco and sweetgrass, and lead the ceremonies (Nielsen, 2003).

Much of the healing that Elders provide is considered soul healing, which is a culturally appropriate approach to healing mental health and addictions by addressing the historical trauma (Duran, 2006). This type of healing differs from the biomedical model as it teaches people to understand how their experience of trauma and intergenerational trauma has led to their current experiences (Duran, 2006; Waldram, 1997). In contrast, the biomedical model pathologizes and diagnoses individuals by

labelling the problem as something within the individual that should be eliminated (Duran, 2006). In other words, only once the absence of symptoms occurs is the individual considered healed. However, sometimes those who receive a diagnosis are not provided with the details as for how this occurred and how it can be eradicated (Duran, 2006). Thus, the biomedical model can be confusing as individuals tend to assume diagnoses as part of their identities (Duran, 2006). Soul healing teaches ways to understand experiences and transform them into something that can be understood, mastered, and transcended (Duran, 2006; Waldram, 1997) and works by incorporating the assistance of the Elders, the Creator, and other spirits (Duran, 2006; Waldram, 1997). More specifically, soul healing is a process whereby Aboriginal people are taught how their history of cultural oppression has injured their soul (Duran, 2006). In order to overcome and surpass personal problems caused by the history of colonization, Aboriginal people need to understand the history of systemic oppression (Duran, 2006). Thus, the goal is to heal the soul by coming to an understanding of Aboriginal culture and spirituality through learning and partaking in ceremonies (Duran, 2006).

It is widely acknowledged that struggles with addictions stem from experiences of trauma or intergenerational trauma (Chansonneuve, 2007; Duran, 2006; Nabigon, 2006; Waldram, 1997). This is attributed to the fact that substance abuse is a means to attempt to escape or ease the pain caused by the trauma Aboriginal people have experienced (Chansonneuve, 2007; Duran, 2006; Nabigon, 2006; Waldram, 1997). As a great deal of this trauma centres on a loss of cultural identity, it makes sense that an effective way to help facilitate healing from addictions is to use cultural healing techniques. Many cultural practices, such as learning knowledge about ceremonies, using sacred medicines, and learning the history of colonization can be easily carried out in prisons. To begin with, there is a great deal of ancient wisdom contained with understanding the Medicine Wheel path, such as daily rituals and ceremonies (McCabe, 2008; Nabigon, 2006). The Medicine Wheel is also holistic, as it incorporates a balance between spirituality, emotions, the body, and the mind (Nabigon, 2006). The Seven Grandfather Teachings also contain the seven natural healing methods: crying, yelling, sweating, yawning, talking, laughing, and shaking (Nabigon, 2006). By learning the teachings associated with creating balance within the Medicine Wheel, it is possible to understand what aspects of the self are out of balance, and enables individuals to listen to these parts of the self that are out of balance in order to take the next steps towards restoring balance (McCabe, 2008; Nabigon, 2006).

## Cultural Practices

### Sweat lodge

Another form of cultural healing occurs in the form of participating in ceremonies. One ceremony that is becoming increasingly accessible to Aboriginal inmates is the sweat lodge (Martel & Brassard, 2008; Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997; Yuen, 2008). For many inmates, the first time they participate in a sweat lodge is at the prison (Waldram, 1997; Yuen, 2008). Sweat lodges allow individuals to purify the mind, body, and soul via prayer (Huber, 2010; McCabe, 2008; Nabigon, 2006; Grosse, 2006). In relationship to healing from substance abuse, sweat lodge ceremonies allow the individual to reflect on the past and examine their weaknesses as well as their strengths in order for the individual to develop and focus on becoming balanced (Nabigon, 2006).

Many inmates who participated in sweat lodges indicated that the ceremony allows them to heal both physically and mentally (Waldram, 1997). For example, some inmates have reported that, through participating in sweat lodges, they experienced a cleansing whereby a negative spirit or energy was removed from their body (Waldram, 1997). Additionally, the sweat lodges have been reported to help reduce stress in the inmates as it allows the inmates to cleanse themselves of the negativity that they are constantly absorbing in their mind, heart, body, and spirit and are metaphorically reborn into a person who projects positivity (McCabe, 2008; Waldram, 1997). Sweat lodge protocols also work harmoniously with mandatory Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (for those struggling with alcohol abuse), as the inmates are taught to make amends through prayer, especially for those they have harmed through drinking (Waldram, 1997). Thus, healing inmates' substance abuse within prisons requires two-fold spiritual healing. First, spiritual healing helps inmates understand the imbalances within the body, mind, emotions, and spirit (Thakker, 2013; Waldram, 1997). Once the imbalances in the body, mind, emotions and spirit are understood, the inmates then learn how these imbalances impact themselves and the community (Thakker, 2013; Waldram, 1997). Second, the inmates learn how the history of colonization has led to substance abuse as a means of coping (Duran, 2006; Thakker, 2013). Spiritual healing focuses on providing avenues to partake in ceremonies and allows inmates to reconnect to these cultural ceremonies, as well as learning that sobriety is a core value in traditional spirituality (Waldram, 1997). Furthermore, inmates also learn the history of colonization through residential schools (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). In prisons, this most often occurs through access to Elders who help the inmates learn more about cultural identity and their community's history to foster an understanding of the conditions that led them to prison (Waldram, 1997). As such, Elders are invaluable in facilitating healing of the mind, body, emotions, and spirit.

Elders approach soul healing through "cultural and spiritual education with the goal of rebuilding self-esteem and pride as an Aboriginal person" (Waldram, 1997, p. 111). One of the keys to the success of this healing approach is that Elders establish a relationship of trust with the inmates. For example, all discussions and activities conducted by and with inmates are not shared with the correctional staff (Waldram, 1997). Another important element is that the Elders uphold the cultural standard of not forcing individuals to participate; it is voluntary (Hayman, 2006; MacDonald & Watson, 2001; Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997). For example, Aboriginal women who are sentenced to federal prisons can choose to serve their sentence at a women's prison, or at Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (Hayman, 2006; MacDonald & Watson, 2001). It is reported that by granting this choice, it fosters an environment for positive changes within the inmates, as they are treated with respect and empowered to make a choice (MacDonald & Watson, 2001).

## Healing Lodge

Healing Lodges are a unique alternative to traditional prisons as the focus is on healing in order to adequately prepare inmates for release (Hayman, 2006; Nielsen, 2003; Thakker, 2013). Healing Lodges achieve healing by allowing inmates to connect with nature, to participate in traditional ceremonies, to connect with Elders, and in the case of Okimaw Ohci, even the inmates' children are allowed to live with their mothers in the Healing Lodges (Hayman, 2006; Nielsen, 2003; Thakker, 2013). Healing Lodges focus on healing and harm reduction through the provision of cultural teachings and engaging in spiritual practices (Correctional Service Canada, n.d.; Hayman, 2006; Nielsen, 2003). Within

the Healing Lodge, a sense of community is further established as the inmates live in shared units where they cook and clean together (Hayman 2006; Nielsen, 2003). As the number of inmates within each Healing Lodge is quite small, inmates are able to receive individualized programming, including job training, parenting classes, and education (Hayman, 2006; Thakker, 2013). As such, upon release, inmates have had the opportunity to heal spiritually, and also to be empowered by increasing their skill set to help them obtain meaningful employment (Hayman, 2006).

## **Sacred Circle**

Sacred Circles are another form of soul healing that occurs within some prisons (Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997). Sacred Circles are used by many different Aboriginal Nations (Sanderson, 1991). Sacred Circles are a way to acknowledge the link between all life forces and the influence life forces, including people past and present, have on each other (Sanderson, 1991). In a Sacred Circle, people connect and share with others in a space where everyone is equal and equally important (Sanderson, 1991). The Sacred Circles allow inmates to explore their soul wounds with Elders through individual counselling, group counselling sessions with other Aboriginal inmates, and participating in ceremonies to aid in healing (Nielsen, 2003). This teaches the inmates to respect themselves, others, the community, and the spirits (Waldram, 1997). Group Sacred Circles begin with a traditional opening in the form of smudging and prayer (Waldram, 1997). Each inmate is granted the opportunity to discuss any issues they are experiencing and the Elder offers guidance by relating the problem to traditional teaching and principles (Waldram, 1997).

## **Sacred medicines**

Another way in which prisons facilitate cultural practices is through allowing inmates to use sacred medicines, such as tobacco or sweetgrass (Hayman, 2006; Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997). These sacred medicines are important for healing as they allow individuals to communicate and connect with the Creator<sup>2</sup> and help purify the individual's mind, body, emotions, and spirit (McCabe, 2008; Waldram, 1997). The use of sacred medicines empowers the inmates as it allows them to use these cultural tools whenever necessary and not just when they have access to an Elder (Waldram, 1997). It has also been reported that these sacred medicines allow inmates to practice self-care when they are feeling stressed or upset as it helps them alleviate these feelings and focus on more constructive things (McCabe, 2008; Waldram, 1997).

## **Cultural Healing and Rehabilitation**

The benefit of cultural healing for inmates extends beyond the prison cell; cultural healing can be used as a rehabilitation tool to prevent recidivism upon release (Cox, Young, & Bairnsfather-Scott, 2009). To begin, Sacred Circles can also have a positive impact when former prisoners participate in community Sacred Circles (Cox et al., 2009). Cox and her colleagues have documented that prisoner participation in community Sacred Circles reduces the likelihood of reoffending by demonstrating to the former inmate

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<sup>2</sup> Creation stories and the relationship to the Creator vary from Nation to Nation, but many Nations believe the Creator is responsible for creating the land and the people on the land. Many Aboriginal people also believe in many spirits and the connection to the spirit world (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013).

how their behaviour has impacted their victim(s), family, and the community (Cox et al., 2009). This is achieved through the Sacred Circle discussions, which allows former prisoners to take accountability for their actions in a holistic environment where it meets the healing needs of the prisoners (Cox et al., 2009). In fact, the healing effects of the Sacred Circles have been so profound that the Canadian justice system has created several community-based Sacred Circles for those who have been released from prison (Nielsen, 2003; Waldram, 1997). These community Sacred Circles further the healing process for both the perpetrator and the victim as they both have the opportunity to come together in the safety of the Sacred Circle to address their pain and suffering (Cox et al., 2009).

While the community based Sacred Circles focus more so on healing the victim rather than the perpetrator, both the victim and the perpetrator report that this environment facilitates holistic healing and is more effective at facilitating healing than the legal system (Cox et al., 2009). Additionally, Sacred Circles are viewed as beneficial to the community, the families of the victim, and the perpetrator (Cox et al., 2009). Sacred Circles are beneficial because they present the opportunity for the victim(s) and perpetrator to address each other, provide closure, and allow them to move forward in a positive manner by restoring balance to the mind, body, emotions, and spirit through discussion and spiritual practices (Cox et al., 2009). It has also been reported that Aboriginal inmates who attend healing lodges, such as the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, instead of traditional prisons have lower rates of recidivism than Aboriginal inmates who are released from traditional prisons (Nielsen, 2003).

Some Aboriginal inmates who have participated in the cultural healing programs offered in prisons reflect that it allows them to reconnect to their cultural heritage which was missing or lost before they entered the prison and now that they have had the opportunity to learn the traditional teachings and ceremonies, they have been re-born (Yuen, 2008). It has been further suggested by some Aboriginal inmates that having gained this new identity, they have hope for the future as they could act as the positive, proud Aboriginal role models that they never had (Yuen, 2008). These programs also encouraged the inmates to want to maintain a connection to their culture by becoming active in Aboriginal cultural centres (Yuen, 2008).

## Conclusion

While Canadian prisons are evolving and making an effort to provide Aboriginal people with accessible ways to access their culture and practice their traditions, more can be done to improve the healing for Aboriginal inmates. For example, some Aboriginal inmates perceive the cultural programming that is offered throughout the prisons, such as the Sacred Circles, Healing Lodges, and sweat lodges, as another form of colonialism (Martel et al., 2011; Yuen, 2008). This colonized perspective on Aboriginal culture is felt in three very distinct ways. First, the Aboriginal cultural programming does not directly address the history of colonization and oppression, how colonization has negatively impacted the individual, and how the individual can heal, despite the fact that this is crucial to their healing (Duran, 2006; Yuen, 2008). While some Elders may take it upon themselves to provide a history of colonization of Aboriginal people and how this continues to impact Aboriginal people, this is not required as part of the cultural programming offered to Aboriginal inmates (Yuen, 2008). The second problem with these cultural programs is the fact that it is provided by the Canadian government, which presents its viewpoint on Aboriginal culture and traditions, instead of coming exclusively from an Aboriginal perspective (Cox et al., 2009; Yuen, 2008). Thirdly, the cultural programming selected certain ceremonies and aspects of

Aboriginal culture to use within the prisons, however, Aboriginal culture is not homogenous and while some of these teachings may be part of some cultures, they may be irrelevant to other Aboriginal cultures (Martel & Brassard, 2008). For example, sweat lodges are commonly provided at prisons with large Aboriginal populations but they do not exist in Inuit culture (Martel & Brassard, 2008). Thus, the cultural programming has been described as “an oversimplified, over-generalized version of Aboriginal identity and it imposes it on its Aboriginal populations” (Martel & Brassard, 2008, p. 344).

Perhaps this is why a recent investigation into Aboriginal corrections stated, “If I were releasing a report card on Aboriginal corrections today, it would be filled with failing grades” (CBC News, 2013). While the inclusion of the current cultural programming is a better alternative to the past where Aboriginal culture was suppressed in prisons, more needs to be done, including increasing the funding to ensure that all eligible Aboriginal prisoners who want to serve their sentences in Healing Lodges are able to and to provide Aboriginal inmates with cultural programming that is representative of their Nation’s cultural practices and traditions. However, in order to facilitate the rehabilitation of Aboriginal inmates, cultural healing needs to occur, and this healing cannot occur without recognizing the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal people. As such, cultural programming should be modified to ensure that teachings are consistent and relevant to the teachings of the inmates’ Nation. Furthermore, additional Aboriginal staff members should be hired so that cultural programming is not being taught via non-Aboriginal people. Finally, the additional cultural programming needs to be expanded to include a dialogue regarding the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal culture, education, employment, addictions, and incarceration. Some areas of focus for future research could include: an investigation into the effectiveness of having cultural programming taught by Aboriginal staff verses non-Aboriginal staff, how effective Aboriginal inmates perceive cultural programming to be on their healing journey, and an investigation into the long term benefits of cultural programming for Aboriginal people upon release from prison (e.g., the likelihood of reoffending, transition from prison to society, work outcomes, etc.).

Thus, in order to achieve the goal of healing incarcerated Aboriginal people, the current cultural practices must be extended upon to include the history of colonization of Aboriginal people and its impact on Aboriginal culture, education, employment, addictions, and incarceration. Without the knowledge of why culture was taken away and an understanding of its impact today, healing and reduced recidivism cannot occur.

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