The creation of the *expected* Aboriginal woman drug offender in Canada: Exploring relations between victimization, punishment, and cultural identity

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Abstract

This article illustrates how the Aboriginal female drug user is responded to as an expected offender based on the intersection of her gender, race, and class. Drawing on the findings of a national Canadian study documenting the lived experiences of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit female drug users, we argue that the strengthening of cultural identity can potentially disrupt this expected status at both the individual and social system levels. Within the framework of critical victimology, the challenge then becomes to translate this understanding into praxis. In response, we suggest advancing women's agency at the individual level in the face of disempowering images and practices related to the offender, the victim, and Aboriginality. For change at the system level, we return to Christie's notion of the need to dismantle the stereotypical construction of the Aboriginal female drug user. We illustrate both levels of change with an innovative form of knowledge sharing, which aims to evoke transformation with respect to individual and socially constructed conceptualizations of identity.

Keywords

criminalization; cultural identity; drug offender; punishment; victimology

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Nils Christie (1986a) theorized the notion of the 'ideal victim' and the 'ideal offender'. Christie (1986b) and others (Rock, 2004) have since established how these ideals legitimate the experiences of some individuals and dismiss those of others at both the individual and social system levels. Pervasive within social discourse, notions of the ideal victim and offender identities serve as a form of social control (Balfour, 2008; Chesney-Lind, 2002) and are constituted along gender, race, and class divisions (Comack, 1999; Kilty and Fabian, 2010). The field of critical victimology cautions, however, that these categories are highly malleable and responsive to historical and cultural contexts. Instead, critical victimology encourages us to 'include the "hidden" victims of crime in its analysis and [to] consider and highlight the role of the state in

perpetuating inequalities in the “production of victims” (Cochrane and Melville, 2004: 111). Acknowledging this, limited attention has been paid to the intersections of the ideal victim and offender identities on the lived experience of individuals that embody the derogative side (woman, racialized, poor) of all three divisions – gender, race, and class.

We begin this article by situating the Aboriginal¹ woman drug user in Canada as the ‘expected offender’ based on the intersection of her gender, race, and class and by illustrating how given this expectation, she is conceptualized as deserving of punishment. This particular woman is antithetical to the Western ideal victim identity, as she is non-white and often poor. We suggest that strengthening Aboriginal women’s cultural identity can potentially disrupt this expected identity at both the individual and social system levels. To do this, it is imperative to understand how women see themselves – as a victim, a drug offender, and an Aboriginal woman. Likewise, it is important to gain an understanding of whether, and how, they interpret themselves as deserving of punishment.

The making of the ‘iniquitous’ Aboriginal woman drug offender

Smolej (2010: 70) suggests that we do not have a clear understanding of ‘where and how the concept of the ideal victim is generated in our Western societies’. It follows that it is somewhat futile to document the harmful outcomes of a constructed identity without fully comprehending its aetiology. Historically, scholarly and government literature and practice constructed a negative and harmful identity of Aboriginal women as deserving of punishment and undeserving of protection (Amnesty International, 2009; Comack and Balfour, 2004; Razack, 2000). For example, maximum-security prisoners were excluded from the implementation of reforms proposed in *Creating Choices*,² the disproportionate majority of whom were Aboriginal. More recently, we learned that Aboriginal women are more likely than their white counterparts to be confined in segregation, to be in maximum security for longer periods of time and, before its repeal in May 2011, to be on the strict management protocol designed for problem offenders (Acoby, 2011). In short, Aboriginal women, especially those who transgress traditional notions of femininity by engaging in criminal activity and/or drug use, do not make up Christie’s (1986a) notion of the ideal victim (Kilty and Fabian, 2010; Razack, 2000). Christie (1986a: 18–19) states:

By ‘ideal victim’ I have instead in mind a person or a category of individuals who —when hit by crime—most readily are given complete and legitimate status of being a victim. The ideal victim is, in my use of the term, a sort of public status of the same type and level of abstraction as that for example of a ‘hero’ or a ‘traitor.’

¹Aboriginal peoples is a collective term for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003). The Constitution Act of 1982 identifies three Aboriginal groups: Indians (First Nations), Inuit and Métis. First Nations generally applies to both Status Indians (recognized under the Indian Act by the Government of Canada and entitled to certain rights and benefits under the law), and Non-Status Indians (not recognized under the Indian Act for whatever reason, such as status cannot be proven or status rights have been lost). Inuit are the Aboriginal people of Arctic Canada. The Indian Act does not apply to Inuit; however, in 1939 the Supreme Court of Canada interpreted the federal government’s power to make laws affecting “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians” as extending to Inuit. Métis are people with mixed First Nations and European ancestry who identify themselves as Métis’ (Dell and Lyons, 2007: 3).

²The Correctional Services of Canada (1990) federal policy document for women’s corrections, *Creating Choices*, proposed the construction of four regional facilities and an Aboriginal healing lodge. It recommended the development of women-centred correctional programs and the establishment of a community integration strategy. Like reports before it, it urged the closure of the Prison for Women.

It is so by at least five attributes: (1) the victim is weak. Sick, old or very young people are particularly well suited as ideal victims. (2) The victim was carrying out a *respectable project* [emphasis added]. (3) She was where she could not possibly be blamed for being—in the street during the daytime. (4) The offender was big and bad. (5) The offender was unknown and in no personal relationship to her.

Christie's (1986a) discussion roots victimization in harm inflicted by one party against another. In this light, Aboriginal women who use drugs are excluded a status as victims because they are imposing harm on themselves. Problematically, and as a result of the criminalization of drug use (not what Christie would argue is a respectable project), Aboriginal women who use drugs are characterized as offenders – a socially constructed identity laden with stigma and notions of dangerousness (see Bruckert and Hannem, in press). However, conceptualizations of victim and offender are neither static nor universal (Balfour, 2008; Fattah, 1992).

The ideal offender and the ideal victim are situated within parenthetical understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman in Western societies. In our longstanding patriarchal culture, women are often conceptualized as vulnerable, innocent, fearful, and preyed upon, while men are characterized as strong protectors, but also as those who prey upon others (Gotell, 2009; Stanko, 1997). Similarly, the victim is traditionally identified as a white woman, while the perpetrator is often racialized as a visible minority man (Doran, 2002; Jiwani, 2002; Razack, 2000). We are bombarded by media coverage of this very image, which as Christie (1986a) suggests only legitimizes these gendered and racialized constructions of ideal victim and offender statuses. For example, in order to secure a conviction in a sexual assault trial, the victim must often be a white woman characterized as innocent, vulnerable, and weak (Doe, 2004; Razack, 2000; Tsenin, 2000). In the same vein, critical feminist scholars have long argued that sex workers are rarely considered victims of sexual assault and are frequently perceived as deserving of their fate (Bruckert, 2002; Gotell, 2009; Razack, 2000); this is often exacerbated when the women are Aboriginal and drug users (Lowman, 2000; Razack, 2000). State responses to the victimization of Aboriginal women generally and drug users specifically often fail to recognize them as legitimate, let alone ideal victims, in spite of their lengthy histories of intersecting trauma and victimization. By decontextualizing victimhood, it becomes easier to accept attributions of responsibility for individual victimization. As Gotell's (2009) recent work on neoliberal victimhood demonstrates, the victim is increasingly becoming degendered and deracialized through state efforts to responsibilize the rational subject – to the point where she is constructed as inviting (through irresponsible actions, behaviours, or presentation) or at least participating in her own victimization.

Histories of victimization

Aboriginal women are disproportionately affected by family violence, sexual harassment, inequality, discrimination, and poverty in Canada, which adversely impacts their health and lives and those of their children, families, and communities (Boyer, 2006; Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2002). On almost every socio-economic and health indicator, Aboriginal women do comparatively worse than non-Aboriginal women in Canada (Beavon

and Cooke, 2003: 61). A report by the Canadian government documents that violence-related mortality is five times higher for young First Nations women than for other women in Canada (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). Further, Amnesty International (2009: 2) reports that Aboriginal women's experience of violence in Canada is the result of 'widespread and entrenched racism, poverty and marginalization [which are] critical factors exposing Indigenous women to a heightened risk of violence while denying them adequate protection by police and government services'. The history of state-imposed colonization has set the stage for Aboriginal women's lived experiences of victimization in Canadian society today.

The oppression of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is rooted in centuries of despotic government actions. The devastating relationship between the historical control of Aboriginal peoples and their current disadvantaged position is well documented (Dua, 1999; LaPrairie, 1995; Reasons and Pavlich, 1995). Not as well established are explanations of the impact of historical oppression as it relates to Aboriginal women and their coming into conflict with the law (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003). We do know, however, that the effects of violence and colonization impact Aboriginal women's lives in a multiplicity of ways, including their criminalization (Monture-Angus, 1999: 78), as research suggests that the 'most common pathways to crime involve survival efforts that result from abuse, poverty, and substance abuse' (Bloom et al., 2003: 8; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003).

Subsequently, the stigmatization of women who use drugs is highly racialized. The intersection of race, class, and gender does not simply magnify these effects but actually collides to produce distinctive outcomes for racialized subjects, namely, their over-representation in the criminal justice system. In comparison to non-Aboriginal women, Aboriginal women are disproportionately policed, charged, convicted, and sentenced to time in prison for their drug use (Comack and Balfour, 2004). Similarly, Boyd (2004) discusses the racialization of the 1980s 'crack scare' that largely took place in the United States and produced a new cultural icon to fear – the black urban crack mother who sacrifices her fetus's health and children's well-being for the new drug of choice. These effects take place within the culture produced by the war on drugs that Boyd (1999; 2004), among others (Reinarman, 2001), situate as a global effort to police and govern populations historically deemed dangerous or risky by society's elites. Aboriginal and post-colonial scholars have pointed to incarceration as the new residential school, producing similar effects of cultural dislocation and genocide, as well as segregation (Monture-Angus 1999; Smith and Ross, 2004).

It should be no surprise, then, that Aboriginal women victims of violence do not fit with Christie's conceptualization of the ideal victim (Dell, 2001; Razack, 2000), which is imbued with racist and classist notions of who is socially accepted as a victim in a patriarchal and predominantly white society. This means that Aboriginal women who use drugs experience a double negation. They are not accepted as victims because their drug use is seen as a form of self-harm for which the individual is held responsible (Kilty, 2008), and they are also denied a status as victims of other forms of physical and sexual abuse that occur alongside drug use, as evidenced in the lack of response by the state.³ A clear example is the number

of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, whose disappearances and murders largely go unnoticed by law enforcement. In fact, Amnesty International (2009: 12) claims that measures to end discrimination and violence against Indigenous women have been 'piecemeal at best' in Canada. It is clear that Indigenous women are policed rather than protected, which denotes an extraordinary difference between the respective constructions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women drug users as those who are risky and deserving of punishment and those who are misguided and in need of assistance.

The making of contemporary state sanctioned victimization

Historically, Aboriginal peoples were subject to processes of colonization as a state measure to secure land and to control and punish resisters; however, contemporary processes of colonization take their shape by way of criminalization. Since social location influences how state institutions respond to victims, Aboriginal women are more easily identified as deserving victims (Kilty and Fabian, 2010), and more so, as offenders deserving of punishment (Comack and Balfour, 2004). As a result, Aboriginal women become the expected offender with experiences of violence constituting a normalized part of their lives. Moreover, there exists a social and institutional willingness to label Aboriginal women as offenders and thus to punish them, as evidenced by their over-incarceration and enhanced security level classifications within federal and provincial correctional institutions (Acoby, 2011; Hannah-Moffat, 2004; Monture-Angus, 2000). To illustrate, Balfour (2008: 102-3) notes the resistance of some defence lawyers to enact Bill C-412⁴ with respect to their Aboriginal women clients:

... the spiralling rates of imprisonment for Aboriginal women seem to indicate that the legal category of Aboriginal offender has been closed off to women. The strategies of lawyers appear to be structured by squaw narratives rather than the subversive stories of colonialism that reveal the intersections between poverty, substance abuse, illiteracy, sexual violence, overcrowding, patriarchy, and women's own violence.

Denial of special consideration for Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system reflects an increasing state and public acceptance of intolerant stereotypes about Aboriginal women as offenders (Carter, 2002; Hannah-Moffat and Maurutto, 2010; Monture-Angus, 1999). Dell (2001; Dell et al., 2009) documents how Aboriginal women are unfairly stigmatized within the justice system and consequently face misunderstanding, neglect, and misrepresentation in the courtroom. In recognition of the effects of these labels on the execution of justice, the Canadian Human Rights Commission⁵ (2003: 21) includes as its guiding principle: '[E]quality is based on the real needs and identities of federally sentenced women, not on stereotypes, perceptions or generalizations'.

³This is an important point to which we return in the second empirical half of this article.

⁴With the goal of reducing provincial and territorial incarceration, Bill C-41 created a new sentencing disposition that was available to courts for low-risk offenders sentenced to less than two years. In place of serving a sentence of imprisonment, it was possible for the sentence to be served under community supervision. For example, alternatives to incarceration for low-risk offenders include victim restitution and community service orders. Alternatives to incarceration for First Nations and Métis adhere to the principle of restorative justice and include circle sentencing and family group conferencing.

⁵The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) investigated systemic discrimination in correctional services for federally sentenced women in Canada.

Getting tough on crime; getting tough on women

It is well established that women who come into contact with the criminal justice system are commonly victims of childhood and adult sexual and physical abuse, violence, and neglect (Fillmore and Dell, 2001). In fact, several studies report that women's experiences of victimization appear to increase the likelihood of their involvement in crime (Katz, 2000). Balfour (2008: 116) suggests that '[o]ne strategy [forward] may be ... to reconsider the *victimization–criminalization continuum* in the context of colonial and gendered structural conditions'. Although the influential role of violence and trauma in the lives of women involved in the criminal justice system is increasingly recognized, especially among women charged with drug-related crimes, there still exist multiple examples of how it is ignored. For example, Chesney-Lind (2002) examines how women and girls suffer unintentional consequences of mandatory arrest policies for violent crimes, which fail to account for their use of self-defence.

The increasingly conservative law and order agenda in Canada has resulted in the further criminalization of disenfranchised women. Although women remain overwhelmingly convicted of status offences, they are the fastest growing component of both provincial and federal prison populations (Kilroy and Pate, 2011). In Saskatchewan, for example, the provincial jail was built for a maximum of 85 prisoners, but its 2010 capacity fluctuated between 130 and 150 women (Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan, 2010). At both the federal and provincial levels, incarcerated women are disproportionately victims of violence, poor, undereducated, single mothers, and Aboriginal (Comack and Balfour, 2004; Balfour and Comack, 2006). The increased criminalization of Aboriginal women is particularly true for drug offences. This is most evident with the recent introduction of a mandatory minimum sentences bill for drug offences, which limits judicial discretion⁶ even though research on the US experience shows this approach to be highly ineffective and costly on both economic and social levels (Christie, 2000; Reinerman, 2001).

Within the North American war on drugs, women drug offenders are punished for transgressing traditional ideals of womanhood, which simultaneously emphasize idealized notions of motherhood (Boyd, 1999; 2004; Kilty, 2008). Not only are women drug offenders increasingly portrayed as non-victims, they are also portrayed as victimizing their children, and thus as morally objectionable (Boyd, 1999; 2004; Boyd and Marcellus, 2007). This is evident in the media, law, and social policies and ranges from newspaper portrayals blaming 'bad' mothers for raising their children and being pregnant in methamphetamine labs (Kolbi-Molinas, 2010), to women being charged with murder and child abuse due to cocaine use during pregnancy (Boyd, 1999; 2004; Boyd and Marcellus, 2007; Smith, 2008) to injection drug users not accessing health care for fear of losing custody of their children (Crowe-Salazar, 2010). The impact of negative attitudes toward Aboriginal women, and specifically those who are involved in drugs, is evident in child apprehension statistics; one out of every 10 First Nations children in Canada is placed in care, compared with 1 out of every 200 non-First Nations children (Assembly of First Nations, 2007). Not surprisingly, Aboriginal

⁶This Bill is one of more than a dozen introduced by Canada's newly elected conservative majority government as 'tough on crime' omnibus legislation.

women fear the apprehension of their children, and hide their injection drug use to maintain custody of their children (Stadnyk et al., 2007: 47).

The ongoing prohibition of drugs is couched in the rhetoric of securing societal protection, but it actually reinforces essentialized constructions of woman/motherhood. For Aboriginal women who use drugs, this results in a form of state sanctioned victimization via criminalization that punishes them for failing to be ideal women and mothers. This process erases their status as victims of ongoing cultural and social oppression and contributes to an environment reinforcing their personal histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Critical victimology: Dismantling the construction of the *expected* Aboriginal woman drug offender

The emergence of the sub-discipline of victimology in the 1980s generated much discussion of victims' rights and their exclusion from contemporary criminal justice systems that are predominantly offender-focused. This movement coincided with growing Western conservative 'get tough on crime' agendas that used the concept of victims' rights to justify the increasingly punitive turn in corrections (Fattah, 1992; Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Walklate, 2007). As Fattah (1992: 4) suggests, victims became constructed as 'natural targets for human sympathy,' which inherently limits our emotional ability to critically scrutinize punitive and vengeful initiatives created in their name. The (re)emergence of the victim (Landau, 2006) within a conservative neoliberal politics reinforced its associated image as stereotypically frail/weak, innocent/pure, white, youthful, and typically female prey of unprovoked street- or violent crime (Fattah, 1992). Such a construction inherently creates a dichotomous image of the offender as diametrically opposed – and thus as dangerous, aggressive, evil, frequently non-white, poor, and predominantly masculine. In this context, it is important to remember Balfour's (2008) conceptualization of the victimization–criminalization continuum and Fattah's (1992: 7) assertion that 'the roles of the victim and victimizer are neither static, assigned nor immutable. They are dynamic, revolving and interchangeable'.

Critical victimology encourages us to question who has the power to define and apply the label of victim (Miers, 1990); however, Mawby and Walklate (1994: 18) suggest that it is a generic and neutral, albeit emotionally laden, term that 'leaves victimology within the confines of law'. They posit that it is important to break free of this restriction and to consider the broader structural and institutional forces that constitute victimhood. In particular, these scholars (Mawby and Walklate, 1994; Walklate, 2007) investigate how patriarchy and capitalism create the material conditions that shape the state of contemporary discussions of victimology and how a rights-based approach, so popularly debated in some countries throughout the 1990s, is complicated by the fact that defendants also have rights and victims are not one homogeneous collective group. Rather than positioning defendants' rights against victims' rights – which is how the current criminal justice system functions and thereby neglects the differences between legal rights and social citizenship – we should advance a critical victimology that is situated in the historic and material experiences of both parties.

To do this, we turn to Cochrane and Melville's (2004: 113) description of critical victimology as 'an approach that has attempted to incorporate a critical understanding of the role of the law and state in the victimisation process, as well as recognising the important role of human actors in influencing the conditions under which they exist'. That is, it accounts for both the influence and impact of the law and state as well as individual agency in understanding victimhood. Balfour's (2008) victimization–criminalization continuum is an example and extension of this premise of critical victimology. Central to our position is the need to hear experiential voices in order to learn how Aboriginal women's histories of cultural destruction, violence, and socio-political marginalization are contoured by state and institutional oppression and how these experiences are related to their criminalization. Within this framework, we can position criminalization as the continuation of state victimization of Aboriginal women in Canada and demonstrate how reclaiming a positive cultural identity can help to challenge the victimization–criminalization nexus.

Rather than basing criminal law and policy on the growing, but empirically unsupported, fear of crime that is advanced by conservative politicians and some victims' rights groups, critical victimology offers a theoretical framework for understanding the application of Christie's (1986a) concept of the ideal victim and offender identities. To engage this position, we must examine how these identities are influenced by individuals' historical and cultural contexts and how they are determined through an intersection of gender, race, and class at different structural levels. For example, by occupying the subordinated side of all three divisions, the Aboriginal woman drug user is relegated to the status of the expected offender. Structural processes and practices greatly impact how Aboriginal women experience their victimization and as we argue, more accurately, their punishment.

Taking into account that individuals forge a distinctive sense of self-identity based on their social and cultural experiences (Gergen, 2001; Macionis and Gerber, 2009: 627), we question how an expected identity may be challenged at the individual and social system levels by exploring the links between victimization and criminalization for Aboriginal women drug users in Canada. In order to answer this question, the empirical section of this article examines how Aboriginal women drug offenders conceptualize, negotiate, and experience these intersecting identities. Thus, this project began with and is rooted in women's narratives. Drawing from a national study of criminalized First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women, both in treatment and who completed treatment for illicit drug use, we examine their perceptions of themselves as victims, as offenders, and as Aboriginal women. We also explore if and how they view themselves as deserving of punishment. We argue that a strong cultural identity has benefits for personal change as well as the potential for warding off the impacts of disempowering Western images of the expected Aboriginal woman drug user; this understanding informs the main contribution of this article.

By drawing on the critical victimology literature, and specifically the cautions highlighted in the work of Christie (1986a), Mawby and Walklate (1994), Walklate (2007), and Cochrane and Melville (2004), we contend that the challenge in dismantling the expected identity of Aboriginal women drug offenders in Canada is the need to translate understanding into praxis. Subsequently, we conclude this article with a brief discussion of a potential way to achieve this end, namely, by turning to the women's marginalized voices for direction and

by applying unique forms of knowledge-sharing to disseminate their understanding. This insight can offer learning opportunities for other Aboriginal women as well as for individuals outside this experience.

The experiences of Aboriginal women drug offenders

In 2005, our national research team undertook a multi-year, community-based study on the role of identity and stigma in the healing journeys of criminalized Aboriginal women from illicit drug use. The National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, and the University of Saskatchewan spearheaded the project. The majority of participants were First Nations, which reflected the treatment centre clientele at the six National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NNADAP) treatment centres where the story-sharing sessions (i.e. interviews) took place. These sessions occurred over a 12-month period with 65 women in treatment and 20 women who completed treatment. Thirty-eight interviews also took place with treatment staff, 80% of whom self-identified as being in recovery from substance abuse. The collected knowledge was analyzed from multiple viewpoints, and the findings verified with the participating treatment centres.

It is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal women who are criminalized and who problematically use drugs are not a homogeneous group; they differ in countless ways, ranging from drug of choice to ethnic background and social, cultural, and personal experiences. The overarching similarities between the women interviewed for this project, however, relays the devastating impacts of colonization in the lives of Aboriginal women across Canada, evident in their common experiences, for example, of poverty, violence, family history of residential schooling, and loss of Aboriginal language.

Consistent with a community-based research model, the study was grounded in the diverse experiences and expertise of our team members – Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal treatment providers, women who completed drug treatment, treatment centre directors, academic researchers, community agencies working with criminalized Aboriginal women, and government decision-makers. The key finding is that to heal, there is a need for women to (re)claim a healthy self-identity as an Aboriginal woman. This includes understanding the negative impacts of stigma associated with being an Aboriginal woman, a drug user, in conflict with the law, and with respect to her victimization. In congruence with the women's experiences throughout the healing journey, we found they negotiated their identities across three intersecting phases, beginning with: (a) not knowing who you are/limited self-identity; (b) recognizing the harmful impact of stigma on how you see yourself; and (c) (re)claiming a cultural identity.

Who am I? Notes on experiencing limited self-identity

The pervasive colonial impacts of violence and trauma in the lives of Aboriginal women cannot be disentangled from their lived experiences, in particular their use of drugs as a means to cope and belong. For example, one woman stated:

Drugs allowed me to numb out the pain of loss: loss of my kids, loss of myself, loss of any understanding about my place as an Aboriginal woman in this world. I didn't

feel like I had any kind of future to look forward to—so I felt like I belonged with the drugs, you know, not with any sort of happiness.

The women in our study shared how they felt lost in their lives and did not know who they were. One woman simply stated, 'I am trying to find myself.' They also spoke of how traumatic life events, ranging from the loss of a child to protective services to experiences of incarceration to histories of personal abuse, deeply impacted this experience. For many, these events were initiated in childhood and occurred at both the social structural (e.g., residential schooling) and individual (e.g., discrimination) levels. One woman recalled the traumatic and lasting impact of a childhood experience in grade school on her feelings of self-identity and broader social acceptance:

She had told the kids to bring up all their scribbles. And I um, I ran up there with my, my beautiful little scribbler, with the ribbons on it, that my grandmother had made and when I gave it to her she looked at it and she said, 'This is not a scribbler, it's nothing but an old bag of potatoes. It's stupid, it's ugly.' She ripped it up and she threw it in the garbage and um ... I tried to get it from the garbage can but she wouldn't let me. And something inside of me ... something inside of me broke ... I think it was my spirit. And um, I went back to my little desk ... I went back to my little desk and um, I got my sweater ... and I wasn't crying or I wasn't sad, I just knew that I was not ever going to be any part of that system. Ever. And I left. I quit. I quit school in grade one.

This woman retreated from participation in state institutions, such as education, to avoid experiencing similar rejection of and disdain for her Aboriginality. She also expressed a loss in spirit that signalled a loss in identity, or at least a loss in pride for her identity as an Aboriginal woman. For some, not knowing who they were was compounded by their intent to hide their Aboriginal status because of the associated racism. One woman shared:

It was hard. It was hard because it was difficult at times because on the reserve I got kicked and beaten by the Natives for being so pale and off the reserve I get kicked and beaten for being dark-haired and living on a reserve. So it was a no-win situation.

Another woman shared a similar experience:

I just never knew who I was, never knew who I was. I denied being Indian when I moved off the reserve because it wasn't anything very great about being an Indian. And I even went to the extreme of disguising my Indian-ness. Imagine. I mean, I had long hair I'd wear it back in a bun and I would make a little kiss-curl right in the centre of my head and somebody would ask me if I was Indian and I'd say I was an Indian from India. And it seemed to me that I was always looking for my identity because I was also a non-Status Indian living on the reserve because my mother had enfranchised, forced enfranchisement when she married my stepfather.

One manifest aspect of the legacy of colonization is the loss of culture. Evident in the recent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission⁷ and the existing literature, the loss of culture is resulting in a loss of identity amongst Indigenous women globally – including Canada (Anderson, 2000; Asante, 2005). In this way, colonization, a form of punishment

and violence in its own right, sets the stage for contemporary state sanctioned punishment and victimization of Aboriginal women who are increasingly criminalized. In place of this lost or limited self-identity, Aboriginal women are forced to negotiate and/or contest the pervasive stigmatized identities (e.g., the squaw, the addict) that were largely created over time by the colonizers, the Canadian government, and other citizens. It is difficult for many Aboriginal women to challenge these identities because they have few alternative experiences upon which to draw and make up a positive construction of self.

Coming to understand the intersection of stigmatized identities: Notes on being a victim, a drug user, and an Aboriginal woman

Many of the women spoke of personal, interpersonal, and intergenerational violence as affecting their self-identities. Events that had the greatest impact on their self-identities included: racism and bullying in childhood, child welfare (as a child and with their own children), and experiences of violence. One woman explained the pervasiveness of violence: 'Like when I was a child, violence was, you know, rape and an attack on my mother and seeing family members stabbing people, and violence, yeah all kinds of violence.' Violence was commonplace, and in some cases an expected part of the women's lives. One woman shared:

... when the Indian Agents left our communities, 'brown patriarchy' took its place ... our own people learned to lead by domination and power and control relationships. The power of the church also continued to dominate our communities and a very powerful teaching was that men had to control women and children in order to be men.

Accepting discriminatory and violent treatment as a normalized part of their material realities, these women did not readily identify themselves as victims. Their status as non-victims was continually verified by social system (non-)responses, such as police failure to investigate cases of violence (Razack, 2000) and state failure to adequately assist women who use drugs, including immediate dismissal from treatment programming for not adhering to abstinence. One participant claimed: 'I felt like I was nothing—like I was a junkie. They made me feel like there was no hope for myself—that's why I stayed on the streets for three years, because they made me feel like I had no hope.'

The consequence of the pervasive violence in their lives was that the women felt worthless and isolated. One woman expressed: 'for shame, what's been done to me I guess. I feel dirty,' while another woman stated: 'I just basically felt alone and that there was nobody around.' The latter finding is particularly telling because self-identity from an Indigenous worldview is based upon connections to the land, others, and community; it is a way of life. Ross (2004) draws upon the work of Benton-Banai (1979) to describe an Indigenous worldview, where '[w]hatever happened with one thing rippled out to touch and affect all other things' (cited in Hopkins and Dumont, 2010: 10). Accordingly, just as individual well-

⁷The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has a mandate to learn and to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools. For more information, access the official government website: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>.

being is situated within a complex web of interdependent relationships, different components of one's identity (empowered or disempowered, healthy or harmful) are often related. Given this connection, it is clear that as many of the women began to use drugs as a method of coping with their victimization, their identities as victims became intricately tied to their identities as drug users.

The women commonly referred to themselves as 'an alcoholic' or 'a drunk,' but they did not draw heavily on drug culture language, for example, by referring to themselves as 'druggies.' Although this reflects the women's use of alcohol alongside drugs, it also dismisses their drug user identity. This may partially be explained by the ongoing and devastating impacts of alcohol on Aboriginal communities and thus its normalization and acceptance within their lives (Thatcher, 2004). Consequently, an alcoholic identity has significantly less stigma attached to it.

Similarly, there was limited criminal self-identification among the women. Reflecting Balfour's (2008) discussion of the victimization–criminalization continuum, the women overwhelmingly linked their criminal involvement to a pragmatic choice to use and sell drugs in order to cope and survive their victimization. One woman reflected:

After everything I went through, being an Indian kid in a White world, getting beat as a child and then by my husband—I just started to use to make it all stop. So I could numb it out. Just forget for a while that my life was hell on the reserve and then hell on the streets. If I couldn't feel, if I could be numb, I could forget it, even if only for a little while. But then I just ended up getting hooked, and in and out of jail. I just kept going around and around in all of that.

Moreover, the women were reluctant to associate themselves as either a drug user or an offender, several noting the embarrassment and shame that they felt. For example, one woman remarked:

I hid it for a long, long time; I never wanted my family or kids to know that I was using or had done time. I didn't even want to admit it to myself. I kept saying to myself, 'You got it under control, you can stop any time.' But of course that was wrong. But it just isn't me. It's not the real me—I used drugs but I'm not a druggie, you know what I mean? I don't feel like 'a criminal.'

Many participants spoke of feeling as though they were being punished for engaging in different coping or survival behaviours. Another woman explained:

There is so little help when you're poor, when you're Indian, and when you use drugs. I mean, what the fuck was jail going to do for me? Did it help me get clean? No. I just got punished over and over again for coping any way I could. For surviving. I mean, I know that using is not a good thing, right? But at the time, I just couldn't do anything else, or I thought I couldn't.

The traditional role for Aboriginal women is to be the caretaker in the family and community, which essentializes motherhood as an inherent component of their identity (Boyd, 1999; 2004; Kilty, 2008). Overwhelmingly, the women in our study self-identified as 'poor' and as 'bad mothers'; motherhood was a key source of pain and self-punishment.

They identified motherhood as a foundational component of who they are, not merely something that they do. However, when they spoke about being a mother, it was often overshadowed by shame. One woman expressed:

I don't want to be in jail and my son coming to visit. I don't want that, you know? I wanna be a normal mom. It's not his fault that I'm being a screw-up. But he's paying the price. It's hard. It's hard to watch your child cry when they have to take him through the door, to go somewhere else. I don't want somebody else raising my boy, that's my baby! So I'm fighting really hard to get him and I'm fighting really hard to stay off the drugs. That's all I have to do ... That's what the programmers keep telling me; it's up to me and that when I use I am failing my kids and when I'm clean I can be a mother again, they talk about that a lot. *And being a mother makes me feel like a woman. I feel whole, when I'm with my children.* I don't feel that way when I'm not with them, you know? It's weird. *I feel complete when I'm with my children* [emphasis added]. And when something like this is going on, I'm, I'm lost.

This participant referred to her maternal role as the central motivator for her healing from drug use. Being a mother and using drugs caused feelings of shame and often impacted the women's actions. For example, one woman stated: 'I gave up my children because I thought I wasn't good enough [to be a mother].'

When discussing motherhood, the women expressed little understanding about the impacts of colonization. For example, residential schooling was not widely discussed within families and communities, so the link to the intergenerational impacts of parenting skills and their transmission was not readily made. With this in mind, there is also a need for caution in treatment or other programming in identifying Aboriginal women's historical role as a caregiver. Given that many participants had lost custody of their children, such discussions may incite additional feelings of shame for not living up to that cultural role.

This is who I am: Notes on (re)claiming an empowered cultural identity

Having a cultural foundation is essential to building a healthy sense of self for Indigenous people (Dell et al., 2011). A woman who completed treatment stated: 'To heal is finding that balance—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.' The women who completed treatment spoke of the need to construct an identity that is not based on their past behaviour. One treatment provider shared:

How can one feel good about oneself if they are not connected to who they are or their place or purpose on earth—all of which is known through one's spirit. Focusing on the strengths of an individual through spiritual connection and identity development is very powerful and changes the low self-esteem to a strength-based perspective that is focused on the individual's unique gifts and characteristics as they are given by the Creator ... a complete shift from self-loathing.

(Re)claiming a cultural identity helps to combat the negative impacts (e.g., self-loathing) of stigma. At the heart of (re)claiming this aspect of identity is the development of pride and the forfeiting of shame associated with being an Aboriginal woman. A positive effect of

participating in cultural programming was that the women embraced their culture and history; this was consistent across the women's stories. One woman who completed treatment reflected upon the impact of this process:

I knew who I was but it wasn't until much later, probably into my sobriety that I actually learned about who I was and where I come from and how important that is to me now, you know, like knowing my culture, learning my language, the songs; it means so much to me now ... Well, I come from a matrilineal society and, you know, they always talk about the strengths of, the women are always the backbone of the community and we don't need to be out in the front but we're always behind supporting and we're the ones who are nurturing. Yeah, I'm really proud of who I am and where I come from and, you know, I have a responsibility as an Aboriginal woman; as a mother; as a daughter; as a sister.

The presence of a cultural identity helped to ward off the negative impacts of societal stigma attributed to Aboriginality. For our participants, once an Aboriginal cultural identity was (re)claimed, it helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness and being lost, which initially contributed to their use of drugs and subsequent criminalization. The women described this process as one of coming full circle.

It is important to note that while the women self-identified in harmful ways (as dirty, squaw, addict, alcoholic, or offender), they would oftentimes counter these constructions with expressions of hope for the future. The depth of these harmful self-identities ranged among the women who shared their stories, but it is noteworthy that they were evident to some extent in nearly all of their narratives. For example, one woman stated:

... I fight with myself, I literally fight with myself, you know, like there's ... two of me ... the new one and the one that wants to drink, the one that wants to do drugs ... and there is like this part of me that [is] trying to open, trying to say no more, you know I know there is two people in me, the one that's been abused so much and don't care, that don't give a shit about anybody around her ... [B]ut then [there's] the stronger one.

Maintaining this kind of hope is critical to a woman's ability to move forward in her life and on her healing journey. Taking the findings presented here about the need to strengthen cultural identity, we conclude with a brief discussion of two innovative methods of knowledge sharing that may assist Aboriginal women to heal from drug use. The first resides at the individual level and assists women in (re)claiming a strong and valued cultural identity; the second is an entry point to the structural level and draws on Christie's (1986b) original work that suggests individuals must understand the experiential realities of others in order to evoke wider social change.

Conclusion

Self-identity can yield power just as it can be the basis for inequality (Bobb-Smith, 2003: 36). Subsequently, the transformative power of self-identity can incite strategies of resistance and survival or defeatist feelings and inaction (Bobb-Smith, 2003). In order to conduct research as praxis, our team developed a workshop that introduces the value of

(re)claiming a strong cultural identity as an Aboriginal woman, which supports her efforts to foster change at the individual level. To reduce the potential for causing further harm, it was important that we: (a) raise awareness and provide a legitimate space for women to vocalize their experiences of victimization; (b) not focus on the drug user or offender identity if they do not associate with it; (c) recognize drug use as a survival behaviour; and (d) combat feelings of shame associated with being a mother and using drugs. We began this effort by creating *From Stilettos to Moccasins: A Guide for Group Discussion*⁸, which offers a structured half-day workshop on identity, stigma, and healing. This guide includes exploration exercises and guiding questions, which are designed to promote self and group reflection, dialogue and support, and to offer hope and inspiration to women in treatment and in the transition back to their communities from addiction treatment.

While individual transformation is certainly important in Aboriginal women's efforts to combat victimization associated with their drug use and criminalization, Christie (1986a) argues that to enact social change we must also dismantle long held oppressive beliefs about ideal victimhood. As Smolej (2010: 71) writes, 'Contemporary narratives not only invite but actively encourage people to identify and empathize with victims of crime'; however, this is largely dependent on how victimhood is interpreted. Similarly, Balfour (2008: 115) states: 'I suggest that Aboriginal women's narratives of violence and social exclusion could become 'subversive stories' that challenge the 'hegemonic tales' of the squaw narrative that has operated to justify the coercive punishment of Aboriginal women'. Ignoring or silencing their voices is but one factor in the ongoing denial of Aboriginal women's victimhood. With this in mind, our team worked to develop a method that would help others 'walk in the women's shoes for greater understanding'; the result was the creation of a song and music video.

Approximately 30 members of our research team and the women who shared their stories worked with Violet Naytowhow, a Woodland Cree singer/songwriter, to draft lyrics to reflect the women's voices. Our goal was to draft a song – literally to hear the women heal – so their stories could educate others with their strength, wisdom, and knowledge. The song and video, *From Stilettos to Moccasins*, reflects the stages of the healing journey, namely, where the women have been, where the women are now, and where the women are going. To reach as broad an audience as possible, the video was uploaded onto YouTube;⁸ to date, it has had over 20,000 views. In addition, we distributed over 10,000 copies of the DVD to treatment centres, at conferences, and to various community organizations. This song allows us to send a message of hope and transformation to a much broader audience than traditional scholarly publications.

Despite histories of victimization, including the oppressive discourses and state practices that continue to construct them as expected offenders, Aboriginal women's ability to (re)claim an empowered cultural identity facilitated their healing from problematic drug use. In (re)claiming their cultural identity, participants were more able to accept their victimization and move forward along their healing journey. By re-centering their voices, our research worked to assist Aboriginal women to foster individual transformative changes

⁸The music video is accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QRb8wA2iHs>.

and to broaden social awareness of their victimization and its relationship to their criminalization. Christie's (1986a) seminal work in the field of critical victimology continues to shed light on how only certain individuals are understood as ideal or accepted victims. Partially due to the fact that drug use is commonly seen as a victimless crime, contemporary state discourses preclude the drug user as a victim of state (non-)responses. However, failing to conceptualize Aboriginal women's pathways to using drugs and to recognize the subsequent victimization–criminalization continuum (Balfour, 2008) only contributes to ongoing state punishment (and thus victimization) without hope for transformative change.

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