

THE ROLE PLAYED BY A FORMER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL IN A FIRST NATION COMMUNITY'S ALCOHOL ABUSE AND IMPAIRED DRIVING: RESULTS OF A TALKING CIRCLE

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. The study's objective was to better understand alcohol abuse and impaired driving behaviors in a First Nations community as it reflects systemic issues linked to historical, family and community experiences.

Study Design and Methods. Fifteen 18- to 29-year-old drivers participated in an exploratory eight-hour Talking Circle held according to traditional cultural practice. Four First Nations researchers, trained in Talking Circle protocol, and a Band Elder facilitated the data collection, data analysis according to emerging themes, and data verification.

Results. Federal government residential schools contribute to intergenerational effects which impact impaired driving in a northern First Nations community. Traditional parental role modeling has changed dramatically. Rather than guide children through a communally shared development process, many parents now expect their children to assume adult roles by expecting them to take care of their guardians when they drink excessive amounts of alcohol. Because a wall of silence exists between the young and old, many young people seek refuge with friends and peers, who subsequently influence them to abuse alcohol and engage in impaired driving. Many older Band members no longer serve as leaders for young people. Instead, they behave like peers and engage in activities that facilitate alcohol abuse and impaired driving

Conclusions. Historical institutions like federal government residential schools have contributed to systemic socio cultural problems which influence alcohol abuse and impaired driving. Hence there is a need for community-based intervention strategies that promote cultural healing. The healing journey can start with First Nations communities providing their people opportunities to share their stresses and traumas in supporting and nurturing environments. (*Int J Circumpolar Health* 2006; 65(4): 347-356).

Keywords: impaired driving, First Nations, Talking Circle, residential schools, family

INTRODUCTION

Motor vehicle collisions account for 40% of unintentional injury fatalities among Canada's First Nations people. Of the fatal crashes that involved young First Nations males, more than 80% of the drivers had consumed alcohol (1). In the province of Alberta, First Nations people represented 4.4% of the population for the year 2001. Yet they were overrepresented, at 16%, in all of the Alberta traffic-related deaths (2). According to RCMP Traffic Services, First Nations people were 5 times more likely to be involved in fatal alcohol-related crashes than non-First Nations people (3, 4).

A vital component of impaired driving in First Nations communities is the community context generally, and the family context specifically (5). Parents typically teach their young right from wrong, good from bad, desire from need (6). However, with the introduction of federal government residential schools, First Nations people were stripped of their cultural values in child rearing, family functions and civic responsibilities. Their experiences in residential schools produced low self-esteem, cultural

shame, loss of spirit and language, loss of extended family and community bonding, increased domestic violence, child and elder abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, and internalized oppression that the residential schools engendered (7). Members of the older generation no longer had the traditional roles and responsibilities in the community and shared customary relationships with friends and family members. Some responded by engaging in deviant behaviors, like common assault, family violence, alcohol and drug abuse and suicide. Others became passive, removing themselves from community affairs and traditional parenting responsibilities.

The issue of the older generation's change in behavior towards family and young people, and its manifestation in alcohol abuse and impaired driving, begs for more research. It is a response to Ogbu's thesis that social issues of today reflect the cultural and historical contexts in which young people develop (8). Consistent with the assumption that impaired driving amongst First Nations people of Alberta reflects their social realities, norms and experiences, and that intervention strategies must reflect the needs of

the community, a research study was designed to explore historical, family and community factors that influence impaired driving behaviors in one of Alberta's largest First Nations communities (9).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

An exploratory study, using a "Talking Circle" methodology was initiated to be consistent with the First Nations people's philosophy of sharing, supporting and respecting life experiences through the use of oral traditions, personal interaction and group consensus (10). Narrative inquiry through Talking Circles has previously been used to document the Aboriginal story (11), teach culture and tradition (12), promote health, provide spiritual counseling and healing (13) and instill restorative justice (14). The literature shows that it has not been widely used for injury prevention, or traffic safety.

The community's Wellness Centre was the sight for an eight-hour Talking Circle. A tribal Elder conducted the traditional protocols of the opening prayer, smudging ceremony, and the ceremonial presentation of the tobacco pouches. Four local First Nations researchers, with extensive experience and training in Talking Circles, facilitated the event. They ensured that the Talking Circle was supportive, spiritual, culturally meaningful and unbounded by artificial parameters. For informed, consent participants signed a prepared document entitled the "Drinking and Driving Talking Circle Consent Form", that detailed the purpose and voluntary nature of the session, the confidentiality of speakers and content, the anonymous nature of all information, and the assurance that no redress will befall any individuals

from participating in the Talking Circle and speaking their minds. Furthermore, participants agreed to be audiotaped and to meet again for verification of the findings. They also consented to the publication of the findings. The University of Alberta Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry Ethics Committee provided formal consent for the study, and the regional Chief and Council verbally endorsed the study via the Talking Circle leader.

Research facilitators asked three open-ended questions that allowed participants to detail personal experiences and points of view:

1. Who are you? What is your relationship to drinking and driving? How do you feel about that? (How frequent does drinking and driving occur? What's your experience? Is there a difference between 18-year-olds and 29-year-olds in terms of their experiences with drinking and driving?)
2. How does your experience connect to what's going on with your friends (Or others in your age group)? Can you speak about, or expand upon, the topic in the 2nd round?
3. Tell us about drinking and driving as it relates to your family? What do they think about drinking and driving? How do they support (or not support) it?

Participants were purposively selected through the use of criterion sampling, in which persons were sought because they had experiences with impaired driving and they were prepared to articulate their experiences (15, 16). Fifteen First Nations young drivers, aged 18-29 and residing in a northern Alberta First Nations' community, were selected in accordance to the selection criteria. Recruitment practices consisted of researchers presenting the proposed study to students at the regional First Nations' College, posting notices in the

local counseling and community health offices, and by promoting the study through word of mouth in the community.

Proceedings were tape recorded and transcribed. Each participant received a copy of the transcripts for data verification and editing. Data analysis was guided by a cultural/community framework that was sensitive to emerging themes, concepts and structures of reasoning reflective of the local context. A team of four local First Nations researchers and one non-First Nations social scientist analyzed the data according to explicit and implicit structures of reasoning, meanings participants assigned to their actions, use of tacit knowledge, presentation of insider cultural rules, values and common-sense assumptions and re-occurring patterns of behavior in the local context (17). Analysts coded the data and allocated the codes to emerging cultural/community themes. They not only noted similar or common emerging themes perceived among themselves, but also ones that were unique to individual analysts. The latter were analyzed further to establish the themes' contextual meaning, relevance to the issue and explanatory power. To help assure that the analysis accurately represents participants' meanings, all members of the Talking Circle received copies of the analysis for verification and commentary.

RESULTS

It is important to preface the results of the study with a brief explanation. One of the largest regional residential schools was located in this particular community. Because it was only recently, in 1970, that the federal government closed its doors and transferred control

of the facility to the community, many parents and grandparents leave behind personal legacies of trauma imposed by the school. Loss of parenting skills was one such legacy. Whereas, in the past, adults in the village had mentoring, protective relationships with children based on strict rules, and a strong system of obligations that helped ensure children would thrive and become contributing members of the community (18), now a view shared by some members of the community is that pre-teen, or early teenaged children are independent adults who should take responsibility for their guardians' actions. This theme was routinely found in the interview data. Some participants detailed how their parents and/or grandparents, having consumed substantial amounts of alcohol, expected their children, or grand-children, to take care of them. A girl not yet 16 years old, unlicensed and with no driving experience, related how she was forced to drive her drunken parents:

When I was younger, I used to drive a lot for my parents. My parents drink a lot. When I was younger they'd make me drive for them... I'd have to go to (Town X) and drive with them... They'd just be yelling and screaming, and, I wasn't that experienced, but I learned how. I thought about what if I get pulled over. I never had my learners (Learner Driving Permit).

Although it was common for the young girl to drive her inebriated parents, there was a time in a neighboring province when she felt especially vulnerable and angry. Her parents "were drunk". So she had to drive them four hundred miles home, all the while enduring their screams:

My parents were drunk and they wanted to come home, so I drove and [sigh]... there was screaming and everything. It was a really

old car and it was surprising that we made it home. I was so mad at them for making me do that.

Another participant discussed how she, at the age of twelve, with no driving experience, was forced to drive her drunken aunt home:

I was only twelve or thirteen. One of my Aunties was drinking and I had to drive for her and I had no experience driving whatsoever. Just the thought of getting behind the wheel and having somebody yell at you constantly while they're drunk was something really scary, having no experience driving and a little kid behind the wheel. But I managed to bring her home.

There were incidents where parental demands on a young child were even more extreme. For example, one set of parents forced their 16-year-old daughter to become an accomplice to a robbery attempt. Her father, while drunk, demanded that she give two other men a ride to the liquor store, which they subsequently robbed while the young girl was told to wait for them in the car. As she angrily described in her own voice:

There was a time when I was 16, my Dad (was drunk) wanted me to drive and there was these two guys that wanted me to take them to (Town X). I didn't know they didn't have money and... they just got out of jail or something. I got there and this guy's like "Leave the car running." So I did. And he went in the liquor store and he came running out and he just robbed that store. He was telling me to 'go'. I was just freaking out, so I did. I was running from the cops... I didn't even know that's what they were going to do. Then my Dad kept telling me to stop at all these houses because they wanted cigarettes. When I stopped at the last house I thought it was a driveway and I

got stuck. The police came and those guys ran out...They found them and I told the police everything.

Driving drunken parents and friends at age thirteen without a driver's license is illegal. One of the participants spoke about her also having to take the responsibility of facing the police when she was driving her drunken parents. As she said:

I only had a learners (Learner's Driving License) back then. I had so many tickets for just driving around with a learners but they'd let me go because I was driving around my drunk parents and other people.

Being with parents while they are drinking can make a profound impact, as it did on a 23-year-old woman, who, at the age of thirteen, could not get home to bed, because her parents were still consuming alcohol at 3:00 a.m. in the back of a business, where she worked part-time. She needed to go to school the next morning. Her story took on a twist when her father drove her home and left her mother at the store. Later that night, the mother wrecked the car, without receiving a bruise. The event defined the participant's relationship to drinking and driving:

When I was 13 I used to (work at...) in (location). My parents were really good friends with the bosses and they used to drink all the time in the back while I used to work...during weekends, during evenings and after school. One time it was... three o'clock in the morning and I had school the next day so I told my Dad "Let's go, I want to go home." And he said your mom doesn't want to leave yet. "So I don't care, just leave her. She always wants to drink any ways, just leave her." He listened and he brought me home. An hour later the cops were at my place and my mom took off

with this car. She rolled it [sobbing] and I felt so guilty... and I still do to this day actually. [sobbing] I just felt like it was so my fault. She was trying to come home but she was going every way and I felt like it was all my fault.

Although the girl's mother was driving under the influence of alcohol when she had a major crash, still the young woman felt guilty about the event. Talking Circle participants shared a strong sense of guilt for family members who were impaired and involved in major crashes. They not only felt grief for the death or injury of others, but they also blamed themselves for not preventing the collisions. There was a strong sense of the speakers, at a very young age, taking personal responsibility for the actions of others, with such comments as "I should have tried to stop him from taking the car;" or "I should have been there to help her make it." This sense of responsibility for the well-being of parents reflects a familiar pattern of role reversal where a child assumes a caretaker role due to the emotional unavailability of parents. In the previous quote, a 13-year-old tells her father how to behave ("Mom just leave her. She always wants to drink any ways, just leave her."). Even more telling is her personal sense of responsibility for the crash her mother subsequently experienced due to her drunken state. The girl's guilt haunts her to this day.

Participants expressed that, having been denied their culture, native language and family structures by forced assimilation in residential schools, some grandparents and parents turned to alcohol abuse, in which they often indulge in the company of children. Witness the following two responses:

My dad's dad died of blood something - alcohol poisoning ...My dad has a history

of drinking alcohol. My mom has a history of alcoholism. I think she's been impaired but I'm not sure... It all comes from them at residential school. (And) I have older sisters and older brothers from my dad's side. They have a different mom and they're 'we'll party every weekend' people.

A lot of us have experienced some type of trauma in our lives when we were children, like seeing... our loved ones drinking and fighting in front of us. They say it all comes from what happened to them before...

Having children present when grandparents and/or parents abuse alcohol illustrates problematic role modeling, which can easily influence children to participate actively. For example,

My parents did not do drugs but they drank and they did it at outings. I seen that thinking 'ok - well they do it'.

My Father was an alcoholic. There was a lot of drinking growing up as a child. Growing up with it I thought it was ok to drink alcohol because I seen my Father doing it since as long as I can remember...I Started drinking at 14 and I thought it was ok, and I got addicted and it went on from there and it got out of hand.

Friends as surrogate parents

It was common for Talking Circle participants to suggest that many parents and their children no longer have common ground, shared purpose, or direction. Parents have a difficult time talking to their children about matters of consequence:

A lot of us... can't talk or anything or talk about or express our feelings to them so we turn to some kind of substances like alcohol, drugs... gambling, food, sex... anything to take our mind off what's really bothering us.

Some participants suggested that there exists a wall of silence between parents and children, a situation that some participants thought was one of the outcomes of their parents' residential school experiences. As the oral testimony of Leona Makokis, a residential school survivor, suggests:

The meaning of anything we did in residential school did not represent anything that we brought with us from our reserve communities. Soon we quit talking about our experiences and our families.

Instead, I quickly learned that "silence was golden." From that first day, we lost our voices. Lost is probably not the right term, because when you lose something one may assume that you might have misplaced it and you may eventually find it.

Our voices were silenced. We spoke when we were spoken to. We never had an opinion, there was never an argument; creativity was discouraged. How has this affected our communities? We still feel voiceless, we still fear disagreement, we still keep our opinions to ourselves, we still fear expressing creative alternatives to our problems, and without intention, we pass this down to our children. Our communication and relationship skills are limited. (19)

Makokis's version of silence filtered through to the next generation. It became a silent background, a seen-but-unnoticed curtain against which young people behaved as "normal." A participant spoke about the subject:

...That was real traumatizing for me so I learned not to speak about, I learned not to talk about it, I just learned to just shut down... I didn't know how to talk about my feelings and a lot of us can't talk... about or express our feelings. So we turn to some kind

of substances like alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, sex... anything to take our mind off what's really bothering us. So I'm learning that it has a lot to do with...our trauma that many of us have experienced.

By no longer listening to their children, parents and grandparents unintentionally motivate teens to seek meaning elsewhere. One source of meaning is substance or alcohol use/abuse. According to one young participant,

Teens just drink to escape from reality. And in my case I do it because I got a lot of pressure that I have to deal with.

Another presented the following abbreviated account:

And a lot of times you end up drinking or doing drugs and ... the thing about that is, well your parents are there but you can only tell them so much. They don't want to hear the whole truth about what happened and it's true.

A popular strategy teens use to fill the parental void is to seek out friends with whom they can identify and who become major influences on their alcohol consumption and subsequent impaired driving experiences. As one young woman explained, "My friends who grew up around here they all drink and drive." Friends become like surrogate parents to the troubled teens. This is aptly witnessed in the following quote, where a Talking Circle participant suggested that his friends were his surrogate parents who contributed to his alcohol abuse and criminal charge of impaired driving:

I think my friends have a lot to do with my behavior (drinking and driving) because when I was a teenager they were like Mom and Dad I guess...You could be anything. I would do things to get acceptance just to be liked.

Another participant had this to say:

Friends... I see them everyday ... I drink with them everyday. I smoke with them everyday. At least they're there for me whereas my parents, well they're not there for me.

The combination of silence, role modeling and the search for acceptance steered many of the research participants towards alcohol abuse and impaired driving. The latter appeared to be an extension of the former.

Blurred relationship boundaries

In traditional First Nations families, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles participated in the upbringing of a child, attending to the classic phrase provided by one of the participants that, "it takes everyone in a community to raise a child, because it's a holistic thing." Although the ideal lives on, the experience has changed dramatically. Based on the Talking Circle discussion, present day child rearing practices are more likely to reflect family disunity and hardship. (20)

Members of the Talking Circle stated that family members play a vital role in the lives of many of First Nation's people. Although, ideally, family members help guide a child to maturity, in reality they often steer children towards alcohol consumption, partying and subsequent impaired driving. As two young respondents suggested:

The majority of people drink with their kids from anywhere from 13(years) with people who are like 50 years old. So...it's quite accepted.

A lot of people in this area I grew up around, like my mom, my real mom, well, I call my grandparents mom and dad because they raised me since I was a baby. But my real mom is an alcoholic and she was drinking all of the time. And my sisters now drink a lot and

they party quite a bit. I was a little kid seeing them drink and soon I was doing it too.

Blurred relationship boundaries between generations are more common than unique. According to Talking Circle participants, many young people in the First Nations community started drinking alcohol and became involved in drinking and driving in the company of older members of the community. As one young woman suggested, "they just were always there and when I was drinking and driving they were always with me..." Although some participants were only 13 or 14 years old, their friends were aged thirty years, or older:

We would always take off with older people all the time... They were over thirty...we were always taking off and the people we would hop in with were always older and were always drunk.

A blurred relationship circle, inclusive of family and non-family members, contributes to older members influencing teens to become involved in high-risk behaviors like alcohol abuse and impaired driving. Witness:

I remember my first experience was in Grade 3. My aunt and her boyfriend were drinking and they gave me some and I remember standing up and then it affected me...

Some young people were influenced to engage in high-risk, impaired driving behaviors with dire consequences. One young female participant told of how a 13-year-old girl caught a ride with an older man and ended up playing "chicken" with a truck:

...that night my girlfriend (aged 13) and another friend of mine they hopped in with these older people and they were cruising around partying and everything. My other friends decided to stay at the dance and they decided not to go with them. They all ended up

going back to town... everyone always drinks and drives and the vehicle that they were in, they met up with this truck and they were playing chicken and they both turned away at the same time but they turned the same direction, they got into a head on and all of them died except for one.

DISCUSSION

By using the indigenous methodology of a Talking Circle, this article describes the relationship between impaired driving, alcohol abuse and intergenerational impacts due to the local people's traumatic experience with federal government residential schools. First Nations people were involved throughout the research process, from the design of data collection and analysis, to the dissemination and recommendations for change. (21) The analysis showed that impaired driving in First Nations communities is not an isolated deviant behavior that is prone to short-term intervention strategies. Instead, it is an issue that is interrelated to other significant social issues and requires culturally rooted, community-based strategies for improvement.

The in-depth accounts of the Talking Circle showed a distinct reality outside the mainstream, whereby participants spoke of impaired driving as a manifestation of many First Nations parents having lost the skill of listening to their siblings' problems. In response to the parental code of silence, some teens seek solace with older friends, who become increasingly involved in alcohol abuse and impaired driving. To help deal with this situation, Talking Circle participants recommended that the community organize peer groups at

the high school and post-high school levels, in which peers are taught to listen to students' problems, experiences, fears and anxieties. This innovation would reduce the need for young people to seek emotional support from friends and seek escape from their stressful lives by becoming involved in alcohol abuse and subsequent impaired driving.

The Talking Circle produced numerous suggestions about the need for members of the older generation to reclaim who they are. One way is for the community to provide opportunities whereby older members can share the stresses they are experiencing due to the historical traumas they faced and the problems they now encounter in their families and in the community. It is a major step towards healing in the community, a way to restore intergenerational balance that would eventually reduce the likelihood of senior members of the community becoming involved in high-risk behaviors, like alcohol abuse and impaired driving.

Finally, the use of the Talking Circle as a hermeneutic approach to research a First Nations community steeped in the oral tradition of the people's culture provided in-depth accounts of experiences that would be unattainable in structured one-on-one interviews, or survey questionnaires. However, the Talking Circle used in this study represents the people's lived experiences in one large First Nations community. It has limited power of generalization across First Nations communities in Canada, or the rest of the world, but it has significant strength in delving deep into the community structure to provide information that can lead to relevant, culturally respectful, and realistic community development projects. Similar studies are needed in other First Nations communities to capture

their unique psychological, historical, spiritual and social experiences related to health issues like alcohol abuse and impaired driving.

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