CRIMINAL CONDUCT & COLONIZATION:

EXPLORING THE LINK

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DISCLAIMER: All of the views and analyses expressed herein are personal to the author, and do not represent the thinking or policy of any branch of government.
A. INTRODUCTION

Many Canadians wonder why aboriginal people keep claiming that residential schools and other aspects of ‘colonization’ are to blame for most of the social and criminal turmoil that some communities presently experience. More precisely, I have heard many Canadians ask the following kinds of questions:

- Didn’t many aboriginal people, perhaps the majority, come through the residential school experience and yet go on to lead law-abiding lives?
- Didn’t many immigrants also come here without language skills, without money, lost in a completely foreign culture, yet they managed to adapt and lead law-abiding lives?
- If people went to residential school but were never physically or sexually abused, how can that non-abusive environment be linked to criminal behavior?
- Didn’t the English aristocracy also send their children to residential schools using corporal punishment? What’s the difference?
- If someone never went to residential school, how can the attendance of their parents or grandparents explain their own criminal behavior now, in a new generation? Doesn’t the chain of cause-and-effect have to stop somewhere?

In a similar vein, many Canadians are unhappy with the Criminal Code instruction that “all available sanctions other than imprisonment that are reasonable in the circumstances should be considered for all offenders, with particular attention to the circumstances of aboriginal offenders”. When the Supreme Court declared in the Gladue case that it too favoured “singling out aboriginal offenders for distinct treatment” in an attempt to redress what it called “a sad and pressing social problem”, many Canadians objected to that as well, wondering what happened to the principle of equal justice for all and the idea that benefits should not be conferred on the basis of race.

I am writing this paper because I have asked myself those kinds of questions. My experiences with aboriginal people over 25-years as a Crown Attorney in northwestern Ontario have, however, given me answers that I find persuasive. I don’t expect that this
short paper will bring everyone to an identical perspective, but it may at least contribute to a better-informed discussion.

In essence, I’ve been given a deeper understanding of the psychological impact of all the forces of colonization, not just residential schools, and how they have affected successive generations of aboriginal people. The more I learned, the more I found myself drawn to the conclusion that much of the criminal behavior we now see does indeed flow out of that distress, and I am worried that the failure to understand and respond to those psychological dynamics almost guarantees that the distress will continue to magnify.

A couple of notes of caution, however. First, I don’t support using the Gladue rationale as an aboriginal get-out-of-jail-free card. There are many aboriginal offenders who, sadly, are now too damaged and dangerous to remain on the streets. For everyone’s safety, especially the vulnerable people in their own families and communities, we should have no philosophical difficulty seeking substantial jail time. Second, even the most Gladue-inspired court is seriously hamstrung by the scarcity of aboriginal healing programs outside of the jail setting. We may be given the most detailed Gladue Reports, setting out all the causative forces with complete clarity, but if we have no rehabilitation resources capable of responding to those identified needs, we may be left with no real choice but jail, if only to give the offender’s family, friends and community a break from his or her violent ways.

There remains, however, a wide range of criminal activity where jail is an option, but effective healing programs ought to be promoted instead. As I hope to demonstrate, an understanding of the psychological damage inflicted by colonization makes the aboriginal demand that we emphasize healing rather than punishment, in a word, compelling.

**B. MAKING THE CONNECTION: COLONIZATION AND COMPLEX PTSD**

Some years ago, I attended a Crown Attorney’s conference on family violence where one of the presenters was Dr. Lori Haskell, an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Her topic was the psychological state of battered women with lengthy exposure to family violence. As she began to list the symptoms of something called Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it hit me: almost every symptom she listed was something I was routinely seeing in the more troubled aboriginal communities, not only in the women but also in their men and their children. Her list of Complex PTSD symptoms included the following:

- substance abuse in a vain attempt to ‘regulate’ emotional states;
- significantly greater suicidality, self-harm, insomnia and sexual dysfunction;
- chronic, low-grade depression which they considered a “normal” way to feel;
- disruptions in consciousness, memory, sense of self, attachment to others and the establishment of sound and durable boundaries within relationships;
- reduced ability to trust one’s own judgment, assert needs or cope with others;
- uncontrolled vacillation between pronounced dissociation and extreme fear; and
- a smoldering anger.
Two of the symptomatic behaviours on her list stood out for me. The first was “significantly greater suicidality”: in one community where I work, there have been 118 suicides in the last 18 years, out of a population of fewer than 2500 people. In one 14-day period two years ago, police cut down 5 teenagers who had hung themselves; only one survived. The second was the notion of “a smoldering anger”, because I’ve had so many cases where extreme violence seemed to erupt out of nowhere. Here are just three of them:

(1) A semi-intoxicated man met a group of intoxicated youth late at night. He told them to go home. They asked him who the hell he thought he was. One of them pulled a gun and a struggle ensued. Another youth, 17, pulled a knife and stabbed him twice, deep into his back, killing him.

(2) Two youths, age 15 and 16, hosted a home-brew and hair-spray party when parents were out of the community. When a 19-year-old started bragging about how tough he was and made advances towards the girl-friend of the 16-year-old, they attacked him. For approximately an hour, with other young people coming and going, they inflicted 40 “slash-wounds” and 19 stab-wounds, one of which cut his carotid artery and caused his death. While he lay helpless on the floor, one of the boys stomped his forehead, leaving three distinct running-shoe impressions on the skin. They dragged him outside and covered him with boards, then went back inside. The 16-year-old and his girlfriend spent the rest of the night having sexual relations in the same house. Only one of the boys had a criminal record, and it was minor.

(3) Two young men, age 28 and 20, got into a drunken argument with an older man at that man’s home. They beat him nearly to death, caving in his skull with wrenches and tire irons. They tied him up with electrical cords, drove him into the woods and dragged him into the bush. As he was still gurgling, they stuck a meter-long stick down his throat and “stirred” it, breaking his teeth and lacerating his tongue. The bottom 8” of the stick was recovered at autopsy, deeply embedded. There was no prior relationship or reason for animosity.

The question that everyone asked in each of those cases was this: “Where did that violence come from? How can people act that way towards other human beings?”

Given how often I had asked myself that question, I was fascinated when Dr. Haskell went on to list the causes of Complex PTSD in battered women:

- histories of social, psychological and legal subordination;
- a conviction of powerlessness and helplessness;
- experiences of sexism and racism;
- growing up in an environment of neglect and deprivation;
- homelessness and/or extreme poverty; and
- a sense of repeated interpersonal victimization, including childhood abuse and other physical violence.
Once again, I was struck by the applicability of those causal factors to the situation faced by so many aboriginal people throughout the decades. Residential schools were clearly “environments of neglect and deprivation”, and they were openly premised on racial denigration. They demanded complete “psychological and legal subordination”, where the language, clothes, food, spirituality, ceremonies, instruction and structure of every day were entirely foreign. Corporal punishment was routinely threatened and employed. Physical and sexual abuse were not uncommon. Food was often inadequate, and diseases sometimes fatal. As Dr. Haskell spoke, I wondered if psychologists trained in Complex PTSD were examining the residential school environment, asking what impact it has had on the generations of children forced by law to submit to it.

Dr. Haskell indicated that the first person to propose the concept of Complex PTSD was an American psychologist, Dr. Judith Herman, in a book called “Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath Of Violence From Domestic Abuse To Political Terror”. In one of those wonderful coincidences, I was given a copy shortly after by an inquisitive and creative Youth Counselor named Jack Martin. He told me that it was the most important book he had read to get a sense of the traumatization suffered by many aboriginal people, and after I read it I agreed completely.

Central to Dr. Herman’s thesis was her view that the situation of battered women was strikingly similar to that of people caught in contexts of more obvious captivity, whether criminal extortions, concentration camps, prisoner of war camps, satanic cults, the sexual slavery of criminal brothels or the Industrial Schools of Ireland. She argued that the cumulative impact of complete powerlessness, in any of those situations, inflicted a very different kind of damage from the PTSD caused by short-term, single events like a car accident:

“…the diagnosis of “post-traumatic stress disorder”, as it is presently defined, does not fit accurately enough. The existing diagnostic criteria for this disorder are derived mainly from survivors of circumscribed traumatic events. They are based on prototypes of combat, disaster, and rape. In survivors of prolonged, repeated trauma, the symptom picture is far more complex. Survivors of prolonged abuse develop characteristic personality changes, including deformations of relatedness and identity. Survivors of childhood abuse develop similar problems with relationship and identity; in addition, they are particularly vulnerable to repeated harm, both self-inflicted and at the hands of others.”

(emphasis added)

I was particularly intrigued by her description of what she called the ‘tactics’ used by the ‘perpetrators’ of domestic violence, because they seemed identical to the psychological regime intentionally created within residential schools:

“In addition to inducing fear, the perpetrator seeks to destroy the victim’s sense of autonomy. This is achieved by scrutiny and control of the victim’s body and

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bodily functions. The perpetrator supervises what the victim eats, when she sleeps, when she goes to the toilet, what she wears… The methods of establishing control over another person are based upon the systemic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection.”

The notion of disconnection seemed particularly apt, because that was the announced purpose of residential schools: to disconnect aboriginal people from everything aboriginal. Testifying in 1920 before a Special Committee to the House of Commons, Duncan Campbell Scott put it this way: “Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”

As for disempowerment, or what Dr. Herman also describes as “a state of psychological and legal subordination”, here are just some of the intentional subordination forces that were arrayed against aboriginal people by Canadian governments over the decades:

- imposing ‘pass laws’, where aboriginal people were not permitted to leave their home reserve unless specifically permitted by the Indian Agent;
- denying aboriginal people the right to vote as long as they remained on their reservations as ‘status Indians’, a situation that prevailed until well after World War II;
- making it unlawful for aboriginal people to consult with a lawyer or bring suit against any government to enforce any treaty or other rights, a situation that existed from 1927 to 1951;
- making it unlawful for anyone to “receive, obtain, solicit or request” any money to assist a band in any such claim against government; and
- making it punishable by jail for aboriginal people to participate in certain traditional ceremonies.

On that last point, I recall an Elder telling me that, when he was a boy, he and some friends snuck through the woods one night to a tiny clearing where some of the ‘old people’ were conducting traditional ceremonies around a fire. When the old people discovered them, they were told never to try it again, because all of them could go to jail if the white man caught them. To this day, that memory remains a vivid reminder of the degree to which, as he grew up, everyone he knew lived in fear of being punished by the white man for doing things they had always done with - and for - each other.

As I read Dr. Herman’s book, with its emphasis on psychological captivity within a context of subjugation enforced by violence, I began to understand why so many aboriginal people point not just to residential schools, but to all of the tactics of colonization. At that stage in my exploration, however, it was the residential schools that most captured my attention. I wanted to know more about their impact on those children, wondering if that would give me a better understanding of the social breakdown I was peering into every day, and the explosions of violence that so often erupted out of it.
C. ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Once again, luck was on my side, because I was sent a paper by two psychologists, Rosemary Barnes and Nina Josefowitz of the University of Toronto, titled First Nations Residential School Experience: Factors Related To Stress & Resilience. In it, they first reviewed the international literature (not referencing aboriginal peoples) that investigated what happens to children psychologically when they:

- are separated from parents and family;
- endure persistent, cumulative, emotional neglect and abuse;
- are forced to grow up essentially “in captivity” or in environments of extreme coercion;
- are made to suffer a loss of culture, language and spirituality; or
- are exposed to racist bias.

Some of their findings were these:

- “Parental loss coupled with the absence of subsequent supportive care from adults significantly increases the risk of insecure attachment styles and a great variety of emotional and behavioral disturbances.”

- “The psychological harms associated with disturbed attachment and extensive exposure to conditions of neglect and abuse may be irreversible for children removed from families at a young age.” (emphasis added)

- “Exposure to racism increases the risk of negative personal identity, internalized racism and emotional distress.”

- “The extent to which an individual will experience acculturation stress will depend on a number of factors, including: loss of understanding and connection in regard to one’s own culture; sudden, forced departure from one’s own culture; inability to maintain ties to family and friends; substantial conflicts between one’s own culture and the new host culture; disappointed expectations concerning the benefits of departing from one’s own community; and devaluation of one’s previously experienced culture. The extent to which a child experienced any of these factors would increase the risk of acculturative stress and a wide range of psycho-social difficulties”.

Of particular importance to me was the fact that most of those studies involved children who had not been subjected to sexual or other physical abuse, just the other deprivations. This took Barnes and Josefowitz to the following important conclusion:

“The literature challenges the existing case law that has, in the residential school context, only recognized harm from physical and sexual abuse.”

What happens when physical and/or sexual abuse is added to the mix? Barnes and Josefowitz put it this way:
“… abuse experiences occurring within institutional conditions of total control have more serious and persistent consequences than any one type of abuse on its own.”

“To the extent that children experienced maltreatment, this would increase their risk of engaging in poor parenting and negatively affecting their children. Thus, the harm caused by the schools is passed on to future generations.”

“The long absence from their families and communities, coupled with neglect, abuse and the denigration of aboriginal culture that existed at residential schools, would most likely interfere with the survivors of residential school’s ability to participate in their community and to be knowledgeable about their traditions. Through the children, the harm affects the families and the communities in which they live.”

In short, the literature pointed to a clear conclusion not widely understood by the Canadian public: physical and/or sexual abuse were not necessary for many aboriginal children to be significantly traumatized by the residential school experience, and to then grow into adults with “serious psychological and physical problems”. Where such abuse did exist, it only served to magnify an already perilous situation. That was an important revelation for me, because it seemed clear that the majority of aboriginal children had not been beaten or sexually abused, yet that same majority still fastened on residential schools as being primarily responsible for all the dislocations and turmoil that followed.

The Barnes-Josefowitz paper was also important for another reason: it explained why many aboriginal children who had endured those schools might not demonstrate the same psychological damage shown by others. Here are some of the things they suggest would make some children more resilient – or less impacted – than others:

- if their parents wanted them to attend the white man’s school, and supported their going, children would leave home with a very different mindset than those who were forcibly taken, often literally, from their protesting parents’ arms;
- if their parents set out good reasons for going, like learning the white man’s language and customs, then there would be a goal to be achieved, and the “foreign-ness” of the experience would be an expected component;
- the older they were when they first attended, the more they would have already absorbed sustaining aspects of their own culture, language, traditions and sense-of-belonging-within-families, and so could more successfully gain eventual re-absorption into their home community, as opposed to going home alone and ‘unrecognizable’ to their family, friends and community;
- if the families and communities they left behind were peaceful, self-sufficient and steeped in traditional teachings, there was a much better chance that they could psychologically resist racist denigration during their residential school years;
- if they were able to return home during the summer months and be once again surrounded by caring family members, speaking their own language and living
within traditional beliefs, then the alienating, denigrating and non-nurturing forces 
of the residential school could be substantially counteracted;

- if the schools were close to their families so that visits could be frequent, then the 
  sense of dislocation and loss would be substantially lessened;
- if they found adults among the teachers or other school staff who were kind, open 
  and nurturing, their sense of fear, isolation and helplessness would be reduced;
- if they went into the schools with siblings or friends in whom they could confide 
  and with whom they could feel continued, healthy connection to “home”, then the 
  sense of dislocation and loss would be lessened;
- if the school they attended was not overrun with violence, cliques and group 
  bullying, then their sense of personal safety would be better maintained;
- if they had teachers – and there were indeed many in this category – who did not 
  denigrate everything aboriginal, then they could better sustain pride in 
  themselves, their families and their culture;
- if their exposure to residential school was not the full ten years from age 6 to age 
  16, as was often the case, then disconnection and alienation would be reduced;
- if they received an education strong enough to gain access to employment upon 
  graduation, they could then gain a sense of adult independence and personal 
  viability that might counter some of the cultural negatives endured to gain it;
- if the family and community they returned to upon graduation was still healthy 
  and welcoming, then they might more quickly regain a sense of belonging, safety 
  and purpose.

As I pondered those “resilience factors”, I also began to understand why it is not valid to 
compare the residential school experience with that of impoverished immigrants coming 
to Canada (much less the experience of upper-class English children being sent to private 
boarding schools to absorb even more of their parent’s culture!). For one thing, 
immigrants choose to come, rather than being forced to. They come to attain advantages 
they identified for themselves, as opposed to being told what was to their advantage. 
They come either as adults, or as children within immigrating family groups, a far cry 
from having children as young as 6 or 7 being sent to entirely foreign places all on their 
own. They are able to maintain family ties, either in person or by unimpeded 
communication, unlike residential school children who were virtually lost to their 
parents, and vice versa, often for many years. They are able to maintain cultural ties 
either by associating with other immigrants, making return visits home, or through 
communication media. While they may have faced racist employment, housing or other 
challenges, they are never faced with the all-out assault of an open, daily denigration of 
everything about them – and no one forbids them from speaking their own language at 
pain of being strapped. If they are physically or sexually abused, it is at least open to 
them to make effective complaint and take steps to find safety. And, finally, if worst 
comes to worst and they find things intolerable, there is no one to tell them they can’t just 
go home.

The most important difference of all, I suggest, is the fact that the residential school 
system deliberately aimed its all-out physical, mental, emotional and spiritual onslaught 
at children, and made sure they were all by themselves when it hit them.
Rosa Bell, an aboriginal woman from British Columbia, wrote about heading off to residential school in *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* and the first few paragraphs illustrate many of the stress-and-resilience dynamics Barnes-Josefowitz identified. Three of her brothers were sent to the Port Alberni Residential School on Vancouver Island, but she was sent elsewhere:

I was five years old and my sister, Mavis, was nine years old when we were sent from home to Edmonton Residential School. Dad took us to Prince Rupert on the freight boat. We had a lot of fun on that trip. We wore new clothes and ate new food. In Prince Rupert we were put on a train to Edmonton.

At first I found this exciting. We ran around and ate in the diner. But as the train took us farther and farther away, I began to feel afraid. At each stop, more and more Native children were put on the train. Soon we were packed in like sardines. All around there were other children like us, looking and feeling afraid. It seemed strange with no adults around to look after us, so I clung to my sister.

Finally, we stopped in Edmonton; a place far away from home, a place I had never heard of, a place I had never seen. We were crowded into buses, which took us into the country. The trip was quiet. We all sat and stared out at everything. We stopped in front of a huge red brick building full of windows.

As soon as we entered, some women took away our clothes, and gave us clothes with numbers on them. We never saw our clothes again until the end of the year. We were assigned a bunk bed. I was given the top bunk and my sister was given the bunk below me. I was the youngest girl in grade one.

In those few introductory paragraphs, it’s easy to see not only the dislocation and fear that began to engulf her, but also some of the ‘resiliency factors’ that helped her survive. There were many aboriginal children who did not, however, have siblings protecting them, or parents supporting them, and their residential school experiences were deeply traumatizing. When they returned to their home communities, grew into adults and began to have children of their own, psychology tells us that they would be expected to demonstrate varying degrees of substance abuse, suicidality, self-harm, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, chronic depression, uncontrolled vacillation between pronounced dissociation and extreme fear and smoldering anger.

How could their children not be adversely affected by the kinds of home environments their traumatized parents created? It’s called the intergenerational transfer of trauma, and I’ve seen first-hand how it works, much too often.

**D. THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF TRAUMA**

Barnes & Josefowitz phrased the issue this way:
“We would expect that children who attended residential school and were exposed to multiple traumatic events would be at greater risk for becoming aggressive adults, which would place their children at risk for the intergenerational transmission of violence”.

Three of my own cases, each indelibly etched into my consciousness, illustrate the dynamic.

One involved a young boy and his even younger sister. Both parents were damaged ‘survivors’ of residential schools, and their marital relationship was marred by violence and deep addiction to the numbing effects of alcohol. On welfare days, they hosted drunken binges that frequently descended into beatings. On those occasions, the boy regularly took his little sister to hide in a closet. As they crouched in the darkness, he held her against his chest and put his hands over her ears so she couldn’t hear the thuds, cries and grunts from the other rooms. That meant he couldn’t put his hands over his own ears, so he learned to close his mind and heart instead. In that way, the sounds were just sounds, with no people or pain attached. When it finally got quiet, he and his sister would emerge and scavenge for food among the passed-out bodies. On many occasions, they saw men taking sexual advantage of passed-out women. To them, these events were all part of the ‘normal’ circumstances of their survival.

That young boy grew into a young man who had no sense of personal boundaries and no capacity for empathy. He began to sexually assault others, and by the time he came to police attention, there were over 20 victims, most of whom had never come forward, because such abuse was also just the reality of their lives too. His Youth Counselor was Jack Martin, the same man who gave me Dr. Herman’s book so many years later, and together we did what we could, placing him for long periods of time in the most intensive residential rehabilitative programming we could find. Unfortunately, we couldn’t give back what had been stolen from him, and re-offended. He will likely offend against more victims, and he may well spend the rest of his life in jail. I don’t know what happened to his little sister.

The second case involved a 50-year-old grandmother who was blind from having drunk ethyl alcohol some years ago. She too was a residential school survivor, now living in a remote First Nation. On a single court day, she was required to attend for three cases:

- she was the victim of her son’s having held a knife to her throat demanding money for alcohol;
- she was an (auditory) witness to the rape of her passed-out niece on a mattress beside her own bed; and
- she had accused a 30-year-old man who had been drinking at her house of raping her. The laboratory reported that the DNA found in semen from the vaginal swab had 2 donors, neither of whom was the man she named; she has no idea how many men had sex with her, or who they were.
When police went to pick her up for court, she was grossly intoxicated, screaming profanities at the police officer, refusing absolutely to participate. This was the home the son and niece were growing up in.

The third case involves a much more direct method of intergenerational transfer. A father and mother were both charged with assaulting their 14-year-old daughter, and here is part of her statement to police, with her spelling and grammar:

“It was last night at my house. My Mom and Dad were drinking hairspray… in the living room. I was in my bedroom. They asked me to come in the living room. They didn’t say anything to me. They started to fight me. They pushed me around. My Dad threw the chair at me and it hit me in the side of the head. My Mom pulled my hair and punch me in the face and my nose started to bleed. She punch me once in the face. My Dad was pushing me and punch me in the shoulder. It was back and forth. I couldn’t defend myself. I ran out of the house. I stand outside.”

She was taken into care out of the community, but was later returned to her parents at the insistence of the community leadership. The child-care agency did not argue too vehemently, because one of the last children taken from that community had committed suicide while in their care, and they didn’t want more.

*It is now clear to me that while the initially-traumatizing experiences may have been long ago, and may have directly touched only the parents or grandparents of the people presenting today, their psychological distress is easily magnified through the intergenerational transfer of that trauma, and is still poisonously alive for far too many people in aboriginal Canada.*

Sadly, there are many *aboriginal* people who have not made the connection between residential schools and the traumatized behaviour of their parents and grandparents. I recall hearing a grandmother say that she supported the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to collect residential school stories, not because she wanted to embarrass or humiliate the white man, but so that her children and grandchildren might forgive her for, in her words, having “failed them so badly”. The unfortunate reality is that many aboriginal children have no idea why their families are the way they are.

The situation is far worse in non-aboriginal Canada. Despite my 25 years working in this environment, it is only in the last few years that the cause-and-effect relationship between initial traumatization and perpetuated Complex PTSD has finally been made clear to me. That means that I too have regularly misinterpreted much of the behavior of aboriginal people laboring under Complex PTSD, and have come to judgments about them that are as harsh as they are mistaken.
E. THE PUBLIC FACE OF COMPLEX PTSD

In her book, Dr. Herman described how battered women are seen by the outside world, and I saw a striking parallel with the way most Canadians view large segments of the aboriginal population:

“Most people have no knowledge or understanding of the psychological changes of captivity. Social judgment of chronically traumatized people therefore tends to be extremely harsh. The chronically abused person’s apparent helplessness and passivity, her entrapment in her past, her intractable depression and somatic complaints, and her smoldering anger, often frustrate the people closest to her.”

I confess to having made harsh judgments of many of the aboriginal victims I have dealt with, especially for their pronounced passivity in ‘failing’ to confront their abuser in court or to at least get themselves out of their dangerous domestic situations. Dr. Herman shed new light on that dynamic as well:

“The barriers to escape are generally invisible. They are nonetheless extremely powerful. Children are rendered captive by their condition of dependency. Women are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological and legal subordination, as well as by physical force.”

In fact, almost all of those forces are at work in some remote and impoverished First Nations, where it is common for many people to feel that leaving is not an option. Many have already experienced racism in the outside world. Many may not be able to face the complexities of finding housing, transportation, jobs, education and the like. Others may lack enough education and marketable employment skills to make it economically on the outside. Facing so many obstacles, many choose instead to remain with ‘the devil they know’. Where that attitude is prevalent, entire communities may fall prey to a psychological condition that Dr. Herman has observed elsewhere in the world:

“In the aftermath of systemic political violence, entire communities can display symptoms of PTSD, trapped in alternating cycles of numbing and intrusion, silence and re-enactment.”

The predicted reactions of “numbing” and “silence” struck a chord with me, causing me to recall one of the most dispiriting moments I’ve ever had. The case involved two men charged with killing a grandmother during a 24-hour orgy of alcoholic stupor. We knew that perhaps a dozen other men had come and gone from the ‘party house’ that night, and we called their wives to the witness stand during the Preliminary Hearing, asking them what clothes their husbands had worn that night, and where they were now. All of them told the court they didn’t know the answer to either question. In cross-examination, defence counsel asked them if, once they learned that a woman had died in that house, they had ever talked to their husbands about what had been going on that night. All of them denied ever talking to their husbands about it. With some exasperation, they were asked “Weren’t you at all curious about what happened that caused that grandmother to
die?” Very carefully, each one answered that they were not curious. Something about the slow and quiet way they said it caused all of us to believe them completely, and we could only come to one explanation: their lives were so full of unmanageable grief and tragedy that they simply could not consider searching out more. Their only survival choice was just what Dr. Herman suggested: numbing and silence.

I also recall hearing a middle-aged man tell an organizing conference for the Truth & Reconciliation Commission that he really had only one request of them: “What I really need to know is this” he said, “Why can’t I cry? Even when I know things are sad, why can’t I cry?” His habit of numbing had lasted for decades.

And that takes me to my most recent line of inquiry: the cumulative intergenerational effect of residential schools on what western psychiatry is now calling Emotional Intelligence, and the kinds of relationships that emerge when there are ‘deficits’ in those emotional skills and capacities.

F. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND VIOLENCE

I was recently sent two papers that discussed the expanding field of Emotional Intelligence, or EQ. The first was An Exploratory Study Of Emotional Intelligence and Domestic Abuse⁶, published in the Journal of Family Violence. In its description of abusive men, it detailed a host of what it called “EQ deficits”, or certain incapacities within an individual’s total emotional make-up. As I went down the list I found myself saying “These are the exactly the kinds of emotional competencies that would be stifled in even the most benign of residential schools! These are exactly the kinds of fears, dependencies and insecurities those schools would help create in the children who attended them!” To illustrate, here are nine EQ deficits commonly found in abusive men:

1. being unable to verbally articulate their feelings, thoughts, needs and emotions in a non-destructive way;
2. emotionally dependent, unable to form and maintain healthy intimate relationships;
3. having difficulty linking inner emotions with objective circumstances;
4. being insecurely and fearfully attached to their intimate partners, causing them to experience high levels of anxiety;
5. so lacking in reflective insight that they project their anger and fear onto their partners;
6. extremely sensitive to criticism and the threat of rejection;
7. lacking assertiveness to express their feelings and, as such, fall back upon aggressive impulses;
8. unable to recognize and adequately process their emotions; and
9. displaying low levels of empathy and reporting feelings that they lack control within intimate relationships.

It didn’t take much imagination to see how a child in residential school might fail to develop those kinds of capacities and, as a result, would show those deficits as an adult.
If, as a child, you don’t experience nurturing relationships based on openness and generosity, you have nowhere to find comfort, trust and safety at the time, and you have no environment in which you can develop those emotional capacities within yourself for the future. If you live with constant fear, you not only develop the protective numbness that best guarantees survival at the time, but you also make fear and emotional distancing central components of your own relationships for the future. And, knowing nothing else, you have nothing else to pass on to your children.

When aboriginal people indicate, as they have for at least two decades, that their first priority is learning how to parent, I suspect they are not just talking about how to make rules and enforce them. A great many outwardly successful aboriginal people have told me that their biggest challenge remains talking about their feelings, or feeling comfortable when others share theirs. I think that’s one aspect of the magic that happens in healing circles: newcomers get to experience, perhaps for the first time in their lives, hearing other people disclose fears, hopes, loves, regrets and dreams to each other, and responding to each other with kindness and understanding.

It was with those thoughts in mind that I turned to the second paper, *Promoting Emotional Intelligence: An Intervention Program For Use With Aboriginal Peoples*. It described an experiment in south-eastern Ontario in which an aboriginal healing program called The RedPath Program, in affiliation with Trent University’s Emotion & Health Research Library, explored the effectiveness of aboriginal healing approaches on violent men. Their experiment first used standard EQ testing procedures on 78 aboriginal men incarcerated in federal prisons (which meant they were all serving sentences of two years or longer). Unsurprisingly, they showed substantial deficits in EQ competencies like:

- the ability to identify and express emotional states;
- the ability to link emotions with specific situations and personal behaviours;
- the ability to guide future behaviour using feelings and emotions; and
- the ability to mentally regulate negative or extreme emotional states.

Of those 78 men, 23 went through the traditional aboriginal approaches used by The RedPath Program, including the use of Circles, storytelling, ceremonies, and traditional teachings. One of those teachings, common to Ojibway and Cree peoples, is called “The Seven Grandfathers”, and it lists 7 bedrock principles for establishing sound relations. One translation of those principles is as follows:

- Zah-gi-di-win (Love) – To know love is to know peace.
- Ma-na-ji-win (Respect) – To honour all of Creation is to have respect.
- Aak-de-he=win (Bravery) – To face life with courage is to know bravery.
- Gwe-ya-kwaad-z1-win (Honesty) – To walk through life with integrity is to know honesty.
- Dbaa-dem-diz-win (Humility) – To accept yourself as a sacred part of Creation is to know humility.
- Nbwaa-ka-win (Wisdom) – To cherish knowledge is to know wisdom.
- De-bwe-win (Truth) – to know these things is to know the truth.

Justice Ervin Stach of our Superior Court recently recited that formulation to
a young aboriginal man convicted of stabbing another to death, expressing the Court’s wish that during his incarceration he could gain exposure to the many powerful teachings of his people. During the trial, the young man had presented himself as the most defiant, remorseless, unrepentant and ‘other-blaming’ person imaginable. When Justice Stach slowly recited the Seven Grandfathers, and his hope that he could learn more about them, however, the same young man cried. Those tears brought to mind something I heard Kathy Louis, a Cree member of the National Parole Board, say some time ago: “Why is it that so many of my people get their first exposure to our Teachings… when they are sent to prison!”

After the RedPath Program, Trent University administered the same EQ tests, finding what it called “a significant increase in various dimensions of emotional intelligence” and making the following recommendation:

“This study indicates that the Red Path Program can enhance emotional and social skills even in the most high risk Aboriginal population. Therefore, it is recommended that this program be used to enhance emotional and social competencies in a variety of Aboriginal groups to deal with the cross-section of problems (addictions, violence, etc.) plaguing North American Aboriginal Communities.” (emphasis added)

The RedPath Program’s success with those 23 inmates is a clear demonstration, backed up by the testing procedures of western psychology, that traditional teachings, ceremonies and practices can be effective - even in that most debilitating prison environment.

G. INCARCERATION AND COMPLEX PTSD

I recall once listening to an aboriginal man who for many years had been a member of an urban aboriginal gang and had served substantial jail time as a result. He made what was then a startling suggestion: while residential schools may have been the largest destabilizer of First Nations in the past, there is now a new leading force: jails.

When I began to learn about Complex PTSD, I thought back to his assertion, and it was immediately clear that a jail environment is the perfect environment to promote Complex PTSD. After all, every inmate is likely to experience extreme forms of the following: social, psychological and legal subordination; a conviction of powerlessness and helplessness; experiences of racism; an environment of neglect and deprivation; and a sense of repeated interpersonal victimization.

In other words, aboriginal inmates of correctional institutions might well be dealing with a triple-whammy of forces known to cause Complex PTSD:

- family and community histories of economic, social, political, racial and legal subordination to, and isolation from, the non-aboriginal world;
- childhoods marred by violence, neglect and addictions at the hands of traumatized adults; and
• actual imprisonment by the dominant society, with all of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual deprivations that entails.

We should therefore not be surprised that the leaders of many First Nations are expressing a concern that young men sent to jail are coming back worse than when they were taken away. Instead of learning any ‘good’ lessons, they often return with their skills of intimidation and criminal activity significantly enlarged, demonstrating a frightening criminal arrogance that no one can penetrate. Many families and communities are concerned about their hair-trigger anger, the explosions of extreme violence upon the slightest provocation, exactly what a Complex PTSD diagnosis would predict.

The conclusion is, in my mind, inescapable: absent effective “de-traumatizing” or “de-colonization” programs like the Red Path Program, jails will only do further psychological harm, and put tiny communities further at risk. In my own view, we should be sending as few people into that environment as we safely can, while at the same time we should be helping aboriginal people create rehabilitative programs both in the correctional facilities and in the communities themselves. Those programs must recognize the colonization roots of these psychological challenges and offer holistic strategies designed to recover lost psychological ground.

Just as importantly, we must be careful that recovery strategies do not serve to continue the colonization process. Up until now, I have used the diagnosis of Complex PTSD rather freely, as if it were the perfect way to understand the psychological impact of colonization. As I have been reminded by my aboriginal friends, Complex PTSD is a western diagnosis, a western way of articulating the psychological impact of colonization. As such, it would ‘naturally’ lead us towards western-designed recovery processes as well. What if aboriginal people would articulate the challenge differently? What if that would cause them to ‘naturally’ design recovery processes that flow out of aboriginal teachings instead?

If good-hearted non-aboriginal people, anxious to help, nevertheless insist on shoving aside aboriginal healing approaches in favour of western-based healing programs, does that not serve as a further denigration of aboriginal capacities, precisely what all the other colonization strategies did?

And wouldn’t that be the most grotesque irony of all!

H. EXPLORING ABORIGINAL DIAGNOSTIC AND HEALING APPROACHES

I remember speaking with a Cree grandmother from northern Quebec who wondered about our insistence on taking abusive men out to jail. "We know you do this to protect the women and children,” she said, “but to protect us in your way, you would have to keep them there forever. Since you don't, we'd like to try our way instead.” When I asked what “her way” was, she said something like this: "In our understanding, anyone who can act in these ways towards others has somehow learned, perhaps while growing up, that
relationships are things based on values like anger, power, fear, jealousy and so on." She then asked about our jails, and the kinds of values behind relationships within them; I took it to be a rhetorical question. She then expressed her fear that being in jail might make it even harder for her community to teach those men, when they came back, how to live in relationships built on values like trust, openness, respect and sharing instead. I can’t recall exactly the values she listed, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they were another English formulation of the Seven Grandfathers I mentioned earlier.

As I thought about what she said, I finally gained a sense of how people who were abused as children could grow up to abuse children themselves. I could never understand how someone who knew first-hand the pain of being a helpless victim could grow up to inflict exactly the same pain on others. Once I looked at it in relational terms, as she suggested, the dynamic became clearer: they were simply operating within the same kind of relationship they knew from their childhood, the only kind of relationship they knew of, one based on manipulation, fear, lies and using others for self-gratification. The only difference was that they now held the position of power in that relationship.

It also helped me understand why so many offenders, at some point during successful healing programs, suddenly find themselves ambushed by explosive remorse: they had never truly forgotten the pain of their own victimization. Because a buried part of them recalled that childhood pain, they carried a guilt that bordered on self-loathing. Not knowing how to relate in any other ways, however, meant that they'd abuse again, and that their guilt and self-loathing would grow. The only way they could survive in that trapped state was to begin insisting, to themselves and to the world at large, that they do not care, do not feel, and do not need.

This emphasis on exploring relationships, together with the notion of people being ‘trapped’ in learned ways-of-relating, seems central to aboriginal healing. It insists that the focus be not just on the individual, but on all of the relationships that surround and define him. The challenge becomes not one of changing a person, but changing his ways-of-relating. That often requires that all the people in those relationships be brought into the process as well, as opposed to simply plucking the individual from the couch and going to work. It also expands to include relationships with rocks, trees, water and other creatures, insisting upon treating all with the same respect.

I recall one graphic instance of people being “trapped” by ways-of-relating traceable to residential school. A man in an alcoholic rage had grabbed a hockey stick and beaten his wife severely, with his children screaming, “Stop, Daddy Stop”. Despite that, his wife wanted to do whatever it took to bring the family back together again. At her suggestion they all attended attend a 5-week, residential family healing program at the Muskrat Dam First Nation in far northern Ontario. A year and a half later, when it became clear that their relationship was now on a very different path, I asked his wife what had happened to cause such changes. She explained that she and her husband had both grown up in abusive families, where drunken violence between their residential school parents was frequent, but they had never shared that information with each other.
In the program, they learned how to talk about events in their past, and about their feelings. In doing so, they came to realize that they were both seeing each other through the lens of their parents’ abuse. When one would get angry about something, the other would receive that anger within their experience of abuse between their parents, as leading quickly to violence. As a result, they would respond in a disproportionately resentful, fearful and hostile way. This, in turn, would cause the other to come back with a similarly disproportionate response, escalating the fear and hostility, until both were swept up in exactly what they feared: a level of violence that often became physical. It was as if the patterns of escalation were so deeply implanted that they took over even the slightest disagreement, leading both of them where neither wished to go.

Once they understood the chain reaction, however, they could begin to disengage from it. They also needed to learn how to share their feelings about things, instead of just acting them out. I can’t recall her exact words, but it was something like this: “We learned how to talk to each other, instead of talking as if we were our parents, and we learned how to hear each other, instead of hearing them. We’re learning how to escape what we grew up in.”. Their story was one further illustration of the validity of the aboriginal healing perspective that says it is not people who must be changed, but the ways in which they relate to each other.

I. THE REAL WONDER: PSYCHOLOGICAL & CULTURAL SURVIVAL

Before closing, I want to underline something that is easy to miss but essential to recognize: despite the astounding assaults on the mental, emotional and spiritual health of so many aboriginal people, the majority are NOT in jail, nor are their lives swamped by addictions, violence and despair. While the rates of suicide, incarceration and addictions are indeed higher than in the non-aboriginal population, and demand concerted attention from everyone, we must keep in mind the startling truth that a much higher proportion have found ways to keep the colonization onslaught from overwhelming them. That doesn’t mean everything is as it should be, because residential schools made it so difficult for children to share their feelings that many otherwise ‘successful’ people still labour under that same impediment today.

The success of the aboriginal majority in coming through those astounding challenges with so much of their faith, hope and humour intact should tell the rest of us something about the power and validity of traditional teachings. It should also tell us that it is imperative that we do whatever we can to support their revitalization. In fact, I’ll go further than that: as the research partnership between Trent University and the RedPath Program demonstrates, we would be wise to look, listen and learn whenever we can. From personal experience, I can say that you don’t have to be aboriginal to derive benefit from aboriginal prescriptions for living “a good life”.

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J. CONCLUSION

My amateur’s exploration of the psychological impact of colonization has attracted me towards four propositions that I’d like to offer for consideration:

1. Western psychology tells us that many children raised in the residential school environment (or children raised by parents or grandparents who survived that experience) were prevented from developing some or all of the emotional competencies necessary for a healthy EQ, and those EQ deficits are directly related to interpersonal violence, especially within intimate relationships;

2. Western psychology also tells us that there are many people who can be expected to suffer from varying degrees of Complex PTSD, and have transmitted that debilitating condition to their children and grandchildren;

3. Aboriginal psychology, focusing on how those emotional incapacities or experiences of trauma necessarily result in relationships premised on unhealthy values, comes at exactly the same issues, but from a different direction; and

4. The testing techniques of western psychology are verifying the effectiveness of aboriginal healing responses to both dimensions of the challenge.

My own sense of the cause-and-effect relationship between colonization and much of the criminal conduct we see in court today has grown to the point where, on occasion, I have found myself wondering about the fairness of being sent out by my society to punish crimes that are so easily traceable to the ‘colonization crimes’ my society first committed against theirs. From that perspective, choosing preferential, rehabilitative sentencing to counter those historically destructive forces seems more that a simply sensible thing to do; instead, it feels like a moral obligation.

As for the ‘race’ element that prompts such resistance to preferential sentencing, I’ve found an answer that satisfies me: since our governments singled out aboriginal people for ‘colonization strategies’ on the basis of their race, and it is those strategies that have produced so much of the criminal conduct coming into our courts, it seems only fair to bring restorative justice efforts into play on exactly the same basis. We were the ones who relied on racial distinctions to do things that caused the damage, and to now insist that we can’t use that same distinction to promote recovery rings pretty hollow.

Finally, I want go back to the seventh Grandfather Teaching that Justice Stach recited, the one that spoke about Truth. Basil Johnston, a noted Ojibway scholar, cautioned that the notion of “truth” is not identical between cultures:

“The highest compliment or tribute (Anishinaabe) could pay a speaker was to say of him or her “W’déab-wae”, taken to mean he/she is right, correct, accurate, truthful”. It is an expression approximating the word for ‘truth” in the English language, except that it means one casts one’s knowledge as far as one has
perceived it and as accurately as one can describe it, given one’s command of knowledge. Beyond this one cannot go. According to this understanding there is or can be no such thing as absolute truth”.

I close with Basil’s words for three reasons. First, I want to emphasize that there is no direct translation of words or concepts between our cultures; as long as I only speak English, I am prohibited from seeing the full sophistication of traditional concepts. We have to let aboriginal people speak together, design together and create together, whether we understand them or not. Second, these are sophisticated teachings; I am told it takes a lifetime to even come close to understanding each of the Seven Grandfathers, much less to be able to live by them. Third, I make no claim whatever to Basil’s “absolute truth” in anything I say, being well aware that I have only scratched the surface of these complex historical, cross-cultural and psychological realms.

But perhaps what I have said will spur people who know more than I to dig deeper into each of these issues, and we will all be the wiser for it. Thanks for reading. Megwetch.

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i Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, Judith Herman, M.D., (1997), Basic Books, a Member of the Persus Book Group


iii If you want to read the rest of her short story (and those of 20 others, including Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly Of First Nations), please read Residential Schools: The Stolen Years, (1993) University Extension Press, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Editor Linda Jaine.


v Promoting Emotional Intelligence: An Intervention Program For Use With Aboriginal Peoples, by Peggy Shaughnessy (Whitepath Consulting Inc., Peterborough Ontario), Laura M. Wood & James D.A. Parker (Department of Psychology, Trent University), Report Number 27, Research Report Series, Emotion And Health Research Laboratory, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.