

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Pre-Reading Primer

Delivered to the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC

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TRIGGER WARNING: *Some of what you read you may find disturbing. Please reach out to someone after you read through in case you need to talk to someone. Making time and space for you to prepare mentally and emotionally may help you to digest some unsavory truths about Canadian history.*

Introduction

The purpose of this short document is to let the reader begin to think of what they know about Indigenous people in Canada and to begin a dialogue that hopefully broadens that understanding and allows for additional learning about the original inhabitants of what is now called Canada.

This document and any subsequent cultural competency training are not about creating guilt for the things off the past. It's an attempt at what is commonly referred to as reconciliation. Although some believe that reconciliation suggests that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were once closely tied to one another, Canadian history tells another story.

Every person is entitled to their own beliefs, hopefully these are based in some facts and not just unfounded opinions, e.g., all Indigenous people get free education, or all Indigenous people don't pay tax. Both examples are 100% false yet they still exist because many people either have not had the chance to be educated about these and other notions or are too afraid to ask an Indigenous person for fear of backlash.

If more people placed some small effort in understanding other cultures, the world might be a far better place. All cultures have extremes, such as the KKK, the Taliban, etc. Racism and discrimination divides people, usually based on false understandings that are learned young. It is the hope that this document gets the reader to check bias, to open your mind a bit, and see if we can come together, even if, a bit closer.

What is Indigenous Cultural Competency?

It may be easier to ask what is incompetent. Most people with a bit of common sense can easily identify things that are in poor taste, such as asking a female sexually assaulted by a male to re-tell the horror of that assault to a male police officer. Police forces now usually assign an officer of the same gender to handle the multi-layered sensitivities without being re-traumatized.

In a sense, that is also what cultural competency is about. It's about increasing your capacity and understanding of things you or your institution does or says that may cause harm, re-traumatize, or be plainly inappropriate to ask or say. Cultural competency is NOT about learning all you can about every Indigenous culture that you encounter. It's more about having enough of a basic understanding to connect the person you are speaking with to the right services and making them feel their culture is not the issue. An example might be if an Indigenous person goes to see a doctor because they have the flu, they want to doctor to treat the flu, not grill them about whether they use substances or question why they are coming to see them. Granted, some noted experiences may be classified as racist, such as the treatment at a hospital in Quebec of Joyce Echequan, who was in major pain and was admitted to the

hospital. She ended up recording the horrific treatment by nurses just before she died. The Coroner's report found she could have survived had the hospital staff taken her needs seriously instead of assuming she was just there for pain killers.

This is true on an individual level also. If through your own travels throughout your day you meet an Indigenous person, it is clearly not ok to start asking them to get you tax-free cigarettes, or to enter a rant about income tax exemptions, etc. It soon becomes obvious that what you see is an Indigenous person versus a human being who is also just going about their day. It is not an Indigenous person's responsibility to educate non-Indigenous people or to defend their Treaty and Indigenous Rights simply because you do not agree with them.

5-day Training to define who is a First Nation person.

Court rulings continue to challenge a largely outdated piece of legislation, the "Indian Act." Legally, the term Indian is still used. In fact, there is a 5-day training that Membership Clerks take to help understand how to apply the law to who can be legally considered a "Status Registered Indian."

There are all-encompassing terms that include different groups, these have changed over time, and can include Native, Aboriginal and Indigenous. First Nations (also known as "Status Registered Indians"), Inuit and Metis are the 3 groups recognized in the Canadian Constitution repatriated by former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. First Nations can also be used to describe the community or reserve that Status Registered Indians belong to. In some cases, a community or people may use only nation and drop the word "first", e.g., Squamish Nation.

It's also important to point out there are exceptions, for example some Inuit do not identify as much with the term's Native, Aboriginal or Indigenous, and simply prefer to be referred to as Inuit. Inuit is the plural term; Inuk is the singular term for the original people that live North of 60.

Sound complicated? It is, but not to worry. If you are having an interaction with someone you suspect is Indigenous, it is totally fine to ask them their identity if you are doing so to refer them to Elders, knowledge keepers, cultural workers or specific services your agency may offer. Some Indigenous people also get some medical benefits that most Canadians do not get, so it simply could be part of intake questions. It is a good practice to explain why you are asking, and the reason can be that you just want to understand how they self-identify so you can offer better services for their needs.

*"Cultural competence is generally defined as the acquisition and maintenance of a set of skills – including behaviors, attitudes and policies – for the delivery of appropriate care in a multi-cultural context."*¹

A Bit of History (re-told).

In Canada, Indigenous people were not defeated militarily. In fact, if you read history books, you'll see how Indigenous people on the east coast helped settlers to this land who arrived with scurvy and could not withstand the harsh winter climates. There are archaeological finds in Newfoundland that show the Vikings were here long before Columbus got lost and thought he found India.

Indeed, there were violent clashes between the First Peoples and newcomers to this land. As more settlers arrived, these clashes grew. The Wabanaki Confederacy which makes up Tribes on the eastern part of Canada and the United States sided with the French, while the Iroquois Confederacy sided with the English. Similar military alliances occurred with other tribes elsewhere. Canada before it was known as such, was eager to build a railway line clear across this country to stop the United States from moving north and planting their flag. This was why Treaties were signed, more so on the Prairies. The Treaties in the Maritimes are also known as Friendship Treaties, as they did not deal with land matters. They simply agreed to co-exist.

As Canada became a country, Residential Schools became a reality. One of the oldest federal departments is Indian Affairs, as we were here and need to be dealt with. Some concurrent things were happening though, including new illnesses Indigenous people had no immunity against, smallpox and tuberculosis to name two. Military conflicts also continued to exist also. Louis Riel, the Metis Leader now considered to be a Father of Confederation was hanged.

Most people can heal from trauma, but one essential ingredient is time between one trauma and the next. However, time was not on the side of Indigenous people. As it became clear that newcomers were here to stay, needing more land and assigning First Nations to smaller tracts of land, often isolated or near swamp lands, disease, warfare, residential schools, etc. started to take their toll.

We are unsure how many Indigenous people died but some suggest it is in the tens of millions. Mi'kmaw Grand Chief Membertou was once asked how many Mi'kmaq there were before Europeans arrived, his response was "more than the hairs on my head."

Most people have heard about the smallpox infested blankets, largely by the US military that were issued to Indigenous people which resulted in great numbers of deaths. There were also periods where starvation tactics were administered by the Canadian government to see how we might respond to extreme deprivation methods. Once self-sufficient and proud, Indigenous people became reliant on government for what was called rations, where they got food and other supplies, they were barely able to live on or clothe themselves with.

Some non-Indigenous people will say "*That was then, I can't be held responsible for this my ancestors did hundreds of years ago.*" The reality is assimilationist policies against Indigenous people are still happening recently. Between 1950 and 1990, the 60's Scoop occurred. An estimated 20,000 Indigenous children, (First Nations Inuit and Metis) were taken from their families and placed into foster care. The problem was, they were not told of their Indigenous heritage, and some were sent to far off places like New Zealand, Australia and the United States. The Innu in Labrador were forcibly relocated in the 1960s, which resulted in their way of life being interrupted because they could no longer fish off the ocean.

These two examples are within the last 50 years, so Indigenous people are not talking about what happened at first contact. It has been hundreds of years of interaction that have created some of the deepest psychological wounds. The constant underpinning of Canada's approach to Indigenous people has been to remove Indigenous culture. The solution then, is to create the conditions that allow Indigenous people to embrace and celebrate their cultures.

Essentially, when Indigenous people show signs of distress and negative coping patterns, they are often displaying normal reactions to abnormal situations they experienced.

Unhealed/Unresolved Trauma & Cumulative Loss

Kathy Broady lists **20 effects of unresolved trauma** (on the individual) as follows:

1. Addictive behaviors
2. An inability to tolerate conflict with others (fear of it, running from it, avoiding it)
3. An inability to tolerate intense feelings (preferring to avoid)
4. An innate feeling they are bad, worthless, without value or importance
5. Black and white thinking (all or nothing)
6. Chronic and repeated suicidal thoughts
7. Disorganized attachment patterns (dysfunctional relationships, etc.)
8. Dissociation (spacing out, feeling like you are two different people)
9. Eating disorders
10. Excessive sense of self-blame
11. Inappropriate attachments to mother/father figures, even when unhealthy
12. Intense anxiety and repeated panic attacks
13. Intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, body memories, etc.
14. Ongoing chronic depression
15. Repeatedly acting from a victim role in current day relationships
16. Repeatedly taking on the rescuer role, even when inappropriate to do so
17. Self-harm, self-mutilation, self-injury, self-destruction
18. Suicidal actions and behaviors, failed attempts at suicide
19. Taking the perpetrator role/angry aggressor in relationships
20. Unexplained but intense fear of people, places and things¹

It may be true that Residential Schools *tried* to educate Indigenous children, the operative word is tried. Residential Schools failed mostly because the main objectives were to *'take the Indian out of the Indian'*, by not allowing the speaking of Indigenous languages, dressing in Indigenous regalia, having long hair, etc. and ultimately the goal became to Christianize Indigenous people first, and education came second. The fact that physical and sexual abuse occurred, as well as vicarious trauma for children who weren't abused but witnessed it lays a solid foundation for generations of damaged children.

How confusing it must be for a child to be told by Priest and Nuns that sex must be saved for marriage, only to have those same adults enter their dorms at night and sexually abuse them. To date, almost six thousand gravesites of mostly children have been found on just a handful of Residential School sites. While it is true that many children died from illnesses, there are Residential School survivors who recount stories of other students suddenly disappearing never to be seen again, others where the girl

¹<http://www.discussingdissociation.com/2009/07/20-signs-of-unresolved-trauma/> retrieved Dec 5, 2016

was either forced to abort a baby after being impregnated by a Priest and to have the fetus flushed down the septic system or burned in a wood furnace.

One key fact that people need to understand, is that the cultural identities of Indigenous people has suffered from a legally structured system of discrimination ever since Europeans arrived here in North America. Once settlers gained a foothold here and established a colonial government, a steady and systematic assault began.

It is the impacts of that hostile system that we all are struggling to address today.

Set aside those who are blatantly racist, as they are not the ones who are interested in understanding how we can overcome these impacts. Most non-Indigenous people want some type of reconciliation and want to see less homelessness, addictive substance use, etc. Most seem to want to understand what they can do to support healing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) report produced 94 recommendations. Interestingly, not one deals with housing and homelessness.

That is where organizations and government can continue to work with Indigenous stakeholders to meet areas that were overlooked, for whatever reason. It is unclear whether the reason nothing in the TRC Report is because housing and homelessness are not "rights" per se, e.g. every person in Canada has a right to education. Can we realistically ask if every person in Canada has a right to a home?

Conclusions

This primer is to basically introduce some historical differences between what is taught in school and what Indigenous people know. It truly isn't about blaming people today for what happened many years ago. The key point is when you see signs of distress among some Indigenous people, please remember that Indigenous people are simply displaying normal reactions to abnormal situations. If you can open your mind to at least acknowledge unresolved traumas and that cumulative loss plays a key role is a solid starting place for an ally to stand with Indigenous people as we work toward a better and brighter future. What is more important, is for the reader to prepare to open their minds and see things a bit differently. We recommend not wearing guilt, as this exercise is not about blame or to make people feel sorry. It is to explain things that many people do not see.

ⁱ Relational Care: A Guide to Health Care and Support for Indigenous People Living with HIV/AIDS. Canadian Indigenous AIDS Network, Ottawa ON. 2008:2