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Community Collaboration in Developing a Culturally Relevant Alcohol Abuse Early Intervention Program for First Nation Youth

By: M. Nancy Comeau
Sherry H. Stewart
Christopher Mushquash
David Wojcik
Cheryl Bartlett
Murdena Marshall
Jerry Young
Doreen Stevens

For more information contact: *M. Nancy Comeau at the Psychology Department, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 4J1. Email: ncomeau@dal.ca*

This paper details how researchers and community partners have combined results from quantitative and qualitative investigations to develop a program for preventing alcohol abuse in First Nation at-risk teens that are meaningful to the lives of these youth. This article focuses on the levels of theory and evidence which support the development of youth interventions. While this novel, innovative program attempts to nurture health and healing practices, work needs to be done at a level not often considered by academics: the “root” level or where you meet the client to be served before the level of crisis, considering youth development as an opportunity to support a healthy growth pathway. A metaphor can help convey the associated underlying meaning. Imagine a young person, with an inclination toward alcohol abuse, standing at the edge of a cliff. Interveners tend to grab the individual at the edge, if possible. In contrast, work at the “root” level considers youth who may be a mile away from that edge of the cliff.

The “root” level is a grounding level that encourages activities which speak to the creative Spirit. For example, arts, crafts, and puppetry can provide a re-vitalization of self-esteem important to achieving a sense of belonging and making a difference in one’s life. Some First Nation youth may lack a sense of identification or belonging. Root re-vitalization ultimately cultivates in First Nation young people a sense of pride in their own history, their own language and in themselves. The underlying assumption behind this research is that inclination toward alcohol abuse among First Nation youth can ultimately be reduced. The purpose of this project is to learn more about the drinking behaviour of First Nation youth at high personality risk of alcohol abuse.

Central features of this article include project aims and background of what this research is trying to achieve. Focus group activities, whereby a small number of youth provide their feedback and opinions about the issues and helpful processes, direct program facilitators and co-facilitators within the broad process of collaboration. The overall approach of this research is to work together with First Nation community partners to help prevent alcohol abuse by First Nation adolescents. In affiliation with the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Dalhousie University, and the CIHR-IAPH (Canadian Institutes of Health Research – Institute for Aboriginal Peoples' Health) funded "Integrative Health and Healing" project at the Cape Breton University (CBU), this research is an effort to create a new path of mutual trust and respect that should optimally allow Mi'kmaq communities and health/science researchers to walk together in order to promote improvement of mental health, particularly among Aboriginal young people.

Another aim of this research is to support the development and training of First Nation students with respect to health and healing issues of great concern to First Nation communities. To this end, it is important to understand that the research proposes to use early interventions predicated on the notion that Anxiety Sensitivity (AS), Hopelessness (H) and Sensation Seeking (SS) are three behavioural-trait risk markers for the development of substance misuse (Comeau, Stewart, Loba, & Theakston, 2004; Comeau, Stewart, & Loba, 2001; Conrod, Pihl, Stewart, & Dongier, 2000a; Stewart, Conrod, Marlatt, Comeau, Thrush, & Krank, 2005).

These traits are thought to reflect differential sensitivities to certain rewarding pharmacological effects of substances. For example, AS and SS youth are thought to be most sensitive to the anxiolytic (anxiety reducing) and psycho-stimulant (excitement reducing) properties of alcohol, respectively. If the interventions that focus on the underlying distinct motivational bases for alcohol misuse in AS, H, and SS youth, respectively, do result in decreased "risky" or heavy drinking, this project would provide further evidence of the importance of these distinct etiological pathways in alcohol misuse and abuse. ('Five drinks per occasion' is usually considered heavy drinking; Poulin & Wilbur, 2002). While the substance abuse literature supports a relationship between these pathways and drinking behaviour in teen drinkers from the majority culture (Comeau et al., 2001; Comeau, 2004; Comeau et al., 2005; Conrod & Stewart, in press; Stewart et al., in press) it is unknown to what degree this approach might be useful in Aboriginal youth.

Our investigation attempts to demonstrate attention to diversity and sensitivity to cultural issues that affect Mi'kmaq teens' drinking behaviours. Motivational theories of substance abuse variability generally propose that individual differences in personality reflect different susceptibility to certain reinforcing properties of drugs of abuse (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Conrod et al., 2000a). Certain personality factors (e.g., AS, H, and SS) have been associated with unique reasons or motives for alcohol use (Comeau et al., Comeau, 2004; Conrod, Stewart, Pihl, Côté, Fontaine, & Dongier, 2000b; Theakston, Stewart, Dawson, Knowlden, & Lehman, 2004; Stewart, & Devine, 2000; Stewart, Loughlin, & Rhyno, 2001).

Recent research suggests that these personality factors are associated with unique reasons or motives for alcohol use (Comeau et al., 2001; Comeau, 2004; Conrod et al., 2000b; Theakston et al., 2004; Stewart, & Devine, 2000; Stewart et al., 2001). Quantitative research provides an empirical case for targeting personality factors as a means for reducing "risky" drinking motives in adolescents (Cooper, 1994). Coping, conformity, and enhancement motives are considered "risky" due to their established associations with heavy drinking and/or drinking related problems in majority culture youth (Comeau et al., 2001; Cooper, 1994) and adults (Conrod, Pihl, & Vassileva, 1998; Conrod et al., 2000b; Stewart, Karp, Pihl, & Peterson, 1997; Stewart et al., 2001; Stewart & Zeitlin, 1995). It is important to acknowledge that reasons for drinking differ among First Nation Youth and may not be the same as the majority culture. Thus, this research investigates associations between personality factors and drinking motives as applied to First Nation teens' alcohol use.

As co-authors, we share a concern about the interests of Mi'kmaq youth and what kinds of research methods will help illuminate those interests. Thus, we use the apparatus of quantitative and qualitative research to pursue understanding of drinking patterns, contexts, and consequences particular to at-risk First Nation adolescents. More specifically, there is a need to investigate whether personality factors matter in this cultural group and to further explore, through qualitative interviews with Mi'kmaq First Nation youth, to see how

the relations between personality factors and drinking motives manifest in this cultural group. This information can then be used to modify an existing, effective and personally-meaningful set of interventions (see Substance Abuse Prevention Network Program, 2003) for preventing alcohol misuse in high personality risk adolescents (Comeau, 2004; Conrod, Stewart, Comeau, & Maclean, 2005; Stewart et al., in press) to make them culturally appropriate for this group.

School-based partners and members of the RCMP Aboriginal & Diversity Policing Services, "H" Division, have indicated a need for culturally relevant, school-based programming that addresses problems of alcohol abuse and related mental health issues. Community and research partners acknowledge the disproportionately high levels of alcohol and other drug abuse and its associated suffering and tragedy among Aboriginal peoples in Canada, especially youth (cf. Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2001). The abuse of alcohol and other substances is consistently reported as a major problem in Aboriginal communities (Chandler, Lalonde, & Sokol, 2003; The Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003), and these communities are well aware of the negative effect that alcohol has on the health of their people. For example, the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (Statistics Canada, 1993) found that 73% of First Nations respondents reported that alcohol was a problem in their communities. This research uses a novel methodology (Comeau, 2004; Stewart et al., 2005) to develop of a set of innovative, culturally relevant, early interventions for First Nation teens at high personality risk for alcohol abuse. While this program targets alcohol abuse, it might also be effective for substance abuse more generally.

Method

This research involves a three study empirical investigation that uses quantitative and qualitative research methods within a context of First Nation community collaboration. Together, the three empirical studies were designed to add insight into our understanding of certain groups of at-risk First Nation teens' relationships with alcohol. Those involved in the research leading up to program development include Dr. Patricia Conrod (National Addiction Center, Institute of

Psychiatry, London, U.K.) and Pamela Collins, Dr. Sherry Stewart and Dr. Nancy Comeau, (Psychology Department, Dalhousie University, N.S., Canada). School and community partners at preliminary planning stages include: from Indian Brook Mi'kmaq First Nation community: Father Tom Kurudeepen and former School Principal, Jerry Young; and from Eskasoni Mi'kmaq First Nation Community: High School Principal, John Googoo and former RCMP detachment Staff Sergeant, John Ryan and S/Sgt. Jeffrey Christie.

Study 1 investigated associations between three personality factors (AS, H, and SS) and drinking motives using four categories of substance use motivations as applied to First Nation teens' use of alcohol (Comeu et al., 2001). In the first study, we expected to discover whether personality factors matter in this cultural group. Study 2 asks how First Nation teens at particular risk of alcohol abuse understand their relationships with alcohol. Three groups of drinkers were recruited through the screening sample to participate in qualitative semi-structured interviews: those with high AS, H and SS. Interviews were conducted with AS, H, and SS Mi'kmaq First Nation adolescents at particular risk of alcohol abuse by virtue of these specific personality factors associated with heavy drinking and alcohol problems. In the second study, we expected that open-ended, semi-structured interviews would yield results that enrich our understanding beyond that achieved with quantitative measures on the motives underlying alcohol use behaviour in AS, H, and SS First Nation adolescents.

After completing these two investigations, we tailored the development of personality-matched, motive-specific brief interventions to meet at-risk adolescents' needs by basing stories and images in the intervention manuals on these combined multi-method findings. The set of interventions comprise our culturally-relevant program entitled, "Nemi'simk, Seeing Oneself." This title was suggested by Darren Stevens, Mi'kmaq First Nation guidance counsellor at Eskasoni High School. The name conveys a journey inward toward personal gifts of the Spirit and the power of self-healing. The particular techniques used in the interventions were cognitive-behavioural in nature and were more developmentally

appropriate versions of techniques previously demonstrated effective in the treatment of non-Aboriginal youth (Comeau, 2004; Stewart et al., 2005) and adult substance abusers (Conrod et al., 2000b).

Traditionally, Aboriginal peoples recognized personality or human nature as having four aspects: emotional, physical, mental and spiritual (Sproule, 1994). By mindfully keeping these four aspects in harmony, humans live in harmony with Creation. Kenny (2004) presents a holistic model for Aboriginal research which includes honoring the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of human beings. This view was similar to the original approach in previously proven effective personality-matched, motive specific early interventions with youth in the majority culture (Comeau, 2004; Stewart et al., 2005). In these interventions, aspects of personality were divided into physical sensations, thoughts and actions. With the assistance of Kenneth Paul, Maliseet First Nation, and Murdena Marshall, Mi'kmaq First Nation, as members of our manuals review panel, the current set of interventions mapped these concepts onto the traditional Aboriginal concepts to make the interventions more culturally relevant (e.g., by including a Spirit dimension). Adolescents who participate in the program learn skills to deal with everyday life situations from this traditional perspective.

The "Nemi'simk, Seeing Oneself" program was produced in handbook form including a manual for the facilitators and a student self-healing booklet for the participants that is a subset of the material found in the facilitator manual. The facilitator manuals include the participant self-healing booklet plus instructions for the facilitators. The manuals and booklets make use of the scenarios informed by the results of our qualitative study. Several of the scenarios captured the complexities of First Nation teens' social and personal relationships with alcohol as Mi'kmaq youth defined these relations. Some scenarios focus on maladaptive coping strategies in an attempt to document the interviewed teens' diverse experiences with and contexts of alcohol use.

Most First Nation youth are artists in some sense. The manuals and self-healing booklets also contain creative

images from Mi'kmaq teen artists which were based on stories from qualitative interviews conducted in Study 2. The artists were provided with concepts related to the Medicine Wheel as a creative tool to organize thoughts and images to convey knowledge gained through experience, since Mi'kmaq First Nation people are non-linear thinkers. This original artwork helps bridge Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal understandings through the use of a holistic form that includes the significance of colour in Aboriginal literacy (see Ningwakwe Priscilla George, 2003).

Since artwork of this form can represent the Mi'kmaq concepts of mese'k (wholeness), sa'se'wika'sik (change) and tetpaqjoqtesk (balance), it is used to represent the spiritual response to stories generated from one-to-one interviews with First Nation teens.

With the support of school administrators and teachers, original artwork was completed by Eskasoni Mi'kmaq First Nation High School students: Nikkita Dennis, Dale Andrew Poulette, and Riki Lee Dawson; and Indian Brook Mi'kmaq First Nation High School students: Janine Julian and Roddie Gould. First Nation community partners also involved in the development of materials used in the intervention sessions include undergraduate Mi'kmaq students in the Integrative Science degree program (CBU).

Finally, the upcoming outcome evaluation (Study 3) will ask how these tailored alcohol abuse brief early interventions work for at-risk First Nation teens. These interventions will be tested in an open trial study design with First Nation students from 4 high schools in two Mi'kmaq First Nation communities in Nova Scotia in April 2005.

Results

In our first (quantitative) study, we investigated associations between personality factors and drinking motives using Cooper's (1994) categories of alcohol use motivations as applied to Mi'kmaq teens' use of alcohol (Comeau et al., 2001). Results indicated a distinction between three particular pathways of personality factors that increase the likelihood that a young person will

consume alcohol for specific maladaptive drinking motives (enhancement, coping, and conformity; Cooper, 1994) that in turn put a young person at risk for alcohol problems. Overall, findings supported differential pathways of anxiety sensitivity (AS) to conformity motives, hopelessness (H) to coping drinking motives, and sensation seeking (SS) to enhancement motives (see Stewart, English, Comeau, 2005).

Qualitative interviews with Mi'kmaq youth are necessary to determine the ways that personality risk and alcohol use relations surface in this cultural group. A second (qualitative) investigation further enlisted the engagement of Mi'kmaq youth at high personality risk for alcohol abuse (i.e., AS, H, or SS). Results of interviews investigating Mi'kmaq First Nation teens' motives for alcohol use, alcohol use contexts, and perceived relations of personality to drinking behaviour were consistent with and substantially extended our previous questionnaire-based (quantitative) study findings. For example, AS teens reported appreciating alcohol because drinking helped them feel less anxiety about fitting in with others in social situations. There was a strong theme of negative affect reduction in the H youth with teens reportedly drinking to help reduce their feelings of sadness about other immediate concerns in their lives. A predominant theme of positive affect enhancement was evident in terms of SS teens' specific motives for drinking.

In addition, the role of the physical, social, and economic environments in connection with alcohol use was apparent in the interviews in culturally-specific ways. Important issues such as First Nations teens' strength, agency and resistance to sexual exploitation, racial discrimination, and threat of violence surfaced in stories of Mi'kmaq adolescents' relationships with alcohol and their own conceptualizations about alcohol use in a social context. Such stresses as produced by powerlessness appear associated with some teens' reasons for drinking. Results point to the significance of underlying social conditions as well as psychological underpinnings of alcohol use. Effectively addressing these issues might be important in preventative and early interventions in this population.

Outcome Evaluation

First Nation teens at high personality risk of alcohol abuse were invited to participate in the "Nemi'simk, Seeing Oneself" program. Delivery of the interventions involved trained guidance counsellors at Mi'kmaq First Nations' schools as program facilitators and trained members of the RCMP Aboriginal & Diversity Policing Services "H" Division, as co-facilitators. Program facilitators at the Indian Brook First Nation site include Jerry Young and Janice MacKenzie; facilitators at the Eskasoni First Nation site include Doreen Stevens and Darren Stevens. Co-facilitators include RCMP Constables Ron Lamb, Everett Joe, Lana Bernard, Darren Sylvester, Debbie Maloney, Steve Gloade, and Walter Denny.

After implementing this new program in an open trial with a group of high personality-risk Aboriginal teen drinkers, we conducted a focus group with the facilitators and co-facilitators to get their perspectives on what was working and what needed changing about the interventions and manuals. Focus group discussion highlighted the importance of taking into account community context, community history and participating school dynamics – all factors which can influence program delivery. It was recommended that the program be extended from 2 x 90-minute sessions to include 4 x 45 minute sessions to allow for flexibility of school schedules and retain student interest over-time. Facilitators and co-facilitators also recommended the participating students have the option of continuing to meet as a group following program delivery to assist with ongoing student support. This would be difficult to test in a controlled trial as the length of service delivery needs to be controlled in research; however, research needs to take up the challenge of rigorous evaluation within real-life practice. Monitoring of the content of such ongoing student support sessions would need to be measured and considered in assessing the program's effectiveness.

With respect to cultural relevance, the Medicine Wheel was regarded as an important and appropriate learning tool. In terms of working within the First Nation School system, facilitators and co-facilitators strongly recommended the "Nemi'simk, Seeing Oneself" (2004)

program continue in participating communities and that forthcoming student focus group evaluation, along with quantitative outcome results, guide potential program revision and future delivery. In general, two key learnings arose from researchers and community partners through this process of collaboration: first, to build trust, it is necessary to acknowledge and respect the diversity within First Nation communities; and second, this innovative initiative presents a valuable, culturally relevant option at the school level to assist with the prevention of alcohol abuse among First Nation youth. One commonly held belief is the promise of prevention.

Two First Nation graduate students (Doreen Stevens and Christopher Mushquash) will be participating in the outcome evaluation processes connected with the project. An important forum for presenting research findings will be oral presentations that are holistic in nature, i.e., presentations that honor past, present, and future and honor the interconnectedness of all things (cf. Kenny, 2004). Reflecting the deep value of Elders within Aboriginal communities, and the Traditional Knowledge of which these Elders are the keepers, our research is arranged to encourage meaningful participation by Mi'kmaq Elders. Elders are able to help create the desired multigenerational, community wide approach to facilitating and actively promoting knowledge dissemination in the Aboriginal academic and health research communities.

Every effort will be made to disseminate our project findings broadly, even to those who were not actual research participants.

Health is among the broad spectrum of policy implications that researchers address from Indigenous perspectives (Kenny, 2004). Assuming future controlled trials research establishes this set of interventions as effective, this program should optimally open avenues for school-based, substance abuse policy and procedure for innovative student assistance mechanisms while also strengthening partnerships among those First Nation community stakeholders with youth as their mandate.

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Prior to program delivery, facilitator manuals and student self-healing booklets were reviewed for cultural relevance, therapeutic content, and developmental-sensitivity by a panel consisting of Murdena Marshall, Mi'kmaq First Nation, Kenneth Paul, Maliseet First Nation, Dr. Wade Juneck, Dr. Elizabeth McLaughlin, Dr. Susan Buffett-Jerrott, Dr. Patrick McGrath, Dr. John Jacono, Brenda Jacono, Dr. Cheryl Bartlett, and RCMP Inspector David Wojcik. We are deeply grateful to each panel member for sharing their expertise and investing valuable time.

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About the Authors

M. Nancy Comeau, Ph.D., Sherry H. Stewart, Ph.D., Christopher Mushquash

Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

David Wojcik, LL.B.

Officer in Charge, Aboriginal & Diversity Policing Services, "H" Division, Nova Scotia, Canada

Cheryl Bartlett, Ph. D.

Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science, University College of Cape Breton, Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada

Murdena Marshall

Elder & Associate Professor (retired), Mi'kmaq Studies, University College of Cape Breton, Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia Canada

Jerry Young, SWC

Guidance Counsellor, Indian Brook School, Indian Brook Mi'kmaq First Nation, Indian Brook, Nova Scotia, Canada

Doreen Stevens

Guidance Counsellor, Unama'ki Training & Education Centre, Eskasoni Mi'kmaq First Nation, Eskasoni Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada

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