Colonial Mentalities and Aboriginal Mental Health

- Anthropologist A.L. Kroeber: example of colonial mentality.
- "Barbaric Aboriginal"
- Jesuits/colonials diagnosis that all First Nations individuals have mental health issues.
  - Perception of First Nation spirituality.
  - However, 1908 study (Waldram, 2004).

Residential schools

- Colonial mentalities eventually lead to harsher government policies towards Aboriginal people, such as the residential schools.
- Quote from Shingwauk’s Vision: “It is near the turn of the century. Indian Agents, RCMP constables, and non-Native farmers circle a Manitoba Indian reserve. One of the Indian Agents and an RCMP constable approach the house of an Indian family, bang on the door, and loudly demand their parents give up their children to them. The Indian Agent instructs the RCMP constable to break down the door. They rush into the house, pry the frightened, screaming children from their parents’ arms and rush them to a holding area outside. The constable and agent go to the next house and the next and in the ensuing few days the scene is repeated many times on this reserve and on most reserves within Southern Manitoba. All children captured during the “Fall round up” are marched to the nearest CPR station, assigned a number and unceremoniously herded into cattle cars for transport to the residential school at Winnipeg” (Miller, 1996, p 289).
• Goals: to get rid of Aboriginal culture, assimilate, integrate and collaborate in “civilizing” and solving the so-called “Indian Problem”.
• Duncan Campbell Scott “to have the Indian educated out of them”.
• “to take away their simple Indian mythology”
• Involvement of churches.
• Some Métis individuals also in residential schools. Many Road Allowance people, living on the sides of roads and begging for money (Titley, 1988).

Many issues of mental health in the present stem from the long history of colonization and government policy, which has deeply affected Aboriginal peoples.
• As well, modern day policies have also had an impact, such as: Indian Act, White Paper 1969, Bill C-31 and comprehensive land claim agreements, etc.
• Residential Schools lead to acculturation (Waldram, 2004).

Acculturation also leads to marginalization of Aboriginal people.
• This often leads to feeling “caught in between two-worlds” notion that the marginalized individual is often in social and personal conflict by being suspended between two-worlds, which assists in the process of deteriorating an individual’s mental health.
• Marginalized individuals are seen to be at the greatest risk of developing problems related to their mental health (Waldram, 2004).
Separation from families
Identity confusions
The Cultural oppression, marginalization and acculturation has contributed to high levels of mental health problems found within Aboriginal individuals (Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, 2008).

Mental Health
- Mental Health affects many aspects of our lives.
- The World Health Organization classifies mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his/her community"
- The Canadian Mental Health Association classifies mental health as "...striking a balance in all aspects of your life: social, physical, spiritual, economic and mental. Reaching a balance is a learning process...Your personal balance will be unique, and your challenge will be to stay mentally healthy by keeping that balance"
- However mental health is viewed, it is difficult to come to one concrete definition because....

At least 1 in 3 Canadians will experience a mental health problem at some point in their life.
- Mental illness affects people of all ages, educational, income levels and cultural background. The stigma that is attached to mental illness presents a barrier towards diagnosis and treatment, and acceptance in the community.
- Life events such as the death of a loved one, being in an accident, losing housing or a job can also be a challenge and sometimes lead to mental health problems.
- Mental health problems can often occur in combination.
- Over half the people who have mental illness will not seek treatment (Aboriginal Mental Health, 2004).
Depression will rank second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability worldwide by 2020.

20% of Canadian workers experience a stress related illness per year.

High stress levels and other mental health issues can cause other health conditions: for example, excessive stress can lead to cardio-vascular problems, etc.

The Alberta Mental Health Board (AMHB) has recognized Aboriginal Mental Health to be a priority under the AMHB and was established in 2000 with the inclusion of a business plan and staffing.

In 2004, the Alberta Mental Health Board introduced a framework for Alberta in working with Aboriginal Mental Health.

Supported by Alberta’s nine regional health authorities, Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, Alberta Medical Association, Alberta Psychiatric Association and Alberta Health and Wellness. So supported by National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO).

The purpose of the Aboriginal framework is:

The Aboriginal Mental Health Framework in Alberta promotes.....

For Aboriginal people, it is important that mental health is approached within a holistic wellness context, within the four areas of the medicine wheel: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Mental illness is an outcome of the lack of balance or harmony in one of these areas.

Incorporating Aboriginal cultural values when dealing with this population is significant.
Human Rights and Mental Health

- The Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission classifies discrimination as "an unjust practice or behaviour, whether intentional or not, based on race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical and or mental disability, marital status, family status, source of income, age, ancestry, place of origin or sexual orientation and which has a negative effect on any individual or group".
- Discriminatory behaviour often leads to harassment and unequal treatment.
- The Alberta Human Rights Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act prohibits discrimination against individuals dealing with mental health related problems. Mental disability is defined in the ACT as "any mental disorder, developmental disorder or learning disorder, regardless of the cause or duration of the disorder" (Albert Human Rights and Citizenship Commission).

- Alberta legislation such as ACT important.
- Discrimination can have an impact on an individual's access to adequate treatment and care as well as in other areas of life such as: employment, education, housing and other services.
- The inability for an individual to integrate properly into society as a consequence of their mental health can cause a feeling of isolation, which can, in turn aggravate the mental disorder.
- The stigma/discrimination that is associated with mental health discourages individuals from seeking assistance (Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission).

- International recognition of Mental Health: International Bill of Rights, which is made up of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, along with International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights
- Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Right to mental health also recognized in other international conventions.
- Legislation needs to be culture sensitive towards Aboriginal peoples and include some holistic cultural ideology, towards reaching best practices.
- The Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, (WHO Resource Book on Mental Health).
• In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
• In Alberta as mentioned before, the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act protects the rights of individuals with mental illnesses/disabilities.
• In Alberta, employers, landlords, tenants and service providers are expected to make reasonable efforts to accommodate individuals with disabilities unless it would cause “undue hardship”.
• Employers are not expected to hire or continue to employ anyone whose disability notably increases the probability of health or safety hazards to themselves, other employers and/or the public (Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission).

• In job applications, interviews or ads, employers are not allowed to ask about an applicant’s present or past physical or mental conditions, disease, kinds of medication, treatments, worker’s compensation claims or sick leave.

Drug and Alcohol dependency
• Courts and Human Rights tribunals have acknowledged that drug and alcohol dependencies are medically recognized disabilities under human rights law (Entrop v Imperial Oil Ltd, 2000; HR Commission v Toronto-Dominion Bank 1998).
• Drug and alcohol dependencies are protected under the grounds of physical and mental disability in the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act.
• A “recreational user is a person who uses drugs or alcohol, but is not dependent on or addicted to drugs and alcohol”. A recreational user does not have a dependency and therefore does not have a disability.
• Accommodating disability.
Some Contacts

- If an Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal person has been discriminated against, or feels they have been discriminated against based on a mental health issue.
- Contact a Diversity Support Coordinator, (403) 320-7699.
- Can also contact the Patients Advocate branch of Alberta Mental
  http://www.amhb.ab.ca/ContactUs/Pages/default.aspx

Recommendations

- More awareness about the traumatic experiences in Residential School.
- Colonial history has created for many an imbalance in the medicine wheel.
- Communication.
- This can arise from more conferences (mental health conference held in Lethbridge in November), discussions such as the speaker's series.

- Early identification and treatment of mental health issues necessary.
- Involvement by the Government of Canada such as the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) Resolution Health Support Program as an attempt to start healing.
- Cultural Awareness (about all Aboriginal peoples in Canada)
- Returning to holistic healing practices for Aboriginal peoples (Aboriginal Mental Health Framework).
• Onus also on individuals.
• Community based initiative to battle addictions in Aboriginal women, from "Stilettos to Moccasins" Aboriginal women's research music video.
• Stronger understanding of mental health.

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Brief Summary
- Issues of mental health are at high proportions amongst Aboriginal individuals in Canada, which stems from a history of oppression, cultural destruction (residential schools) and discrimination.
- Mental Health needs to be understood, exactly what all is included under mental health (i.e.) eating disorders to schizophrenia). Difficult task to recognize all, but is also important that the individual communicates and seeks treatment.
- Human Rights legislation both internationally (conventions), nationally (rights and freedoms) and provincially (multiculturalism act) are there to protect the rights of individuals if facing discrimination based on a mental health issue.

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Discussion & Questions
- Thank you!!
References
- Alberta Mental Health Board. www.amhb.ab.ca.
- Alberta Mental Health Board. Patient’s Advocate. http://www.amhb.ab.ca/ContactUs/Pages/default.aspx
- Centre for Mental Health. www.gwlfcentreformentalhealth.com


Thank you for your participation
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