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Exploring the Addiction Recovery Experiences of Urban Indigenous Youth and Non-Indigenous Youth Who Use the Services of The Saskatoon Community Arts Program

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Abstract: *This article explores the experiences of addiction recovery among urban Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth who attended the Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Program (SCYAP). SCYAP is a community-based organization that provides creative ways for youth to express themselves through art, and is intended to address the social, economic, and educational needs of urban youth who are characterized as at-risk. SCYAP has functioned since 2001 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Six Indigenous youth and four non-Indigenous youth were interviewed to explore how the processes of addiction recovery were understood and or experienced. The study postulates a theory of addiction recovery founded on Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences, a sense of belonging, identity, values, art, and visualization. This study is qualitative in nature and explores the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in relation to addiction recovery. Research results show that Indigenous youth and non-Indigenous youth who use the services of SCYAP have meaningful insights into the ways in which they experience and understand addiction recovery.*

Introduction

The experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada and many other Western nations has been marked by the colonization of their social and cultural ways of life. Historically, Canada established policies and practices designed to suppress Indigenous societies, which were deemed to be those of inferior cultures and peoples. Over time, a racialized Indigenous identity emerged as part of their defining identities. According to sociologist Peter Li, “the colonial history of the Aboriginal peoples and their present-day dependence on the state contribute to the social meaning of the term Indians to refer not only to a ‘racial’ group of a remote past, but also a contemporary people that is economically burdensome, socially marginal and political militant” (2003, 2–3). Such colonial history and racialized discourse contribute to the adversity that urban Indigenous youth encounter in their lives (Champagne 2015; Hansen 2015; Li 2003; TRC 2015). Various effects of institutional racism are linked to chemical dependency—residential schools, the 60s scoop, social exclusion, and so on (Champagne 2015; Hansen 2015; Silver 2013; TRC 2015). Silver (2007) notes that “socially excluded groups and individuals lack capacity or access to social opportunity” (2007,

15). However, SCYAP was built on the premise that youth who are characterized as at-risk still have the ability to be resilient in a colonial society. This notion provides the foundation for a program that supports addiction recovery through the healing practices of art. Within this program are the teachings needed to support the development of the addiction recovery aspirations of at-risk urban (Charlton and Hansen 2016; SCYAP 2015). More specifically, the objectives of SCYAP are:

- To develop a multi-layered, community-supported art- and culture-based crime-prevention strategy addressing youth crime (with emphasis on illegal graffiti)
- To create an art- and culture-based environment that lays the foundation for young people's personal development, empowerment, and direction, and provides positive training opportunities aimed at developing a stronger sense of self-esteem and community ownership among the youth of our city, at-risk and otherwise
- To provide at-risk and other youth with the information, knowledge, and real-life experiences required to further their exploration of educational and career opportunities
- To educate and inspire, through art and culture, at-risk youth to become positive, contributing citizens and to dispel the myth that the larger world is forever closed to them
- To furnish a place for urban young people to explore and express their creative abilities, and to provide entry to possibilities for continuing education and career options within and beyond the arts and culture industry
- To partner with other youth agencies and programs in a single-window delivery model in order better to coordinate and expand the range of services offered to at-risk and other youth in our communities (SCYAP 2015,1).

The above objectives demonstrate that SCYAP provides Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth with a community of support while at the same time promoting educational, emotional, and social supports. This article focuses on the Indigenous experience. First, we discuss the Indigenous experience in Canada in relation to addictions recovery. Then we discuss our research methodology and present the findings. We conclude by discussing the themes expressed by the young people interviewed, and provide recommendations for public policy.

Context

The colonization of Indigenous societies has been a major factor in the development of alcoholism and addictions among Indigenous peoples (Adams 2000; Hansen and Antsanen 2015; TRC 2015). A major impact of colonization has been the social inequalities between Indigenous peoples and the dominant group in Canada. The evidence of these disparities

is manifest in the array of studies and reports composed by various researchers concerning inequalities in levels of employment, incarceration, educational attainment, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty, suicide, and so on (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry 1999; Comack 2012; Hansen and Antsanen 2016; Picard 2012; Silver 2013; TRC 2015).

Modern interpretations of chemically addicted human beings are rooted in the discourse of trauma and pain. It is important to understand that negative experiences can have an adverse impact on an individual's well-being; it is understandable that chemically addicted human beings are hurting. As Maté advises, “[a] hurt is at the centre of all addictive behaviours” (2008, 36). Since many Indigenous youth are seen through the lens of colonial stereotypes—they are often seen as lazy, drunk, criminals, inferior workers, and so on—they have often been treated accordingly by schoolteachers, store clerks, the police, healthcare professionals, and many other authoritative social figures. Wotherspoon and Hansen claim that racial stigmatization is damaging and has “led to social exclusion from society’s core institutions, including employment, education, housing, policing, and many other sites” (2013, 31). Wotherspoon and Hansen note that stereotyping Indigenous people as “lazy, apathetic and indifferent both ignores and reinforces the impact of longstanding experiences of systemic discrimination and colonization” (2013, 32). Thus, it is understandable that colonial stereotypes contribute to negative connotations of Indigenous experiences of pain and trauma (Comack 2012; Charlton and Hansen 2013; Silver 2013; TRC 2015; Hansen and Antsanen 2015). According to Adams, this partly explains why some Indigenous people deny their Indigenous identity or attempt to cope with hurtful and negative experiences by turning to alcohol and drugs (Adams 1975). Adams writes, “Schoolteachers do their share in fomenting hate among native people. By suppressing the native children, these authorities condition them to be quiet, unresponsive and quiet. The children are further conditioned to believe that they are powerless to change anything within the system and instead are directed towards the white middle class society, a goal that is sure to result in self-hate. A native child can never become a white adult” (Adams 1975, 172).

This passage by Adams suggests that the colonial education that Indigenous students receive encourages them to internalize racism and thus they are bound to develop deep feelings of shame about Indigenous people and culture. Hansen and Calihoo (2014) concur: “the residential schools, as well as imperialist public education, played an important role in the suppression of traditional teachings, language, and culture, which participants suggest is the cause of various social problems in their home communities” (2014, 100). The colonial education system helps to explain why Indigenous youth develop addictions. The Indian residential school experience has been described as one of the darkest moments in Indigenous history. “For children, life in these schools was lonely and alien. Buildings were poorly located, poorly built, and poorly maintained. The staff was limited in numbers, often poorly trained, and not adequately supervised,” wrote the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015, 3). The TRC maintains that “discipline was harsh, and daily life was highly regimented. Aboriginal languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed” (2015, 3). Indigenous children were taken from their homes and brought to live in residential schools. The last residential school in Canada was shut down in Saskatchewan in 1996. Its

recent operation may have contributed to higher levels of youth addiction in Saskatchewan, and a larger need for social outreach programs there compared to other provinces.

Addiction Recovery and Indigenous Experience

While there are many recovery programs functioning today, very few program graduates are able to sustain their sobriety (Brecher 1972; Charlton and Hansen 2017; Hansen, Booker and Charlton 2014; Mate 2008). How can we explain this?

The failure of addiction recovery programs is not new, as Brecher notes that “almost all [addicts] become readdicted and reimprisoned” and that “for most the process is repeated over and over again” (1972, 71). In order to explain the lack of positive results, we must recognize that most recovery programs have a particular completion/end date. Most, to varying levels, are aligned with the philosophy of a disease model—that is, the idea that addicts have some inherent deficiency and are indeed “powerless in the face of their addiction” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001, 59). The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) philosophy is different in some major ways from harm reduction ideology. As Llewellyn observes, “Harm reduction is a concept among healthcare workers that seeks to reduce the negative health consequences of drug abuse. The principles of harm reduction call for an acceptance of the fact that, good or bad, illicit drugs exist in today’s society. Instead of ignoring drug users, harm reduction practitioners actively work with them to promote safer use strategies and decrease the health damage of drug abuse. The effort of harm reduction is always helping, not judging, the individual” (Llewellyn 2011,78).

Instead of developing a philosophy similar to the AA approach, which stresses complete abstinence from alcohol and drugs, the harm reduction method encourages the alcohol and/or drug abuser to reduce risks associated with addiction and apply safer strategies. Yet, a successful addiction recovery process is often associated with complete sobriety from the early stages of recovery to later years. This creates a problem for those trying to overcome addiction by always comparing their progress, which may not be linear, to complete sobriety.

Sobriety is an aspect of addiction recovery that has been significant to recovery programs and is an essential part of the way in which those recovering from addictions measure their success. While addiction recovery is not impossible, it requires effort and inspiration. Rallying these things is no small task, as evidenced by the fact that many addiction recovery programs on the scene today are not very effective (Brecher 1972; Hansen, Booker, and Charlton 2014).

Addiction recovery programs may not be taking the proper approach, especially with those who have been surrounded by alcohol and drugs since childhood. As mentioned earlier, in terms of young Indigenous addicts, the intergenerational effects of residential schooling have often played a crucial role in the socially learned behaviour around drug and alcohol abuse, which was typically used as a coping mechanism by many victims of the residential schools. This means that the children and grandchildren of those generations are still dealing with the negative consequences of drug and alcohol abuse, such that sobriety may seem impossible both to achieve and maintain. This is especially hard for Indigenous youth who have fewer social supports and few ways to focus on cultural identity as a means of addictions recovery. There are limited Indigenous role models to look up to,

fewer authority figures who support them, and fewer family members who are drug- and alcohol-free (Champagne 2015; TRC 2015).

The family challenges and lack of role models facing the Indigenous community can also be tracked back in other ways to the effects of residential schools—both church- and government-run—that ruptured the lives of Indigenous people. The TRC notes that “the intergenerational impact of the residential school experience has left some families without strong role models for parenting” (2015, 144). Out of this, a state of “normlessness” emerges. According to Indigenous US scholar Duane Champagne, many Indigenous tribal members have weak commitments to both tribal culture and mainstream culture, and thus lack “direction or purpose, and are normless” (2015, 49). Champagne claims that contemporary Indigenous normlessness is the product of “historical traumatization, assimilative education and language policies, loss of traditional culture, and discouragement of family and kinship management of cultural and educational life” (2015, 50). He observes, “Normless Indian tribal members tend toward alcoholism, drugs, underachievement by American education standards, and are usually in trouble with the police and courts. The normless Indians tend to need extensive rehabilitation, serve time in jail, need education, and incur other costs to the tribe, U.S. government and the community in which they live. A main treatment for people in normless states who have turned to addictions is to expose them to traditional values and norms” (2015, 50). These kinds of social problems demonstrate the grim reality of colonized tribal members who had internalized the normless mentality. Today, Indigenous youth in the prairie provinces are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

However, Indigenous peoples must be credited with a capacity for resilience. In their discussion of elders’ teachings, Hansen and Antsanen note that Indigenous resilience “can be developed through Indigenous knowledge such as identifying and re-examining traditional teachings, which can be accomplished by discussions with Elders” (2016, 14). Hansen and Antsanen also maintain that Indigenous culture and language are crucial to the development of Indigenous resilience. They write, “Indigenous teachings enabled the people to live well in the past and they are what we should continue to practice in order to promote Indigenous resilience and wellbeing in the present day” (2016, 14). Such Indigenous teachings promote a positive identity in the sense that every community member is considered to have a purpose in life and is therefore an important part of the community. As Champagne reminds us, “One reason that Indigenous nations have survived the onslaught of 500 years of hostile colonialism is because Indigenous nations believe they have a moral and sacred reason for being” (Champagne 2015, 24).

One way in which SCYAP seeks to enhance the lives of marginalized youth is to provide them with cultural and social supports. Charlton and Hansen note that most of the youth at “SCYAP are Indigenous, many of whom take sanctuary within an environment that offers a non-toxic and stimulating place” (2016, 384). At the same time, SCYAP creates a place for urban Indigenous youth that accepts social justice ideology and Indigenous cultural expressions through art.

Indigenous peoples are aware that Western approaches to addiction recovery tend to undermine their worldviews, discounting their experiences, knowledge, and cultural

understandings of health and healing. This conscious awareness is built upon understanding the history of the colonization and forced assimilation of Indigenous people by nation states, which has had the following negative effects: “high rates of Canadian First Nations suicide, incarceration, alcoholism and other signs of social distress are strong indictments that Canadian government policies have not worked, and are in need of drastic change and rethinking” (Champagne 2015, 110). This growing realization that Indigenous peoples have suffered from oppressive policies and institutional discrimination speaks of the need to develop Indigenous models of healing.

Indigenous Models of Healing

Indigenous people tend to view alcohol and substance abuse in terms of spirituality. Thus, addiction recovery, from an Indigenous point of view, acknowledges the spiritual domain. Duran writes, “Traditional Native people have a way to describe alcohol and the conceptualization of alcohol that differs from non-Natives. Alcohol is perceived as a spiritual identity that has been destructive of Native American ways of life. The alcohol ‘spirits’ continually wage war within the spiritual arena and it is in the spiritual arena that the struggle continues” (1995, 139).

Spirituality is perhaps the most important dimension when it comes to healing trauma in the Indigenous world. Such acknowledgement of alcohol spirits is expressed by Indigenous elders who teach us that when people consume alcohol, their spirits leave them for four days. It is for this reason that some elders will advise those who consume alcohol not to enter the sweat lodge ceremony until four days have passed after they have had any alcohol to drink (Antsanen, & Hansen 2012; Hansen 2013; Hall et al. 2015; Michell 2015).

Unfortunately, when the spirit is gone—for those four days at a time—many people tend to feel depressed and lonely, and some elders teach us that feelings of depression increase with alcohol and drug usage. Such Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are important because they can help develop culturally appropriate programs. We know from various studies that addiction recovery programs that are recognized as successful with Indigenous clients are those that emphasize Indigenous knowledge, spirituality, cultural values, and methods that increase self-esteem (Champagne 2015; Green and Healy 2003; Hansen and Calihoo 2014).

Linden asserts that alcohol abuse among Indigenous people and their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system should be interpreted within “the structure of socio-economic relations between Aboriginal people and the dominant white society, rather than in some disease model or other individualistic-type explanation that ends up blaming the victim” (Linden 2016, 157–58). This passage by Linden challenges the notion that Indigenous youth are disproportionately suffering from chemical dependency due to some natural Indigenous weakness of mentality, culture, nation, environment, or character. Understood this way, the oppression of Indigenous peoples is grounded in the ideology of systemic discrimination and oppression.

Modern scholarly interpretations of Indigenous reality are rooted in the ideology of domination and oppression by colonial nations. According to Statistics Canada, the marginalization of Indigenous youth in Canadian society is documented in the following

ways: “a disproportionate number of youth entering the correctional system were Aboriginal ... In 2010/2011, Aboriginal female youth comprised 34% of all female youth in the correctional system” (2012, 7). These kinds of disparities demonstrate that a system of oppression and colonization is marginalizing Indigenous youth, who are incarcerated at high rates, with an increased risk for youth who are both Aboriginal and female.

Since racial discrimination does not adhere to just or fair procedures, it can ignore non-discriminatory practices and embrace conceptual notions like racism. Crimes are the same, whoever commits them; it is the interpretation of the crimes and the racial discourse that vary. Because Indigenous people are the colonized, justice officials exploit them further to what develops into imperial distortions of justice. For example, Siegel, Brown, and Hoffman claim that “Aboriginal people are more likely than whites to be incarcerated for committing the same crimes and are much less likely to be granted parole” (2013, 46). They observe that “some judges view many Aboriginal offenders as poor risks, considering them more likely to reoffend than white offenders. Yet, Aboriginal victims of crime receive less public concern and media attention than white victims” (Siegel, Brown, and Hoffman 2013, 46). The overrepresentations of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system are an indication of discrimination, and in various ways they are subjected to disproportionate incarceration.

The rise of Indigenous incarceration rates has led many scholars to believe in the existence of direct institutional discrimination. Ravelli and Weber, in their book *Exploring Sociology* (2010), draw a parallel between the experience of Indigenous people and this sort of discrimination. Direct institutional discrimination occurs when an “institution employs policies or practices that are discriminatory against a person or group in that they deny that person or group a right of freedom ... Canada’s residential school system is an example of direct institutional discrimination” (2010, 256). Many Western institutions are, to some extent, discriminatory, and this notion is reflected in the social, economic, and judicial disparities in the wider society. According to Hansen, “systemic discrimination, which had been reproduced since the start of European imperialism, became interconnected into Canadian institutions such as the criminal justice system, and that it remains today” (2015, 3). Since the colonization of Canada, institutional discrimination has been a major factor in marginalizing Indigenous peoples. Hansen argues that the “overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system is connected to economics; and this development is reflected in the prison industrial complex” (2015, 3). The prison industrial complex is based implicitly in the idea that marginalized groups are exploited as a means of generating revenue for the privileged. As Patricia Monture points out, “Aboriginal offenders are the commodities on which Canada’s justice system relies. If all Aboriginal offenders were released from custody tomorrow, prisons would be empty and forced to close. Justice personnel from parole officers to correctional workers to police officers would be laid off. The grave majority of any such fantasized layoffs would not affect employment in the Aboriginal community. As dramatic as the figures of over-representation of Aboriginal people [are] in the criminal justice system as clients, the under-representation of Aboriginal people as employees within any component of the justice system is equally notable” (1995, 1).

The criminal justice system is a reflection of the society from which oppressive inequalities tend to emanate. According to Hansen, colonization has shaped our institutions concerning justice, crime, and society; however, institutional discrimination against Indigenous people in the criminal justice system is hidden from view, “as the justice system does not have policies that directly discriminate against Indigenous offenders ... and [yet] we still have obvious incarceration disparities between Indigenous people compared with non-Indigenous people in the criminal justice system” (2015, 2). Brooks concurs that the “overrepresentation of poor and racialized people in the criminal justice system means that the law defines the behaviour of the marginalized as criminal and excuses the rich” (Brooks 2008, 57). On a regular basis, the marginalized in society are treated more harshly than the privileged by the criminal justice system. Let us consider a scenario in which the media reported a few intoxicated Indigenous people shouting profanities in public, and these few therefore gave a bad name to the entire Indigenous community. So, a few Indigenous people stigmatized the entire group. Such stereotyping does not happen to the dominant group. These situations and the authors feelings about them are shaped by the reality of our existence. In addition to discussing addiction recovery, this article is committed to exposing readers to the reality of urban Indigenous youth in the ways they see themselves, addictions recovery, and the world.

Theoretical Post-Colonial Approach

This study embraces a post-colonial theoretical approach to examining the social and cultural factors that lead urban Indigenous youth to recover from addictions. Ravelli and Webber describe post-colonial theory as “an approach that examines the ways in which the colonial past has shaped the social, political, and economic experiences of a colonized country” (2013, 266). Since Indigenous peoples in Canada have been colonized and there are socio-economic disparities between Indigenous people and the dominant group, a post-colonial approach is suitable for this study.

One way to think about decolonization is to listen to the voices of Indigenous people that have been silenced and marginalized through colonization. What is important is that urban Indigenous perspectives on addiction recovery be established with the goal of providing insights into how we can imagine and improve addiction recovery programs and practices in Canada. The most important tenet of this study is the theory of post-colonialism and, sometimes rather more clearly, the idea of decolonization. Smith notes that decolonization is “about recovering our own stories of the past ... centering our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith, 1999, 39). This research will advance our knowledge on how Indigenous youth understand addiction recovery.

Methodology

This study applied the tools of qualitative research, using ethnographic interviewing as the technique for data collection. Since this research deals with urban Indigenous youth, we

have developed the methodology to be culturally appropriate for Indigenous communities. Given these statements, urban Indigenous youth who have undergone an early addiction recovery experience were interviewed. Open-ended questions were used for data collection. From the findings, we discuss the early addiction recovery experience of urban Indigenous youth who used the services of SCYAP.

Creswell maintains that a qualitative inquiry means that “the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (1998, 15). The research methods that were incorporated into the process of data collection include open-ended interviewing, field notes, audiotaped dialogues, and general observations. The interviews were tape recorded with the interviewees’ consent, and ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan. All interviews were conducted in December of 2015 at SCYAP in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed through a thematic analysis wherein themes emerged through data interpretation. Stake advises that “there is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (1995, 71). The data was analyzed by identifying common responses and similar themes. We looked for ideas and themes in relation to how the interview subjects discussed addiction recovery. On the whole, the young people interviewed suggested that addiction recovery requires a conscious decision to be sober, a community of support, an acceptance of cultural differences, and alternative or complementary forms of healing, such as art. The knowledge the youth shared provides a model that could contribute to increased understanding of addiction recovery as it relates to Indigenous populations. Ten participants were interviewed, all of whom were members of SCYAP. Of those ten participants, five self-identified as First Nations, four as non-Indigenous, and one as Metis. In terms of the non-Indigenous involvement, it is important that SCYAP welcome all youth who are characterized as at-risk, and the non-Indigenous youth were included in the study because they grew up among Indigenous peoples. In addition, many Indigenous communities have a value system that does not exclude outsiders (Adams 2000; Champagne 2015). Since the non-Indigenous youth participants asked to contribute to the study we included them. We interviewed each participant for approximately one hour wherein each shared a story about their lives, experiences, and aspirations.

Presenting the Data

The primary goal of SCYAP is to provide social, economic, and educational support for urban youth through art. This has been accomplished in a few ways, including increasing social inclusion for those who find at SCYAP a refuge in a non-toxic environment—something that is much-needed to increase self-confidence in young people. It also allows them to develop skills that will prepare them better for the future. SCYAP’s actions also have other benefits, including supporting addiction recovery.

Reasons for Indigenous Youth to Recover from Addiction

The young Indigenous people to whom we spoke identified a conscious choice to improve their lives as a basic reason for their recovery. Participants suggested that this choice activated their addiction recovery by leading them to embrace a desire for a better life. SCYAP is all about providing youth with an opportunity to improve their lives. Winnie, for example, states that Indigenous youth want a better life. The participants believe that addictions decrease one's quality of life. The following statements reflect this theme of free will or a personal choice to quit:

I think [they want] a better life, they don't want to be in that lifestyle anymore. They want to try and make it better if they can try and see the damage that it's doing.

Winnie

Winnie perceives that young people have a desire to achieve addiction recovery because they are tired of the lifestyle. She also conveys that Indigenous youth need to put effort into recognizing their situations to see what damage they are causing, which Winnie discusses from direct experience.

I think getting in touch with their roots is really important because the people that I have met that aren't in touch with it are usually really well into their addictions. I really respect their culture and when they see First Nations people and Indigenous people actually involved in it [their culture] they seem a lot happier. That gives them a purpose, I feel like you need a purpose when you're battling an addiction.

Hope

Hope is a non-Indigenous youth and her response indicates that Indigenous youth who are not connected to their culture tend to live with addictions. She also believes that Indigenous youth who are exposed to traditional values and culture are happier than those who are not. Hope feels that connecting with culture will provide the Indigenous youth around her with a sense of direction or purpose, which is needed for addiction recovery.

I would think changing their lives [motivates them]; wanting a change.

Chris

Chris suggests that wanting to change a lifestyle from addiction to a nurturing, chemical free-life is a major stepping stone to addictions recovery.

I think it would be like family of some sort [that would motivate]. But then, they would need to do it for themselves too. They'd probably have to lose a lot and then have to realize [what they'd lost] to stop.

Chlarrisa

Chlarrisa expresses that if a person has lost enough, that person could be left with nothing more to lose, which suggests that when people are depleted, they should be ready for a conscious realization of their loss to spur them on to recover from addiction.

I think that they're going to have to get to that point [of wanting to recover] themselves. Whether it's sick of living the same way and, I guess, slowly killing themselves. I don't think anything can help them until they are ready to help themselves, like, yeah, even rehab centers and stuff. If you send a person there that doesn't want to recover then they're not going to recover, so I don't think anything can help people except for themselves, and [only] when they're ready to help themselves.

Bri

Bri believes that if one enters a recovery program when one is ready, the person will experience a positive difference in the way he or she recovers and heals. But before people can reach for that recovery, it is important to note that healing starts within the individual, not through others.

I hit rock bottom and decided that life really wasn't for me anymore. It basically, like, helped me change.

Brian

Brian hit rock bottom, so he wanted to change his life. Rock bottom is an undesirable place, especially when it is brought on directly by addictive and destructive behaviour. For Brian, the fall to rock bottom needed to occur in order for him to realize he needed to adapt, regroup, and recover from addiction.

It is clear that the participants commonly identified a conscious choice to change their lives as a reason behind their recovery, and this involves moving away from a lifestyle of addiction. For the participants, the connection between addiction recovery and a conscious choice to sober up is a basic foundation on which to begin addiction recovery. In the statements by Brian, Bri, and Winnie, for example, they suggest that no one can help heal another person of addiction until the addicted individual him- or herself wants to heal.

Most find it useful to have families and community involved in the addiction recovery process. One of the commonly held themes in this study is the importance of synergistic family and community support systems, which were seen by interviewees as important primary supports. This communal system is shown to be effective for stimulating addiction recovery by activating the support people need to cope with stressful situations. However, if the addict's family or community members are engaged in drug or alcohol addictions themselves, the participants expressed that the system becomes counterproductive, and prolongs the addictions lifestyle. The following statements express the belief that some kind of support system is an essential part of the addictions recovery process:

[Y]ou're going to need to talk to somebody to get it all out, why you need help, what you're addicted to. They can help you because maybe they went through the same thing.

Sam

Sam suggests that if people want to recover from addiction then they need a strong support system, or at least someone to talk with. The people who should be looked to for support are those who are not engaged in a lifestyle of addictions or unhealthy behaviours.

I think it's good to have, like, family support, but there's, like, conflicts between family members. I think it's good to have the community involved instead.

Melody

If the system of support is negative, which includes unhealthy familial conflicts, one will have to find support elsewhere. Perhaps the stress of negative influences brings with it more problems, and so the community can provide the support needed to assist in the recovery process.

It can be. It all depends on the youth, for me, family is a big thing, because they help me out. But community, not really, because when I'm in the community, people always want me to drink and stuff like that. But here and in school it's nice, because it takes up my time, and my family takes up a lot of my time too, so it's more time spent in the community with SCYAP and school than drinking and doing drugs with friend ... But I think it's better when the whole family can do it as a whole because, like, then when you see them get sober and, like, you're surrounded by all these drugs and alcoholics, you're more tempted to go back to that; that way of life and way of dealing with your problems. I think it's, like, important for, like, the whole family to learn to deal with their issues and, like, their emotions positively and not, like, doing some drugs and getting really drunk.

Lenny

Yes, big support systems. A lot of people just go back to it because they lose their support, whether it is someone moving away, losing your friends, or somebody dying, whatever. Support is, like, the biggest thing that anybody ever needs. People just need people to be there for them, and a lot of people in that area are probably co-dependent, so yeah, support would go a long way for them, I think.

Chris

I would think so [that family and community are important], because family is important and I don't know if they are going to be there for you through everything. It's just, like, a good support system, and I don't know, if your family is not like that then maybe you could help them, in a way.

Chlarissa

Yeah, I think that it's very important to have anything, maybe not necessarily family and friends, because I think that, for a lot of people, family and friends was kind of the issue. Whenever they're still living in the negative, unhealthy way, whether they're doing drugs or drinking, so, I mean, regardless of whether it's family or friends, or counsellors, or new friends, I think that it's very important to have those people during your recovery process because it's unrealistic to think that somebody can do it by themselves when they're dealing with drug and alcohol addiction.

Bri

The family and community dynamics identified by the participants interviewed suggest that family support and a positive environment can assist in the development of addictions recovery. However, if the family is involved in drugs and alcohol, that could contribute to the continued lifestyle of addiction, and therefore obstruct the recovery process.

Which was the most beneficial program for getting addicts out of that situation?

I would like to say a detox treatment centre would somewhat help but I'm not really going to do this. It didn't really help me; it just made everything worse ... I went in for, like, a month and a half and it didn't help at all. I got out and I was worse off than when I went in. Then I had more connections and more people that I knew, you know? With drugs or alcohol, I met, like, a lot, a bunch of alcoholics and drug addicts, and it got worse for, like, a couple months and I was like, "What was even the point of going there? ...It didn't help me. All they did was just sit around and talked about God and Christianity which, I am not a Christian of any sort, and, yeah. It was just a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics sitting around, hanging out, talking about how they get drunk and do drugs. Then after that I met a bunch of friends that were like, "Yeah we're going to stay sober," and as soon as I got out they're like, "Yeah, let's get drunk ... It didn't help at all ... Most people that I know that go through those programs, they always come out knowing more people, and then you say, "Oh yeah, let's stay sober together!" All of a sudden, a week later they're like, "Oh let's get really drunk and go do a bunch of coke or something." Yeah, it doesn't really help anyone. It's just like locking up a bunch of addicts together and expecting them to not do it.

Brian

In Brian's experience, as well as his brother's, addiction recovery programs were places where addicts could meet and socialize with other addicts, and after completing the program the addicts would have found new friends with whom to use alcohol and drugs, furthering their addiction. Negative contacts were created by networking with other addicts who continued with their addictive behaviour after their time in the program ended. In addition, Brian suggested that many programs currently in place (like NA and AA) are based on Christian views which he could not relate to because he is not Christian. Therefore, one could interpret that dominant views continue to alienate this population.

Which addiction recovery programs were most effective for Indigenous youth?

I don't know. I feel like AA meetings, sometimes they don't really help because you can't get one-on-one, you're always in a group full of people so maybe you don't want to share. I don't think it's really helpful, but I'm not sure. I think maybe a couple people get help, but not everybody.

Sam

Sam says that Alcoholics Anonymous does not always work because not everyone wants to share experiences with a group of people. Sam suggests that in some cases, a person would rather talk to someone in private and not in a group. However, she does suggest that the program may be beneficial for some people.

An art program and something that they can like, something they already know of or like, an idea like that.

Hope

Hope believes that art is very important for addiction recovery. She also implies that any sort of healthy hobby that can be transformed into a program that helps people stay away from alcohol or drugs would be beneficial for youth.

I think I would really love to see more programs that integrated recovery and spirituality together. Because we think there's really a strong tie between the two and I think, yeah it would be amazing to have an organization or some kind of program or group or something that focuses on recovery; but recovery through spiritual healing and spiritual growth and stuff like that. Because I think a lot of people that have addictions are spiritually broken and maybe don't have any kind of concept of spirituality. Something like that would be really helpful. I think that even something for myself that would have been very beneficial and yeah, like, youth groups... I've been in NA and AA meetings for years, so I think that a lot of people would utilize them if they were there, or if they knew about them. There's a lot. I mean, I love the counselors in the city, and so I don't think, like, more counselors, but just different [s] of things or different [s] of programs like SCYAP; just kind of a different take on recovery and healing.

Bri

Bri points out that programs that connect spirituality and recovery together would be very helpful for addiction recovery. The addiction recovery process is described as a healing process that helps improve one's spiritual domain, one of the many aspects of the human self, the others being physical, emotional, and intellectual. This more holistic approach to addiction recovery allowed Bri to think of "different" kinds of programs like SCYAP, Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that she had personal experience with, into which she felt that spirituality was something that could be better integrated.

What do Indigenous youth want to see happen in terms of sustaining their recovery?

A good environment in order to do that, positive people, and things like that, I guess.

Winnie

[M]aking sure you have support; people backing you up, making sure you're okay, always checking on you.

Sam

[H]aving different kinds of programs that are more long-term; still have support every step of the way.

Lennie

The above responses from Winnie, Sam, and Lennie indicate that a supportive environment is crucial to an addictions recovery journey. Various programs and a supportive environment would be complementary to the addiction recovery process, which is why these should be viewed as factors in recovery. Although a particular program is only going to be a small part of one's experience, one can find a community of support in programs such as SCYAP.

Identifying the Themes

In the table below, the factors that participants identified as promoting addiction as well as those promoting recovery are organized into themes.

TABLE 1. Factors that promote addiction and factors that promotes recovery

Factors that promote addiction	Factors that promote recovery
Family addictions	SCYAP
Family alcoholism	Belonging to a positive community
Associating with those who are using drugs and alcohol	Alcoholics Anonymous (generally)
A traumatic experience	Art programming
Loss of supports	Hitting rock bottom
Loss of a loved one	Indigenous culture and teachings
Lack of cultural identity	Positive family support
	Conscious choice to improve one's life
	Associating with positive people

The Significance of Community

The participants who attend SCYAP have experienced, or witnessed, addictions at some point in their lives, and they suggest that without a community of support, a person will have a difficult time recovering from addiction. SCYAP provides clients with the support they need to promote the recovery process. Having a community of support can help improve one's sense of belonging and also boost the self-esteem needed for recovery and healing. The clients at SCYAP have a common narrative with a specific ratio of social inclusion, a sense of belonging, and healing through art, all of which they show are important to addiction recovery.

Conclusions

This exploration of the early-life addiction recovery experience of urban Indigenous youth, told from their perspectives, at the Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Program (SCYAP)

discussed how the Indigenous youth participants interpret addictions recovery. This is both a narrative and an interpretation of challenging normative addiction recovery programs. Inherent in that interpretation is a sense of social inclusion, artistic expressions that emerge from being part of a community that accepts Indigenous teachings and ideologies, and the perspective of the urban Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. SCYAP is a humble but significant example of an organization that supports addictions recovery. It does this in a number of ways, but most importantly it promotes social inclusion of Indigenous youth, allowing these young people to improve their lives and giving them a sense of community. SCYAP is designed to address the needs of marginalized urban youth. It is important to note that those participants who grew up outside of Saskatoon, and had addiction experiences in other urban centers, generally expressed that SCYAP was a unique program and that they would have preferred to have a similar program available to them where they had been. The participants in this study recognize the significance of Indigenous traditions, art, culture, and history, and have hopes and aspirations for their futures. Indigenous youth will carry their aspirations into the future in ways that will inform their ideals and actions.

Recommendations

This study recommends that governments at all levels continue to provide support for programs designed to address the needs of marginalized urban youth. More specifically, SCYAP requires continued core funding to provide social, economic, and culturally appropriate support for marginalized urban youth. In addition, we recommend raising awareness of social programs concerning urban youth who benefit from art and social justice programs. This study recommends that national and provincial governments continue funding to social justice and addiction programs that are culturally sensitive in their approach to addiction recovery, like SCYAP, which have been proven to provide beneficial and successful recovery experiences to the clients they serve.

Supporting Agencies: University of Saskatchewan.

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