

Ethnostress: The Disruption of the Aboriginal Spirit

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Introduction

In the early 1980s, the key discussions being held between representatives of various cultural groups whether they were Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, or North American Indian, concentrated on what was happening within their respective communities. People of all races and colours were exploring the causes underlying the dysfunctional social behaviour, the reasons behind the poor economic situation, and the reality of the political battles being waged inside of their communities. Community leaders of all nations were attempting to understand the "confusion" inside of their world.

We felt that if could begin to look at our world, and to try to figure it out, we could get a handle on what was troubling our communities.

So it was during this time that we coined the term known as "Ethnostress". Ethnostress was to become the label for the confusion and disruption that people were experiencing inside of their world. For the purpose of definition, Ethnostress, comes from two words; "ethnicity" which refers to the roots of our Aboriginal identity and "stress" pertaining to the impact that the reality of our experience has on the psycho-social development of the Aboriginal person. In short, living within Native communities, is a very stressful experience. But, to simply state this and not provide the bigger picture would not do the concept justice, we need to be able to relate the stress to the disruption of the Aboriginal identity, and further, to understand the impact of this disruption on the individual and community itself.

Prior to contact, it is known that Aboriginal societies had their own unique form of social organization, spiritual practice, and system of government. Aboriginal peoples developed their social systems so they could function in a manner that supported their beliefs in a Creator and their understanding of "natural law". Many of these beliefs may not be general knowledge today, but Aboriginal people have not forgotten. Beliefs about kinship ties that encompassed a wide range of both human and spiritual relationships was the central theme carried in the minds and hearts of the people. This "holistic" and universal system of kinship made it possible for Aboriginal people to be truly respectful and humanistic in their daily interactions with people, and in their co-existence, and interdependence with the environment in which they lived.

At the time of contact, Aboriginal peoples were subjected to the first forms of physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse that came with the force of "colonialism". This was a time when one race of people began exercising power and control over Aboriginal people by firstly, their "right of discovery", and later, by claim over a dependent area and its inhabitants by "right of conquest". As the colonies grew, the human spirit of the Aboriginal people became overwhelmed by the oppressive forces, stemming from the "racism" that they experienced. Rightly or wrongly, we know today that it was the belief in the superiority of one race of people over another that led the

Europeans to unjustly and cruelly exercise power and establish authority over Aboriginal people and the environment in which they lived.

The Aboriginal view of co-existence and universal kinship allowed the Europeans free access to the resources of the new world. The establishment of the fur trade brought many burdens that affected the minds and the bodies of Aboriginal people. Their human spirits became overwhelmed by the physical and emotional abuse resulting from the epidemic numbers of deaths caused by 11 major diseases. Psychological, physical and sexual abuse came with the influx of large quantities of "the mind-changer" known as alcohol. Emotional, spiritual and psychological abuse came when Aboriginal spiritual practices changed under the stress created by organized and institutionalized religion. "Sexism" became prevalent when patriarchal values and male-dominant systems resulted in the subservience of women and children that worked to disrupt matrilineal family systems. Land was a commodity, and so were the creatures who lived on it. The continuing exploitation of the fur trade resulted in further burdens and "economic stress" as people became physically deprived of food and economically dependent upon their oppressors.

Later historical changes in the form of Indian Act legislation added new "educational stresses" when Aboriginal people had to enfranchise (give up being an Indian) in order to become a doctor, lawyer or some other professional. The implementation of a residential boarding school system created further educational stresses and added new psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual stresses stemming from the separation of children from the family and enforced changes in family roles and structure. De-humanized and demoralized, large numbers of Aboriginal people in an attempt to ease their suffering accepted and adopted the views, ideas, values, and practices of the culture who held power and control over their lives. Our ancestors who were the direct recipients of this abuse changed their beliefs as a way of hopefully improving the quality of their life and the lives of their children.

The Aboriginal concept of a universal system of kinship suffered and broke down under the weight of the many burdens affecting the bodies and the minds of the people. The concept of kinship amongst people which included an extended kinship with all of Creation and the many life forms within it no longer made sense under the influence and weight of the oppressive forces that worked to disrupt family and contributed to a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. The cycle of family violence we know today stems from an anger and fear that can be traced to the disruption of the Aboriginal spirit.

Historical analysis has shown that family dysfunction and family violence has existed for many generations. A loss of faith and belief in a unique Aboriginal view of family and kinship affects not only how we relate to one another as a people, but ultimately how we relate to all forms of life on this planet and beyond.

Over the years, we have observed the impact that this early history had on the identity of Aboriginal people. We know that our identity is our sense of self. A strong sense of self is shaped in the early years of our life when we can be loved as a "precious child" who has purpose, who is acceptable, who belongs and has a place, whose very existence is

beneficial and who has a sense of safety and security in the world because he or she also lives in a world that has sufficient food, water and shelter. These are the basic needs which are required by all human beings and which act as the foundation for a strong sense of self. A strong sense of self is further supported and enhanced if the "precious child" receives positive affirmation of his/her sex and identity as an Aboriginal person.

We receive our beliefs about family life and our child-rearing practices from our family of origin. Our family of origin in turn received their beliefs and concept of family from the generation previous to them and so on. Our beliefs are shaped by our experience and these experiences will determine how various family members behave and relate to one another. If our family life and beliefs support a healthy and nurturing family environment, then the chances that we are able to meet all of our basic human needs is quite good. The level at which we are able to meet and fulfill our basic needs is what determines our sense of self; the more needs met, the stronger our sense of self. A strong sense of self in turn greatly affects the level of self-confidence and self-esteem we possess.

On the other hand, if our family experience and beliefs about family stem from a history of family violence and confusion of identity, then the child's loss of faith and belief in self and about family in general is disrupted. The loss of this sense of self and confusion in identity is reinforced and held in place by the emotional pain and confusion in belief that we have inherited from our family of origin (early childhood stress) and from generations past.

Failing to evaluate our beliefs and leaving our emotional pain unresolved allows us to carry these beliefs and pain into adulthood where we tend to act them out on our own children. Thus, the cycle of abuse and family violence is maintained.

The disruption of our cultural beliefs has been occurring since the time of contact with non-Indigenous people for about 500 years. Over the years since that first meeting in the early 1980s, we have come to recognize that specific "hurting" behaviours associated with the feelings of fear and anger within our communities are examples that Aboriginal people are suffering from an "Ethnostress"; a loss and confusion of identity. When the joyful identity of a "precious child" is not affirmed, the person suffers from both mental confusion as well as physical and emotional pain—a state of being that contributes to a person's sense of powerlessness and hopelessness.

CONDITIONS THAT CREATE ETHNOSTRESS

THE DISRUPTION OF THE CULTURAL BELIEFS OR JOYFUL IDENTITY OF A PEOPLE

THE RESULT OF OPPRESSIVE CONDITIONS FORCED UPON A PEOPLE IN THEIR

OWN ENVIRONMENT

**THE NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE THEY FEEL
WHEN INTERACTING WITH MEMBERS OF EITHER
THEIR OWN OR OTHER CULTURAL GROUPS**

**THE FEELINGS OF POWERLESSNESS AND HOPELESSNESS
THAT DISRUPTS OUR ABILITY TO ACHIEVE
OUR BASIC NEEDS**

Ethnostress and the Conditions Created within the Aboriginal Community

Once the four conditions that characterize the "Ethnostress" within Aboriginal communities become deeply internalized within the community's psychological make-up, the effects of Ethnostress often remain within the community long after the oppressive forces are removed. It is in this way that the force of the oppression continues as people now work to oppress each other.

We have already defined the first condition as being the disruption of the cultural beliefs that support a joyful identity. The beliefs of which we speak are the ones that help us to meet our human needs. These beliefs, which help us to know who we are and give us purpose, once disrupted, instill a deep sense of loss that is accompanied by the feelings of anger, fear, hurt, loneliness and shame. The stress that we feel then as Aboriginal people comes from our inability to recognize these feelings and to discharge them in a safe place where no one is hurt. Thus, we have high levels of family dysfunction, violence and abuse occurring within our world.

Ethnostress results when oppressive conditions are forced upon a people in their own environment. Here again, we have already elaborated on the history of our contact with non-Aboriginal people. Many of the historical changes in Aboriginal culture were forced upon the people. Many Aboriginal people accepted these changes without the freedom of choice. For example, in the case of land transactions, many Aboriginal nations were the victims of fraud and deceit. However, probably the best example of what we mean by oppressive conditions being forced upon a people is the implementation of the Indian Act, that spawned the creation of the reservation system and worked to control every aspect of "Indian" life.

Thirdly, Ethnostress occurs under the condition of negative experience. It is the negative feelings we experience when we are interacting with members of either our own or some other cultural group. We call this condition, "internalized racism", and it is one form of the many oppressions we have internalized over the generations. Essentially what this means is that we mimic our oppressors. For example, when we have been hurt by the stereotypical messages of being called "dumb and drunken Indians", we often retaliate in

kind and send out similar messages out of our fear and anger, sometimes hurting our own but usually aimed at hurting people of other races. Another example of negative experience occurs when we hurt our own people by labeling them as being "pagans" or "witches" for practicing their traditional ways. This occurs when we internalize the views held by certain religious authorities.

Lastly, Ethnostress is at its highest when the feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness pervades our community existence. Often, it is these feelings that are working to disrupt our ability to achieve our basic human needs. Most markedly, these are the feelings that are often experienced by those community members who contemplate suicide, and who take the chance of attempting suicide. When Ethnostress occurs within communities, there is a general condition of seemingly endless crisis. Under crisis conditions, community members are held in a constant state of reaction, constantly reacting to threats of impending crisis and feeling powerless to do anything about it.

Although we have used some very specific examples of Ethnostress in the Aboriginal world, it should be noted that many other cultures throughout the world are experiencing their own unique form of Ethnostress under very similar conditions. The presence of Ethnostress and its attendant behaviour patterns is perhaps the one thing that Aboriginal people share with the other cultures of the world.

THE EFFECTS OF ETHNOSTRESS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

NEEDS ARE FROZEN

LOSS OF FAITH AND BELIEF

THE HOSTAGE SYNDROME

THE NARROWING OF CULTURE

CULTURE UNDER GLASS

TRIBAL ISOLATION

INTERNALIZED STEREOTYPES

ADOPTING OF "SURVIVALIST" BEHAVIOURS

The Effects of Ethnostress: Creation of Distress Patterns

In examining the impact that the disruption of identity and confusion of belief has on the family and individual, we observed that the Ethnostress experienced by Aboriginal people promoted very specific behaviour patterns. We would now like to share some examples of these behaviour patterns to help you to understand more fully the impact of Ethnostress on the Aboriginal family and individual.

The first is a pattern of trying to fulfill "**FROZEN NEEDS**". When we began this paper, we mentioned that human beings require the fulfillment of certain basic needs. To reiterate, these needs are:

- * to be seen
- * to be heard
- * to know that we are accepted and believed
- * to know that others have faith and trust in us
- * to know our place and purpose in the world
- * to feel secure, safe and at peace with one's self
- * to know that our existence is beneficial to the important people in our life
- * to love and be loved

These are the basic needs that we often neglect both within ourselves and when we are interacting with other people. Why do we neglect them? Because we never learn about them soon enough. These needs have been expressed by many psychologists and psychotherapists, but we often do not know about them until we take a course in psychology or find it necessary to see a counsellor or therapist. And, by the time we do, we are already set in our ways and do not really appreciate the full impact that these needs have on our human growth and spiritual development. In fact, Abraham Maslow was the first such social scientist to express these needs as a hierarchy of human needs theorizing that meeting these needs step by step would move us closer to self-actualization—our full human potential.

Over the years of our counselling practice, we have found that most people neglect these needs despite the fact that they are central to the well-being and happiness of any human being. As previously stated, we neglect them because we don't know about them. People in a state of emotional despair often say, "I don't know what I need." – never fully realizing the depth and truth to their statement.

For the Aboriginal person who has had a history of negative experiences and negative messages about who he or she is as a person is at an even greater disadvantage. The many negative messages we have internalized and come to believe about ourselves firstly, as human beings, and secondly, as Aboriginal people, have interfered with our ability to fulfill our most basic and essential needs. In our community history and perhaps most importantly, in our family history, we have experienced much pain and hurt. It is this pain and hurt that interferes with our ability to feel good about ourselves and others, and that prevents us from being totally open and honest in relationships.

Because these human needs have not been met for many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, we say that the needs have become “frozen” usually at a time when the “precious child” needs to be affirmed for who he or she is. This period of time differs for every human being, but generally, these needs should be met by the time the child reaches the age of 7 years.

Further, because much of our Aboriginal experience and family dysfunction has been occurring for generations, we often see people behaving in ways as an attempt to fulfill their basic needs. For example, a young girl who is very promiscuous would be trying to fulfill her "need to love and be loved", particularly if her parents did not provide the appropriate physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual nurturing. Just think about the many times, you heard the word "no" without explanation when you were growing up. This word can be devastating to a child who is attempting to experience and explore the world. It is even more devastating if the "no" was accompanied by a slap, hit or punch. Sometimes the attempt to fulfill an unfulfilled need can be advantageous, as many people in fulfilling their "need to be heard" have become excellent public speakers. But, the main idea behind all of this discussion centers on the idea that our behaviours are learned in an attempt to fulfill unmet needs.

The next behaviour that we have observed operating in the Aboriginal world is the **"LOSS OF FAITH AND BELIEF"**. As previously stated, we lose faith and belief in our cultural beliefs and practices first, and then later still, under the influence of negative experience, we lose faith and belief in ourselves, in our family, and in our community. After a time, we don't know what to believe in and we become lost and confused leaving us vulnerable to anyone or any "thing" that promises to help us.

The third thing that we have seen over the years, and of which we still see remnants today is the behaviour pattern known as **"THE HOSTAGE SYNDROME"**. The hostage syndrome results when a person becomes confused and begins to adapt to the loss of freedom by accepting and supporting the beliefs of his or her captor. The hostage syndrome was more prevalent during the period of time when permits were required for an Indian to leave his reserve, and when children were captured and returned to the residential boarding school whenever they ran away. However, the term is useful because it describes the psychological effects of captivity on an individual. We still see remnants of the hostage syndrome taking effect when people express the belief that all ceremonies must be hidden and that sacred objects, like the eagle feather, must never appear in public places. Times are changing, but there are still a great number of Aboriginal people who adhere to these beliefs that stem from a time when one could not leave the reserve and when all ceremonial items were confiscated and branded as articles of "witchcraft".

The fourth behaviour pattern that we see at work is **"THE NARROWING OF CULTURE"**. During the course of their historical experience, many Aboriginal people lost control of their culture and consequently, their lives. The narrowing of culture began with the loss of mobility experienced by the shrinkage of the Aboriginal homelands. The cultural experience of Aboriginal people became defined by the new and limited environment of the reservation system. Cultural lifestyles became limited and practices were dictated by various religious and governmental controls exercised by those who

assumed "authority" over the lives of the people, namely, the Indian agents, missionaries and bureaucrats. Many Aboriginal people accepted this newly defined and limited version of culture, and today we can still find people who have never left the reserve, and who adhere so strongly to the beliefs of the majority culture that they reject anything that has to do with "traditional" ways. The narrowing of culture sets into motion a myriad of hurting behaviours. Many of us still remember being the victims of ridicule, humiliation, attack and isolation because we came from or didn't come from traditional families, because we did or did not excel in school, because we did or did not talk in a particular way, because we liked or disliked a certain kind of music, and in many other ways. We may have been told that we were not legitimately Native or Native enough. We sometimes hear this attack in the phrase, "You're trying to be White." All of these behaviours are served up and accepted by people who are caught up in a narrow view of culture.

Working closely in hand with the narrowing of culture is the fifth behaviour pattern that we call "**CULTURE UNDER GLASS**". In this instance, it is not just the human needs that become frozen, but the entire Aboriginal culture. The concept of "being Indian and possessing an unique culture" takes on a near exclusive identification with a lifestyle that existed before the loss of mobility (somewhere between 100 or 300 years ago). This view of Aboriginal culture is reinforced by the history books that talk about Aboriginal people and cultures in the past tense, place anthropological emphasis on what used to be, and denote the recent trend in the courts where the opposition to Native rights argues that changed lifestyle means a particular people no longer exists, and therefore, have no claim to land or other rights.

The most damaging aspect of "culture under glass" occurs when a culture becomes defined almost exclusively in material terms. In the 1980s, various Indian education programs examined culture through history, through beadwork and crafts, with some song and dance, but mostly in terms that declared that there was once a certain physical existence that is no more. As a result, a number of contemporary Native children had their identity undermined.

Today, this too is changing, as the more progressive Indian education programs and schools are offering language immersion and designing curriculum that expresses the full scope of cultural belief and practice. However, you can still hear the arguments that a particular ceremony must be done in this way and only in this way; that the "real" traditional person must look, dress and live in a way prescribed by the past, and so on. These arguments can get us locked into highly emotional feelings and beliefs that argue about "going back" instead of recognizing the living culture that we carry within us. If we can see culture as a living dynamic, then we can see that we can carry our language, traditions and beliefs into the future.

"TRIBAL ISOLATION" is another behaviour pattern. This particular pattern has to do with the development of defense patterns that lead us to withdraw and to isolate ourselves from other Aboriginal people. Our childhood experiences may have created high levels of fear and mistrust within us especially if we had been hurt deeply by our own people. We may sometimes feel ashamed of ourselves and of other Aboriginal people. The isolation

can become so severe that we may feel safer with and more trustful of non-Aboriginal people. Most of the time however, we feel the isolation as a barrier that keeps us separate from other Aboriginal communities despite the fact that we may have the same tribal roots.

Another behaviour pattern operating within the Aboriginal world is the one where we act out "**INTERNALIZED STEREOTYPES**". The stereotypical images of Aboriginal people are directly connected to the imagery projected by the Hollywood film industry. The result of these stereotypes has led to the creation of a confusion on what a Native male and Native female should be in the 20th century. The image of the male "warrior" and "chief" and female "Indian princess" and "beast of burden" have created images in the minds of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that are not a true representation of the roles defined by our culture and traditions.

The impact of these images is felt when Aboriginal people become ashamed and angry at themselves for having skin that is too dark, or not dark enough, dress and talk that is different, and behaviour that is stereotyped as being "backwards or uncivilized" and at times, even "violent".

"INTERNALIZED FACTIONALISM" is another behaviour pattern that is perhaps the most damaging when Aboriginal people are attempting to unite their people and move towards a common goal. The factionalism is acted out in political meetings, at social functions, and amongst families. When these behaviour patterns overtake us, we can easily attack, criticize, or have unrealistic expectations of anyone who has the courage to step forward and undertake leadership responsibilities within the community. When we continue to act in ways that emphasize our differences, we fail to provide the support that is absolutely necessary for effective leadership to emerge and for group strength to grow. Often, effective community leaders and organizers become "burnt-out" from their attempts to work in a community where people are very negative and highly critical of leadership.

The final and resulting pattern that usually emerges as a response to all the confusion, pain, and divisions experienced within Aboriginal communities is what we call "**SURVIVALIST BEHAVIOUR**". The "survivalist" develops ways to cope with all of the oppressive situations he or she experiences in life. To survive, we learn to "shut down" our feelings so that we can silently withstand humiliation and criticism. We do so in an attempt to prevent ourselves from once again being hurt, rejected, or trapped by someone else. We learn not to show or to share our feelings with others, and in the process, we learn how to isolate ourselves to the point where we may not understand or be able to feel our own emotions. Survivalist behaviours can be scary. Especially if our attempt to protect ourselves causes us to fail in comprehending the feelings and emotions of those individuals closest to us, namely our spouses and our children.

The use of alcohol, drugs and the development of other addictions such as gambling and becoming a "workaholic" are all ways of coping with our internal despair and unhappiness. Compulsive and harmful sexual behaviours, flashy consumerism, irrational use of money, energy-wasting behaviours and time-consuming games can also become

part of a person's method of surviving.

All of these behaviour patterns are patterns of "distress" and as such they are the most obvious examples that Aboriginal communities and the individuals who comprise them are suffering from "Ethnostress".

When we developed the material on Ethnostress, we knew that if we were to effect positive social change within Aboriginal communities, we would need to direct our attention to helping ourselves and others heal the pain of our unmet needs and clear the confusion from our minds. As workers for the community, we are often faced with the task of managing people who are filled with painful memories connected to a broad range of personal issues stemming from their unmet needs. These issues often surface as various dysfunctional behaviours, as "distress patterns" that work to disrupt community organizations and our interpersonal relationships with family and others.

Understanding the concept of Ethnostress provides one with a broader understanding and vision of the work required in organizational management and community development programs. Thus, when problems surface within an organization, community or family, we can stop judging and blaming and look objectively at the roots of the problem. What distress patterns are at work, and what might be causing this behaviour? What needs am I or is this person attempting to fulfill? And, most importantly, how can I help them and myself break free of the distress patterns that are controlling my life?