

COLONIZATION, DESTRUCTION, AND RENEWAL:

STORIES FROM ABORIGINAL MEN

AT THE PE'SAKASTEW CENTRE

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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December 1998

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the impact of Aboriginal spirituality/culture on federally sentenced Aboriginal males at the Pe'Sakastew Centre. The Centre is a minimum security institution which is operated by the Correctional Service of Canada. The effects of Aboriginal spirituality/culture were explored through interviews with twelve Aboriginal men who were serving part of their sentences at the Centre. The men were asked a range of questions that dealt with childhood experiences, adult lifestyles and attitudes, prison experiences and programming, the Pe'Sakastew Centre, and the perceived effects on attitudes and behaviors by participating in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming. This study also addressed several specific issues including: the role of Aboriginal spirituality/culture in the healing/rehabilitation process; the presence of other contributing factors; and the difference between the Pe'Sakastew Centre and mainstream prisons.

This thesis research identified thematic patterns in the men's life stories. Many interviewees had difficult childhoods and their adult lifestyles reflected similar problems that revolved around chemical dependency, violence,

gangs, illegal activities, and prison. While many interviewees reported negative prison experiences, they benefitted considerably by participating in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs. The benefits related to an enhanced ability to cope with the prison environment, to heal the wounds from childhood, and to deal with problems of alcohol/drug addiction and violence.

The interviewees reported five positive aspects of the Pe'Sakastew Centre including: the Centre's open and safe environment; the men have a responsibility to help themselves; the presence of Aboriginal people; the approach of the Centre; and the ability to release con mentality. The majority of interviewees described positive changes in attitudes and behaviors as a result of their participation in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming. Many reported a more positive attitude towards themselves and others. Several described themselves as being happier and able to deal with problems in a proactive manner. The interviewees revealed a high level of respect for the Elders, their knowledge, and the cultural values that they project to the men. It was concluded that Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs contributes significantly in the process of healing/rehabilitation of Aboriginal men.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to the twelve men who made this research project happen. The stories you so generously shared have inspired and motivated me in several areas in my own life.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Les Samuelson, for providing me with guidance and never-ending support. Thank you also to my committee members, Professors Bernard Schissel and Patricia Monture-Angus, for providing me with valuable feedback, kindness, and encouragement.

I am grateful to Gerry Cowie of the Correctional Service of Canada, and the staff of the Pe'Sakastew Centre for assistance in my research and for making me feel welcome.

I would like to extend a special thank you to the Prince Albert Grand Council for financial support throughout my academic journey.

I am indebted to all my friends and family for encouraging me to persevere, especially my parents and siblings Leslie, Dieter, and Cindy. Finally, I wish to thank my husband Kevin who has stood by me throughout it all, and my children Chris, Jayden, and Taylor. I love you all!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE.....i

ABSTRACT.....ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....v

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

 1.1 Research Questions.....3

 1.2 Objectives of the Study.....4

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL PEOPLES
AND 'CORRECTIONS'

 2.1 Overview.....5

 2.2 The Historical Context.....6

 2.3 The Legacy of Colonialism.....8

 2.4 The Structural Realities.....11

 2.5 The Cultural Dimension.....14

 2.6 Summary.....19

3. 'CORRECTIONS' CANADA

 3.1 Overview.....21

 3.2 Discovering 'Indians' in Corrections.....22

 3.3 Aboriginal Overrepresentation.....23

 3.4 Characteristics of Aboriginal Offenders.....25

 3.5 Aboriginal-Specific Programming.....31

 3.6 Summary.....36

4. METHODOLOGY

 4.1 Research Method and Overview.....38

 4.2 Gaining Access.....40

 4.3 The Research Setting.....41

 4.4 Aboriginal Programming.....42

 4.5 The Method Sample.....43

 4.6 The Interviews.....45

 4.7 Data Analysis.....47

 4.8 Summary.....49

5. SOCIALIZATION AND THE PATH OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

 5.1 Overview.....50

 5.2 Socialization.....50

 5.3 Violence and Substance Abuse.....51

5.4	Racism.....	54
5.5	Adolescence.....	59
5.6	Adult Experiences.....	62
5.7	Prison Experiences.....	67
5.8	Aboriginal Spiritual/Cultural Programming.....	72
5.9	The Healing Journey.....	79
5.10	Summary.....	83
6.	THE PE'SAKASTEW CENTRE: GETTING IN AND GETTING OUT	
6.1	Overview.....	85
6.2	Transferring to the Pe'Sakastew Centre.....	85
6.3	Perceptions of the Centre.....	87
6.4	Perceptions of Staff.....	95
6.5	Aboriginal Spiritual/Cultural Programming.....	98
6.6	Changes in Attitudes.....	103
6.7	Changes in Behaviors.....	105
6.8	Attitudes Towards Release.....	108
6.9	Summary.....	111
7.	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	113
	REFERENCES.....	124
	APPENDIX I Consent Form.....	128
	APPENDIX II Interview Schedule.....	129

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The socially constructed problem of Aboriginal people's incarceration is a western Canada phenomenon that has reached disturbing levels. This problem has been examined by a myriad of justice inquiries, reports, and government task forces. Despite this proliferation of over-incarceration knowledge, correctional institutes remain overall ill-equipped to fulfill the complex network of social, cultural, and spiritual needs of federal Aboriginal offenders. Although official correctional philosophy has changed in some notable respects over the years, these reform efforts have failed to alter Aboriginal overrepresentation in prison and the persisting legacy of colonialism. Notwithstanding these philosophical changes, the correctional system has remained largely based on punishment, isolation, and institutional control.

In the 1980s, Aboriginal offenders lobbied extensively for correctional programs of a spiritual and cultural nature. They argued that the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) guaranteed freedom of religion, and that Aboriginal spirituality was an "Aboriginal" right under Section 35 of

the *Constitution Act* (1982) (Waldram 1997: 12; Royal Commission 1996: 126). Furthermore, they stressed that Aboriginal spirituality is essential in fostering their rehabilitation. In the mid 1980s, a specific policy on Aboriginal offender programs was devised by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and correctional institutions throughout the country developed a range of programs for Aboriginal offenders.

Although correctional programs reflecting Aboriginal spirituality and culture have existed for over ten years in the federal system, their effectiveness in addressing the individual and collective problems of Aboriginal offenders has not received serious attention by researchers. Recent studies indicate that substantial numbers of federal Aboriginal offenders participate in Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming (Johnson 1997; LaPrairie 1996). Another study on Aboriginal federal ex-offenders indicated that Aboriginal spirituality and culture made a significant contribution to the respondents' transformation from serious offender to law-abiding member of society (Nechi Institute 1994). These studies suggest that many Aboriginal inmates attach a high degree of importance to Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs and may benefit positively from them.

Correctional reform in a few sites has progressed beyond piecemeal-event programs in institutions to overarching Aboriginal traditional approaches within the context of a healing facility. These recent reforms represent a concerted effort by the CSC and Aboriginal communities to become partners under emergent legislative provisions. Presumably, healing facilities provide an environment conducive to restoring health and well-being to individuals. The challenges of this study are to determine through Aboriginal inmate interviews whether and how the healing facility, and the Aboriginal approach it incorporates, make a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal offenders.

1.1 Research Questions

This research addresses the key question: Do Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs that are administered within a healing facility effect changes in the attitudes and behaviors of federally sentenced Aboriginal men?

The issue of Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming has four related sub-questions including:

1. Do Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs address the problems facing Aboriginal offenders individually which emerged from their colonial-generated life experiences?
2. Do Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs heal the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical aspects of

individual Aboriginal offenders?

3. Under an Aboriginal holistic approach, are there factors in addition to spiritual/cultural programs that help Aboriginal offenders integrate back into their communities?
4. Does the healing facility operate in a manner that is different from other federal correctional institutions?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study has three key objectives. First, this research will review the problem of Aboriginal people's incarceration within the context of a colonialist-historical, structural, and cultural analysis. Second, interview data will be generated from federally sentenced Aboriginal males who participate in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming in a healing facility. Third, a contribution will be made to a broader sociological understanding of the healing role that Aboriginal traditional holistic approaches play in contemporary society.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND 'CORRECTIONS'

2.1 Overview

The theoretical framework used to address the problem of Aboriginal people's incarceration entails a necessary blend of colonialist-historical, structural, and cultural analysis (Jackson 1992: 157). First, the colonialist-historical model attributes Aboriginal overrepresentation to the history of Aboriginal people in Canada and their colonial experiences. Second, the structural model states that Aboriginal peoples' marginal socio-economic position contributes to their disproportionately high crime rates (Royal Commission 1996: 42; LaPrairie 1994: 12; York 1990: 144). Third, the cultural model argues that a lack of congruence between Aboriginal cultures and that of the dominant society fosters high Aboriginal involvement in the justice system (Royal Commission 1996: 40; York 1990: 147). While reliance on a single theoretical model is insufficient to explain the problem of Aboriginal people's incarceration, combining these models will generate a more powerful and satisfactory explanation (Hamilton and Sinclair 1991: 96).

2.2 The Historical Context

Before the emergence of Europeans in North America, the world view of Aboriginal societies governed their respective social, economic, and political structures. The Aboriginal world views dictated that human beings held the least important position with respect to the four orders of creation (Ross 1996: 60; Sinclair 1994: 176). The perpetuation of the human world in this hierarchy of creation was a function of its interactions with the earth, plant, and animal worlds. Generally, Aboriginal societies manifested traditional laws or values of harmony, peace, and respect to preserve the interconnectedness between all the orders of creation. As Sinclair (1994: 176) points out:

...our world view provides the basis for those customs, thoughts and behavior we consider appropriate. Each person's individual and collective (that is to say, cultural) understanding of humanity's place in creation, and the behavior appropriate to that place, pervades and shapes all aspects of one's life.

This world view or philosophy bestowed Aboriginal people with the responsibility for maintaining healthy connections with their social and physical worlds.

Equilibrium in relationships between individuals, families, communities and the physical environment was achieved through the use of spiritual ceremonies, storytelling, and rituals. The Aboriginal world view held

that human beings and many elements of nature have spirits (Royal Commission 1996: 87; Miller 1989: 12). Thus, spiritual dimensions were accentuated in nearly every facet of human life. Elders, shamans, and other spiritual leaders possessed the knowledge of traditional laws and value systems and played an important role in the socialization of individuals (Sinclair 1994: 177). This knowledge was imparted to individuals to engender socially acceptable forms of behavior. Aboriginal societies maintained social order and balance through their respective culture and spiritual orientations.

Before European colonization, Aboriginal societies contained mechanisms for responding to instances of anti-social behavior (Monture-Angus 1996: 336). Despite the enormous changes Aboriginal peoples have experienced from colonization and acculturation, many Aboriginal communities have adapted their respective spiritual and cultural orientations to deal with contemporary social problems. Generally, Aboriginal approaches focus on restoring or healing the relationships with one's self, family, community, and other involved individuals (Ross 1996: 28). As Louise Halfe (1993: 10) notes:

...when a person is suffering with mental illness, they are treated for the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional problems. They are

inseparable. This instability is called spiritual illness, not mental illness. When this imbalance occurs, the ailing spirit must be acknowledged and guided back to health through the proper rituals.

The Sun Dance, sweat lodge, fasting, and other ceremonies and rituals are being renewed to impart Aboriginal values and affirm individual identity (Halfe 1993: 10). Increasingly, Aboriginal people are engaging in ways that reflect Aboriginal culture and spirituality to heal from the oppressiveness of colonialism.

2.3 The Legacy of Colonialism

The problem of Aboriginal overrepresentation in the Canadian justice system is inescapably connected to the processes of colonialism (Royal Commission 1996: 52; Monture-Angus 1996; 337). Essentially, the criminal justice system is an integral part of the colonial regime which has, and continues to, erode the fabric of Aboriginal societies. Frideres' (1998: 3) internal colonial model describes how colonialism has negatively impacted the social and cultural structures of Aboriginal societies.

The Canadian state perpetrated detrimental changes to Aboriginal societies through legal coercion. The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of interactive relationships between the state and churches whose objectives were to 'civilize' and assimilate Aboriginal people (Frideres 1998:

4; Waldram 1997: 6). As Miller (1989: 112) noted in this regard:

...a new alliance of church and humanitarian organizations, with government encouragement, promoted fundamental changes in those Indians who remained within or close to areas of the colony where agricultural and commercial development was going on apace. They tried to convert Indians in religious terms and to remake them culturally by the twin instruments of church and school.

The assimilation policy was legislated progressively into the *Indian Act* (1876) which empowered the state to advance the changes necessary for Aboriginal people to integrate into the dominant society.

The state supported the missionaries' objectives to convert Aboriginal people into Christians by suppressing their cultures. Operating under the assumption that elements of Aboriginal cultures were incompatible with Christianity, missionaries pressured the state to amend the *Indian Act* prohibiting Aboriginal people from practicing the Potlatch and Sun Dance ceremonies (Frideres 1998: 4; Waldram 1997: 6). The state and churches undermined the social and cultural structures and identities of Aboriginal societies through the indoctrination of Christianity and the prohibition of traditional ceremonies.

Although the model by Frideres emphasizes the negative impact colonization had on Aboriginal societies, the analysis

overlooks the cultural genocide that Aboriginal people experienced through the residential school and child welfare systems. From the 1860s to the 1960s, the residential school system was employed to eliminate the relationships between Aboriginal children and their families, communities, and important components of culture including languages, values, and traditions (Miller 1996; York 1990; Haig-Brown 1988). Maggie Hodgson (1996: 272) described the effects of the residential schools on the Aboriginal population in this manner:

The results were there was a period of 100 years when our population was removed from our language, our parents and our Elders, which are all the integral elements of our culture and values. Emile Durkheim described the effect on cultures when this phenomena happens: a state of anomie sets in, a valueless society in which there is a loss of the original culture and an inability to adapt to the new culture. The results of the anomie within our Indian population manifested itself in the form of alcohol and drug addiction in pandemic proportions.

In addition to the problems of alcohol and drug addiction, some former students have recently disclosed disturbing cases of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that they endured while attending the residential schools (Miller 1996; York 1990; Haig-Brown 1988).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the state inflicted further harm to Aboriginal societies through the child welfare system. Thousands of Aboriginal children were apprehended

from their communities and adopted into non-Aboriginal, middle class families where many experienced cultural deprivation and abuses similar to those who attended residential schools (Royal Commission 1996: 26-27). These colonial processes have dislocated Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, culture and spirituality, value systems, and kinship networks. Consequently, these destructive forces have led to the, now generational, problem of Aboriginal people's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

2.4 The Structural Realities

The structural model attributes the problem of Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system to their marginal socio-economic position (Royal Commission 1996: 42; Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993: 184; Jackson 1992: 153; Zimmerman 1992: 369; and York 1990: 144). Wotherspoon and Satzewich (1993: 185) state that Canada's laws have played an instrumental role in constructing Aboriginal people's marginality. The state's assimilation policy which was reflected in the *Indian Act* held discriminatory provisions regarding Aboriginal culture and spirituality, alcohol consumption, civil and political rights, and citizenship. As Zimmerman (1992: 369) noted:

It is not surprising that a government policy

which, until relatively recently, sought to assimilate Aboriginal peoples by eradicating their culture, languages, lifestyles and spirituality, resulted in a loss of self-esteem and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, this policy has created a cycle of dependence, poverty and despair which all too often leads to conflict with the law.

Thus, Aboriginal people's criminalization is constructed within the context of a political, legal, and socio-economic framework.

The report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Peoples in Federal Corrections (1988: 12) pointed out that, "Crime committed by Aboriginal people-like crime in general-is related to the socio-economic conditions experienced by Aboriginal people on and off reserves." The social realities for many Aboriginal communities reflect problems of poverty, welfare dependency, unemployment, low educational achievement, and high rates of suicide, substance abuse, and violence. Although there is some evidence to indicate that the socio-economic status for Aboriginal people has increased, Frideres (1998) cites demographics which reveal that the income disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals and families is increasing; Aboriginal unemployment is three times the national average and most Aboriginal people obtain only low levels of educational achievement. In addition, three quarters of all housing on reserves has failed to meet some of the standards of safe and

decent living (Frideres 1998: 169). Overcrowded housing conditions can often lead to problems of interpersonal conflicts and violence between close family members (Royal Commission 1996: 43). Consequently, Aboriginal people may commit criminal acts either to escape these detrimental socio-economic conditions or in response to economic deprivation.

Aboriginal people's disadvantaged position has led to high crime rates in various urban and rural regions in Canada. Many Aboriginal people are further frustrated and alienated from the discrimination they experience when they are processed through the criminal justice system (Linn 1992; Hamilton and Sinclair 1991). Regarding the issue of disparity in sentencing, Quigley (1994: 275-276) states that:

Socioeconomic factors such as employment status, level of education, family situation, etc., appear on the surface as neutral criteria. They are considered as such by the legal system. Yet they can conceal an extremely strong bias in the sentencing process. Convicted persons with steady employment and stability in their lives, or at least prospects of the same, are much less likely to be sent to jail for offences that are borderline imprisonment offences. The unemployed, transients, the poorly educated are all better candidates for imprisonment. When the social, political and economic aspects of our society place Aboriginal people disproportionately within the ranks of the latter, our society literally sentences more of them to jail. This is systemic discrimination.

Similarly, Hamilton and Sinclair (1991: 469) underlined the

disparity in the parole process by noting that:

...even if Aboriginal inmates do apply for parole, they are less likely than non-Aboriginal inmates to be released...Aboriginal offenders may appear to be higher risks because, in the eyes of the non-Aboriginal parole board members or parole officers, they are seen as lacking in formal education or employment experience.

The systemic discrimination that is built into the justice system often has an adverse effect on Aboriginal people. At various stages of criminal justice processing, the system may operate in a manner that emphasizes incarceration for many Aboriginal offenders. Therefore, to a large extent, the problem of Aboriginal people's overrepresentation in the correctional system is grounded in their marginal social and economic circumstances.

2.5 The Cultural Dimension

The cultural model ascribes Aboriginal people's negative association with the criminal justice system to cultural differences between Aboriginal peoples and the dominant Euro-Canadian society (Royal Commission 1996: 40; Jackson 1992: 152). Ross (1992: 62) contends that "...our two societies operate under very different perceptions of the causes of social misbehavior and of the responses which might be most appropriate." Generally, Aboriginal people's world views and life philosophies reflect concepts of justice which are relationship-centered and focus on restoring equilibrium to

the individual, family, and community. Equilibrium is realized through the work of Elders who provide cultural teachings, guidance, and counselling to facilitate pro-social behaviors.

Ross (1992) recently observed Elders from an Oji-Cree community in northwestern Ontario who participated in the sentencing process in court. Regarding the Elders approach, Ross (1992: 167) noted that:

...the Elders seldom speak about the transgression itself, about the past. They focus instead upon the future, upon restoration of peaceful relations. They do not speak of punishment, but they do focus on compensation and restitution to the victim, upon "making things right again."

The Elders recommendations were essentially rehabilitative and preventative in nature with a focus on resolving the underlying problems that lead to the offence. For both offenders and family members they emphasized treatment or healing programs, and substance abuse and family counselling. In this Aboriginal holistic approach, individuals and families are not only preserved, but they become empowered to overcome the barriers to healthy living and reaching their full potential.

The Western approach deals with offenders in an adversarial and confrontational fashion with a consistent reliance on incarceration. Griffiths and Verdun-Jones (1994:

352) note that the judicial system utilizes enormous discretionary powers to impose sanctions on individuals found guilty of any offence. Sanctions are imposed with the often conflicting objectives of rehabilitation, deterrence, and retribution (Griffiths and Verdun-Jones 1994: 485). Incarceration is a punitive sanction that the judicial system utilizes to ostensibly protect society from harm. Unfortunately, the long-term harm can seriously outweigh the short-term gain.

In the judicial system, cultural differences in the manner of communication may give rise to inappropriate sentences. The majority of judges, lawyers, and legislators are non-Aboriginal and male, and they subscribe to the norms of the dominant society. Members of the judiciary often expect guilty individuals to demonstrate a sense of remorse, regret, and a desire for rehabilitation (Hamilton and Sinclair 1991: 38). Pre-sentence reports, psychiatric assessments or reports from detention facilities often describe Aboriginal people as uncommunicative or unwilling to engage in self-examination (Ross 1992: 33; Zimmerman 1992: 387). However, in some instances Aboriginal people may be bound by cultural or ethical rules of behavior, such as "quiet deference to authority", which conflicts with the norms/rituals of the dominant culture (Ross 1992: 150).

Consequently, Aboriginal people's non-conformist behavior may lead to misinterpretations by the judiciary and to inappropriate sentences.

Similarly, Western treatment approaches that are used in correctional institutes are constructed to address the needs of Euro-Canadian members of society. Couture (1995: 57) indicated that, "Many psychologists may operate on unexamined biases, incorrect assumptions, and insufficient information when working with clients or patients whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own." For example, some Aboriginal offenders may be bound by cultural rules when they refuse to discuss intimate thoughts and feelings, or incidents from the past. Moreover, many Aboriginal offenders may altogether refuse to participate in culturally insensitive treatment programs. As Ross (1992: 150) stressed:

...refusals of Native people to do what we assume all truly repentant people would do if they were genuinely motivated towards rehabilitation, should not automatically lead us to the conclusion that they are remorseless individuals with no desire for rehabilitation. Native refusals can just as easily be strong indicators that they maintain a determined allegiance to ethical considerations, amongst which may well be a heartfelt desire to see to it that they never repeat their anti-social act.

Cultural differences in certain behaviors of Aboriginal offenders may lead to mis-diagnoses in psychiatric or

psychological assessments, and offenders' refusal to partake in non-Aboriginal treatment programs may harm their chances for parole.

In addition to cultural differences in Western treatment approaches, the punitive nature of many correctional institutions questions the ability to rehabilitate and deter offenders. Hamilton and Sinclair (1991: 395) stressed that correctional institutions "tend to be characterized by high levels of violence, punitiveness by corrections officers, strong anti-social sentiment among prisoners, tolerance for coercive homosexuality, and relatively poor social relations with both staff and peers." According to an Aboriginal perspective, restoring relationships to a healthy state in this harsh environment would be difficult, particularly when offenders are disconnected from their families and communities by lengthy periods of incarceration. Ross (1996: 38) highlighted Hollow Water's Community Holistic Circle Healing Program's views on incarceration:

Incarceration, they concluded, actually works against the healing process, because "an already unbalanced person is moved further out of balance." The team also came to believe that the threat of incarceration prevents people from "coming forward and taking responsibility for the hurt they are causing. It reinforces the silence, and therefore promotes rather than breaks, the cycle of violence that exists. "In reality," the team wrote, "rather than making the community a safer place, the threat of jail places the community more at risk.

From an Aboriginal perspective, incarceration serves to increase the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual imbalance in individuals. Society may be harmed by the release of individuals whose anger and frustration levels have increased from the violent atmosphere of many correctional institutions. Many Aboriginal people experience alienation from a justice system that conflicts with their ways of handling deviant behavior and maintaining social control. Thus, the application of the Canadian justice system on Aboriginal societies is problematic because it conflicts with their cultures and values and this contributes to the overrepresentation of their members.

2.6 Summary

This chapter discussed three distinct but inter-related theoretical perspectives that have been advanced to explain Aboriginal people's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. Colonialism is a global and domestically specific phenomena that had a devastating impact on the social, economic, and political structures of Aboriginal societies in Canada. Through the state's assimilation policy, Aboriginal people became marginalized and this obstructed their ability to become full participants in the social and economic structures of Canadian society. Cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies

may produce inappropriate and counter-productive responses when Aboriginal offenders are processed through the criminal justice system. The next chapter will examine the literature that focuses primarily on federal Aboriginal offenders, the correctional system, and institutional programming.

CHAPTER 3

'CORRECTIONS' CANADA

3.1 Overview

A review of the literature on Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian correctional system is essential here. The early justice research explored the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the criminal justice system, the characteristics of Aboriginal offenders, and their participation in correctional programs. Most studies highlighted the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in correctional institutions. More recent studies have described the Aboriginal offender population using demographic variables including employment, education, age, offence type, sentence length, family background, and cultural orientation.

Still, there is a paucity of research that focuses on the impact of Aboriginal-specific programming on the participants (Monture-Angus 1996: 349). The available studies basically provide information on the participation rates of Aboriginal offenders in spiritual and cultural activities. Only one study explores the effects of Aboriginal spirituality on the Aboriginal offender population.

3.2 Discovering 'Indians' in Corrections

The early research regarding Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian correctional system was mainly exploratory and descriptive. Two early studies, Indians and the Law (1967) and The Native Offender and the Law (1974), described the Aboriginal incarcerated population, the types of offences committed, and recidivism rates. Some common themes in these studies were: that Aboriginal offenders were overrepresented in many federal and provincial correctional institutes in Canada; they committed less serious crimes than non-Aboriginals; they are disproportionately incarcerated for alcohol-related offences and non-payment of fines; and, they have higher recidivism rates than non-Aboriginals. As the researchers noted, the statistics used in these early reports were problematic because many courts and correctional institutions did not collect information on ethnic background from offenders.

The 1967 study was the first research to explore the nature of Aboriginal peoples' involvement in the correctional system. Despite the disturbing numbers of Aboriginal offenders appearing in the courts and correctional institutions, their participation in both institutional and community-based programming was marginal. Moreover, there were no programs designed specifically to meet the needs of

Aboriginal offenders. Correctional staff assigned them to work-camps or prison-farm annexes, rather than trade-training and vocational-trade training because of low educational achievements, poor employment histories, and lack of interest (Laing 1967: 48). Aboriginal offenders had marginal participation in probation and parole programs due to the inability to meet the programs' criteria (Laing 1967: 42 and 49). Although the researchers did consult with Aboriginal peoples, they tended to rely primarily on the views of criminal justice officials and correctional staff. Consistent with the times, the researchers did not present pertinent information from Aboriginal peoples regarding their views and perspectives on the solutions needed for their rehabilitation.

3.3 Aboriginal Overrepresentation

The majority of the recent research reports also highlight the phenomena of Aboriginal people's overrepresentation in the correctional system (Frideres 1998; LaPrairie 1996; Royal Commission 1996; Griffiths and Verdun-Jones 1994; Linn 1992; Hamilton and Sinclair 1991; Task Force 1988). Overrepresentation refers to the situation where Aboriginal people are incarcerated at higher proportions than their proportion in the general population. In the 1991 Census, Aboriginal people comprised 3.7 percent of Canada's

population, yet as of July 1995, Aboriginal people represented 35 percent of the total federal offender population in the Prairie region; 3.7 percent in Ontario; 1.5 percent in Quebec; 3.6 percent in Atlantic; and 14.2 percent in the Pacific regions (LaPrairie 1996: 48). In provincial institutions between 1988-1995, an average of 31 percent of sentenced admissions in Alberta were Aboriginal, 73 percent in Saskatchewan, 57 percent in Manitoba, 7 percent in Ontario, and 17 percent in British Columbia (LaPrairie 1996: 33).

These statistics indicate the disproportionate levels of Aboriginal people incarcerated in the prairie provinces compared to eastern regions in Canada. LaPrairie (1996: 64) stated that:

Interestingly, the provinces with the highest levels of unemployment, the lowest levels of education and income for both on-reserve and off-reserve registered Indians (Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba) also have the most disproportionate incarceration levels. With high off-reserve migration and permanent residency of aboriginal people in these settings, inner cores of some western cities show signs of becoming entrenched aboriginal-ghetto areas.

Thus, regional differences in Aboriginal urban migration and demographics of Aboriginal people on and off-reserves in western and eastern Canada may provide some understanding of their high incarceration rates in the prairie provinces. In

a 1992 study LaPrairie stated that, "There is some evidence...that the particular characteristics of registered Indians residing in inner cores in Western cities, makes them the most vulnerable of all groups, aboriginal and non-aboriginal alike, to the commission of crime and criminal justice processing." Recent studies (LaPrairie 1992; Cawsey 1991) revealed that the majority of Aboriginal offenders in correctional institutions had committed the crimes in urban centres. Besides McCaskill (1985) and LaPrairie (1992, 1994), few researchers have attempted to explain why Aboriginal people are disproportionately incarcerated in western Canada. Furthermore, there is a lack of research which focuses on the relationship between Aboriginal urbanization and crime (LaPrairie 1994).

3.4 Characteristics of Aboriginal Offenders

A few studies have supplied demographic information on the Aboriginal population in correctional institutions in the areas of employment, education, age, offence type, sentence length, family background, and cultural orientation. Some similarities do exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders in terms of attitudes, peer group support, and personality factors that promote the commission of crime (LaPrairie 1997: 35). However, Aboriginal offenders are distinguishable by their colonial experiences that have

shaped their detrimental economic and social conditions. The Task Force (1988) reported the findings from a study comparing demographic information on 84 federal Aboriginal offenders and 793 non-Aboriginal offenders who became eligible for release in 1983-1984. The results indicated that at the time of the offence, the Aboriginal group was less educated and had lower employment rates compared to the non-Aboriginal group, and two-thirds had no previous skilled employment (Task Force 1988: 26).

Johnston's (1997) study involved a review of the case files of 556 Aboriginal offenders in federal correctional institutions. The research showed that 63 percent of the Aboriginal offenders had employment needs and 54 percent had education needs as identified by their case managers. LaPrairie's (1996) study involved a survey of 252 federal and 250 provincial Aboriginal offenders. Two-thirds of all the respondents identified employment and education as their greatest need. However, in both the Johnston and LaPrairie studies, no comparisons were made with a non-Aboriginal offender population.

LaPrairie (1996: 35) indicated that federal Aboriginal offenders tend to be younger than non-Aboriginal offenders. Most studies mention the problem of alcohol abuse as a common characteristic among many Aboriginal offenders. McCaskill's

(1985) comparative study of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal offenders in correctional institutions in Manitoba indicated that the Aboriginal offender group is characterized by higher levels of economic instability, family dysfunctions, and involvement in the criminal justice system compared to the non-Aboriginal group. Johnston's (1997) study also provided information on childhood background of federal Aboriginal offenders. His research revealed the prevalence of: early drug and alcohol abuse; behavioral problems; physical and sexual abuse; severe poverty; and parental neglect (Johnston 1997: 9). However, as mentioned above, the study did not undertake comparisons with a non-Aboriginal offender group. Furthermore, identifying problems and needs of Aboriginal offenders from case files may limit the quality of the data that is collected.

Waldram's (1997) recent study attempts to fill this gap by using several research techniques including participant-observation, survey instruments, and ethnographic interviews. His research generated information from over 300 Aboriginal offenders in five federal and one provincial correctional institution in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Of the 249 Aboriginal men that were surveyed, 66 percent reported the presence of physical violence in their families while they were growing up, and 80 percent noted that at least one

parent had a drug or alcohol problem (Waldram 1997: 46). The interviews revealed that 35 percent had spent some time in foster homes, 30 percent in residential schools, and 5 percent had been adopted (Waldram 1997: 46). Waldram (1997: 67-68) highlighted some common themes regarding the men's childhood experiences which is summarized by the following statement:

Abuse at the hands of parents, relatives, and those in positions of trust was common. Those inmates invariably experienced the grief of many deaths, including those of parents and siblings. They witnessed violence on many occasions. The basic necessities of life, such as food, and shelter, were often denied them. They were introduced to alcohol and substance abuse at a young age, through which they sought escape...They talked at length about how their lives and identities had been affected by racism, and not just from non-Aboriginal people.

These studies describe the negative influences in the socialization of many Aboriginal offenders which often translate into involvement with the criminal justice system.

The recent studies that describe the type of offences Aboriginal offenders are incarcerated for indicate the changes in offending patterns from less serious to more violent types of offences. The Task Force (1988: 26) reported that as of December 1987, 73 percent of Aboriginal offenders had committed violent crimes compared to under 60 percent of non-Aboriginal offenders. More recently,

LaPrairie (1996: 39-40) indicated that 80 percent of Aboriginal offenders in federal institutions were incarcerated for Schedule 1 offences (more violent) compared to 63 percent of non-Aboriginal offenders. The Cawsey (1991: 6-6) report noted the differences in offence types between federal Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders in Alberta:

Generally, male Native offenders recorded higher involvement with offences against the person and violent offences (except murder) and non-Native offenders recorded higher involvement with property related offences during the five-year period (1985-1989).

Johnston (1997: 7) indicated that the criminal history of the Aboriginal incarcerated population is characterized mainly by assaults (68%), property offences (62.8%), sex offences (36.3%), and homicides (30.8%). Thus, Aboriginal offenders often commit more serious offences compared to non-Aboriginal offenders which may lead to an emphasis on incarceration for the Aboriginal offender group.

Two studies (LaPrairie 1996; Task Force 1988) have found that generally, federal Aboriginal offenders tend to receive shorter sentence lengths than non-Aboriginal offenders. This contradicts the above finding that Aboriginal offenders commit more violent crimes. However, LaPrairie (1996: 45) noted that judges may be considering the marginal conditions of Aboriginal offenders in their sentencing decisions.

Moreover, the nature of Aboriginal crimes may not be perceived as "serious" by the judiciary to warrant lengthy prison sentences. Despite the shorter sentence lengths, the characteristics of federal Aboriginal offenders indicate that they constitute a segment of the incarcerated population with significant economic and social needs.

Some researchers (Waldram 1997; LaPrairie 1996; McCaskill 1985) have stressed that the Aboriginal offender population is not a homogeneous group, rather they often differ according to cultural background, geography, and exposure to mainstream society. Waldram (1997: 28) found that the cultural backgrounds of the Aboriginal offender sample consisted of Northern Cree (22%), Plains Cree (22%), Saulteaux (14%), Metis (14%), and Ojibway (7%). Furthermore, Aboriginal offenders exhibit differences that are based on their orientation to Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultures. In his sample, Waldram identified three cultural orientations including traditional, bi-cultural, and Euro-Canadian. Traditionally oriented individuals are characterized by their extensive exposure to an Aboriginal community in mostly rural settings; bi-culturalists can function in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies and have often experienced residential schools or foster homes; and Euro-Canadian oriented individuals have had little or no exposure to

Aboriginal culture or language, and often have significant experiences in urban settings (Waldram 1997: 29-32). Although Waldram's typology serves to underscore the differences among Aboriginal offenders, the "Euro-Canadian" category is of concern because it leaves the impression that this group is completely void of an Aboriginal identity. Nonetheless, it is important for correctional institutions to be aware of these and other differences among Aboriginal offenders so that they may respond effectively to their needs.

3.5 Aboriginal-Specific Programming

In the 1980s, federal correctional institutions began to implement specific programs to meet the needs of Aboriginal offenders. The Task Force (1988: 10) stated that the foundation for Aboriginal offender treatment emerges from Aboriginal people's special legal status, socio-economic conditions, and cultural and spiritual traditions. Recently, the legislative framework of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (1992) hold provisions for the development of policies and programs that are geared towards the Aboriginal offender population. LaPrairie (1996: 79) described the CSC's approach as:

...cultural/spiritual in nature, with an added emphasis on facilitating the release of Aboriginal offenders and connecting them to communities.

Underlying the approach is the belief that unique solutions are required to reflect the unique cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal inmates, and that loss or lack of cultural roots and identity are the primary causes of involvement in the criminal justice system.

At the federal level, the quantity and quality of Aboriginal-specific programs differs widely from institution to institution. Generally, the types of programs that the CSC offers to Aboriginal offenders include: Native Liaison Services; Traditional Spiritual Practices; Substance Abuse Treatment; Aboriginal Literacy; Native Life Skills Training; Native Awareness; Community Reintegration; Sweat Lodge Ceremonies; Aboriginal Language; and Family Violence programs (LaPrairie 1996: 80). The CSC contracts with Aboriginal Elders who conduct traditional ceremonies, individual and group counselling, and also provide spiritual and cultural knowledge.

Although Aboriginal-specific programs in correctional institutions have been in operation since 1987, there have been no program reviews or evaluations or follow up with the participants (LaPrairie 1996: 82; Royal Commission 1996: 30). The studies that are available indicate that Aboriginal offenders often respond positively to Aboriginal-specific programs. In LaPrairie's (1996: 94) survey of federal and provincial Aboriginal offenders, the respondents participated

'a lot' or 'some' in the following programs: 67 percent in alcohol/drug; 66 percent in cultural/spiritual; 57 percent in job placement; 56 percent in education; 53 percent in sweat lodges; 43 percent in literacy; 42 percent each in group counselling and life skills; 40 percent in individual counselling; 48 percent in 'other' Aboriginal; and, 56 percent in general programs. Federal offenders participated more in spiritual and cultural programs than provincial offenders presumably because they serve longer sentences and the programs are more accessible in the federal system.

Johnston's (1997) study also involved interviews with federal offenders. Of those interviewed, 87 percent participated in Native activities, 46 percent identified the sweat lodge ceremony as their most fulfilling activity, and 45 percent indicated that the most fulfilling quality of their Native activity was the healing aspect and the promotion of positivity (1997: 30-38). Johnston (1997: 66) concluded that, "In terms of the offenders' spirituality, it was established that the Native population constitutes, by their own account, a highly spiritual group, mostly placing a high value on their traditions and culture." Both the LaPrairie and Johnston studies indicate that many Aboriginal offenders demonstrate a high interest in Aboriginal-specific programs and may benefit positively by their participation.

One exploratory study that focused on the Aboriginal ex-offender population is somewhat comparable to a research follow up. The Nechi Institute report, Healing, Spirit and Recovery: Factors Associated With Successful Integration (1994), was based on unstructured interviews with 20 Aboriginal persons to study their transition from serious offender to law-abiding, contributing members of society. The respondents had achieved their law-abiding status for two years or longer and many were employed or upgrading their education. The majority of the respondents, who were between the ages of 32 and 53, indicated that becoming law-abiding citizens was achieved by abstaining from alcohol and drugs, developing an awareness of and commitment to Aboriginal spirituality and culture, becoming tired of substance abuse and prison, and looking for a better life (1994: 76). The respondents maintained their law-abiding status by remaining drug and alcohol free, continuing their quest for spiritual, cultural and personal identity, and dealing with unresolved issues (1994: 76-77).

Waldram (1997), a medical anthropologist, conducted an extensive study which explores the effects of Aboriginal spirituality in mainstream correctional institutions. His central argument is that Aboriginal spirituality is a form of 'symbolic' healing through which therapeutic benefits are

derived. Waldram (1997: 71) stressed that 'symbolic' does not mean something intended but not real, but rather this form of healing depends on the use, interpretation, negotiation, and manipulation of cultural symbols as key to the healing process. Waldram (1997: 67) noted that the work of Elders is the driving force behind the healing process:

Since identity issues are firmly rooted within the colonial experience of oppression and policies of assimilation, they are best handled within an Aboriginal framework. Much of the work of Aboriginal Elders and spiritual leaders in prison is directed towards resolving identity conflict and establishing a positive, proud Aboriginal identity within troubled inmates.

The narratives of the men underlined some of the positive aspects of participating in Aboriginal spiritual activities. For example, the sweat lodge offered spiritual renewal and a greater ability to cope with the prison setting; the sacred circle offered traditional teachings of Elders and an opportunity to express problems in a safe environment; and the Elders offered a unique approach that focuses on the individual's present efforts at rehabilitation and the future, rather than on their past behaviors (Waldram 1997: 134-150).

Waldram's main criticism is that the correctional system does not recognize the inherently therapeutic nature of Aboriginal spirituality. However, Waldram fails to mention

that the CSC has partnered with three Aboriginal communities to develop healing facilities for federally sentenced Aboriginal men and women. These recent correctional reforms appear to indicate serious recognition by the CSC that Aboriginal spirituality is a valuable resource for assisting Aboriginal offenders in their rehabilitation. As of yet, there has been no research undertaken in a healing facility for federal offenders mainly because these are relatively recent correctional reforms. Therefore, this research project will represent an opportunity to explore these recent reforms and to generate knowledge in an emergent area, likely still not fully understood by policy advisors, corrections officials, and society in general.

3.6 Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature on Aboriginal peoples and the correctional system in Canada. The early studies documented Aboriginal overrepresentation in correctional institutions and the characteristics common among Aboriginal offenders including: the nature of their offences; the prevalence of alcohol; the high levels of re-offending; and the lack of participation in institutional and community-based programming. Recent studies that provide demographic information reveal that the Aboriginal offender population is younger, commits more violent offences, and has

higher social and economic needs compared to non-Aboriginal offenders. Moreover, Aboriginal offenders are a culturally diverse group who come from various geographical settings and exposure to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. Recent studies indicate that many Aboriginal offenders participate in Aboriginal-specific programs that are offered in correctional institutions. One exploratory study indicated that Aboriginal spirituality and culture was a contributing factor in the respondents' transition from serious offender to law-abiding member of society. Another mainstream correctional study revealed that Aboriginal spirituality may represent a valuable asset in promoting positive attitudes and behaviors of Aboriginal offenders. The next chapter will discuss the methodology involved in the present thesis research.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Method and Overview

Qualitative research is a suitable method for exploring an uncharted area and for the achieving the objectives of this study. Thus, qualitative research methods were used to study the experiences and perceptions of federally sentenced Aboriginal males who are serving the end portion of their sentence at a healing facility. 'Aboriginal' refers to those individuals who self-identify as either Status Indians, Metis, non-Status Indians or Inuit. The research utilized a semi-structured interview format as the method of data collection which allowed for flexibility when interviewing individuals about their life experiences.

Twelve Aboriginal men participated in this study to generate information on childhood experiences, adult lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors, prison experiences, perceptions of a healing facility, and the impact of Aboriginal-specific programs. Three corrections employees were also interviewed to provide information regarding their perceptions of programming and its effectiveness.

The research methodology in this study is a reflection

of standpoint epistemology which is prevalent in feminist research. Cain (1990: 132) defines standpoint as, "a site which its creator and occupier has agreed to occupy in order to produce a special kind of knowledge and practice and of which he or she is aware in a special, theoretical way." As an Aboriginal person, I wanted to broaden my own understanding of the spirituality and culture of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Accountability to the research population whose standpoint one shares is essential in the production of knowledge (Cain 1990: 136). Thus, I am accountable in this research study in the process of interpreting the meanings behind the life stories and experiences of these twelve Aboriginal men.

In conducting this study, it was important that the participants were approached and treated in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner. Furthermore, ethical issues received substantial attention especially due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter that was discussed. In case the participants experienced trauma from the interviews, the staff was informed of my research beforehand, and every participant was reminded that support was available through the Cree Elder and other correctional employees. Also, to express my appreciation to the interviewees for their participation, a dream catcher gift was offered at the

conclusion of the interviews.

4.2 Gaining Access

When my thesis proposal was nearing completion, I contacted the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and discussed my research project with the senior project manager of Aboriginal programs for the prairie region. His initial response was quite positive when I inquired whether permission might be granted to conduct my research at one of their healing facilities. The CSC Research Committee required several conditions to be met before granting access to their facility including: informed consent on the part of participants; confidentiality of the participants; provision of research results; accessibility of the final report; and approval of the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee. I submitted an outline of my thesis proposal which satisfied the first three requirements. Shortly after, I received security clearance from the CSC and my research project was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee. Once all the conditions were met, I was granted permission to contact the healing facility directly to introduce myself and make final arrangements. The contact person was aware of my research project and was extremely supportive. Final arrangements were made for me to conduct my research at the healing facility from April 15 to April 23, 1998.

4.3 The Research Setting

My research was conducted at the Pe'Sakastew Centre in Hobbema, Alberta. Through the collection of pamphlets, magazine and newspaper articles, I was able to obtain information on the history and background of the Pe'Sakastew Centre. Surrounding the town of Hobbema are the Samson, Ermineskin, Louis Bull, and Montana First Nations. The Pe'Sakastew Centre is a minimum security institution that is operated by the CSC, and is built on land that is owned by the Samson Cree Nation. The Centre houses federal offenders who are serving sentences of two or more years. Offenders may be transferred to the Centre from other institutions if they are granted a conditional release by the National Parole Board or have achieved their minimum security status. The Pe'Sakastew Centre can house a total of 60 offenders, 40 on minimum security and 20 on conditional release. Opened in April of 1997, the Centre had been in operation for one year when I conducted this research.

Although the Pe'Sakastew Centre is an institution operated by the CSC, its philosophical approach emphasizes a process of healing that is grounded in culture and traditions. Pe'Sakastew is a Cree word meaning the rays of sun in the early morning before the sun appears. Offenders at the Centre are called Owiciyisiwak which is also a Cree

word meaning a person who wants to help himself. Several aspects of Aboriginal spirituality and culture are incorporated in the Centre's physical layout. For example, the Centre's 11 buildings are positioned in a circular fashion which is representative of the medicine wheel, and the design of some buildings are representative of the wolf, the crow or the eagle (Sheremata 1997: 33).

A Case Management Team designs a Correctional Plan for the Owiciyisiwak. The main objective of the Correctional Plan is to assist the Owiciyisiwak in addressing the criminogenic factors which have lead to their involvement in the criminal justice system. The Correctional Plan contains several expectations that are required of the Owiciyisiwak including: abiding by the Centre's rules and regulations; interacting effectively with others with little or no supervision; and to be motivated to help himself by participating in and meeting the objectives of programs (Belhumeur 1997: 4). The Centre offers a broad range of programs including: Aboriginal programs; Education programs; Living Skills programs; Substance Abuse programs; Psychological services; and Chaplaincy services.

4.4 Aboriginal Programming

The Owiciyisiwak are strongly encouraged to participate in the spiritual and cultural components that lie within the

realm of Aboriginal programming. The Centre's two male, Cree Elders play a primary role in the delivery of spiritual and cultural programs. The Elders are the key facilitators in the sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies, talking circles, fasts, individual and group counselling, family counselling, and culture camps. In addition, the Elders offer a supportive role in the delivery of traditional activities such as feasts, round dances, pow-wows, traditional arts and crafts, and community liaison services. In keeping with the Centre's philosophical approach, the main objective of spiritual and cultural programming is, "Holistic cleansing of Spirit, Emotions, Mind and Body. A sincere commitment to the Spiritual and Cultural Programs will promote a change in attitudes and behaviors" (Program Description Guide: 2). Other Aboriginal programs that are offered include Finding our Gentle Spirits, Building Healthy Relationships, and Conversational Cree.

4.5 The Method Sample

When I conducted my research there was a total of 32 Owiciyisiwak, of which 27 had been at the Centre for a minimum of three weeks or longer. It was important that the participants had spent some time at the Centre because the purpose of my study is to understand the affects of Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming in a healing

facility. My first day at the Centre I was given a tour and was introduced to several employees and Owiciyisiwak. Regarding access to the research population, Waldram (1996: xii) found that, "...convincing individual offenders to participate in an interview was quite another task. One must remember that prisons are characterized by secrecy and paranoia; there is a perceived need to control knowledge and information about oneself." Initially, I felt that several Owiciyisiwak were suspicious of my presence and I learned that some were under the impression that I was a CSC employee. To overcome any potential barriers to the research population, I clarified to several Owiciyisiwak that I was a student and not an employee of the CSC, and offered a straightforward and brief account of my research project. I was able to talk with many Owiciyisiwak because my desk was located in a building which housed the library, the weight room, the arts and crafts room, and where programming took place.

Once I explained the nature of my project and clarified any misconceptions, the Owiciyisiwak that were interested in being a participant proceeded to schedule an interview, usually for the following day. The majority of the interviews were pre-scheduled in this manner and two or three participants discussed my project with other Owiciyisiwak

who, in turn, sought me out to schedule an interview. Judd, Smith, and Kidder (1991: 134) referred to this as "accidental sampling", where the researcher simply takes the available cases until the sample reaches a designated size.

4.6 The Interviews

All of the interviews were conducted in an interview room that was made available to me by the Centre. Before the interviews began, the informed consent form (see Appendix I) was reviewed and signed to clarify both the purpose of the study and the issue of confidentiality. The interviewees were asked to choose a pseudonym that I could use in my research to protect their identity. All of them did except for one who requested that I use his real name. Information was collected regarding the interviewee's age, education level and occupation at the time of admission, cultural background, and Aboriginal status.

The twelve interviewees were from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. All of the participants spoke English and their ages ranged from 23 to 50. Although I did not ask direct questions relating to criminal activity, most of the participants volunteered this information. The participants were serving sentences for a range of offences including first degree murder, assault, robbery, and impaired driving. Their cultural backgrounds included Cree, Ojibway, Sioux,

Sarcee, Blackfoot, and Assiniboine. Six self-identified as being Status Indians, 5 Metis, and 1 non-Status Indian. Ten interviewees had spent the early part of their lives in small, rural communities or on reserves and many had later moved to urban centres. The average length of time the interviewees had been at the Centre was approximately 3.5 months.

The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions that dealt with childhood experiences, adult lifestyles, the mainstream prison system, the Pe'Sakastew Centre, and Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming (see Appendix II). The interviews were conducted in a flexible manner so that the participants could speak freely about their experiences and provide any supplementary information. As Lofland and Lofland (1995: 82) suggested, I used a method of probing that was spontaneous in order to amplify or clarify an account. Sometimes interviewees inadvertently answered questions in other parts of the interview schedule. The interview schedule represented a checklist that I used to ensure that most of the items were discussed during the interviews.

All of the interviews progressed smoothly and efficiently. The interviewees made me feel welcome and for the most part, I felt they spoke candidly and were

comfortable in discussing various aspects of their lives. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. With the interviewee's permission, all of the interviews were tape-recorded, with the exception of my discussion with the two Elders. After every interview I made field notes which highlighted my impressions and thoughts of the interview.

4.7 Data Analysis

Once the fieldwork was complete, I began preparing the data for analysis. I transcribed the interview tapes verbatim into Corel WordPerfect. This was a time consuming process that took anywhere from eight to twelve hours to transcribe each interview. The average length of the interviews was nine pages, single-spaced. The shortest interview was six single-spaced pages and the longest was twenty single-spaced pages. I reviewed the interview transcriptions and my field notes numerous times. I made files for each interview and attached a housekeeping sheet to every file. The housekeeping sheet was utilized as a written aid which was helpful in keeping factual information organized and easily obtainable.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a number of activities including coding, matrix displays, and identifying emergent themes. To facilitate this process, I cut and pasted answers to specific questions from the

transcriptions onto five by eight index cards. Early childhood, adult lifestyles, and prison experiences were placed on blue cards and experiences at the Pe'Sakastew Centre were placed on yellow cards. Altogether, I collected about 200 index cards. The number of analytic categories increased slightly as the analysis continued. The matrices were extremely useful in identifying possible themes and detecting any gaps or missing data. An analytic category that had large segments of missing data was dropped from the analysis. This occurred in the categories relating to the nature of familial relationships prior to their incarceration in the mainstream prison system and while at the Pe'Sakastew Centre.

This type of qualitative research has weaknesses and strengths. The sample is non-random and the results are not representative of the Aboriginal population who are serving their sentences at a healing facility. Moreover, the possibility exists that there are unknown biases built into this type of "accidental" sample. Despite these weaknesses, this qualitative research permitted exploration into the participants' experiences and perceptions in ways that quantitative methods cannot. This small-scale study was able to generate considerable amounts of insightful data from a relatively isolated population in our society. I feel

confident about the quality of the data. The questions were presented in an unbiased manner, and the participants were relaxed and able to speak candidly and honestly about their lives. Therefore, I feel that this research has expanded our knowledge of the impact of Aboriginal spirituality and culture on federally sentenced males at the Pe'Sakastew Centre.

4.8 Summary

This chapter has described the qualitative research methods that were employed to achieve the objectives of this study. I chronicled the stages in this research including gaining access, methods sample, interview process, and data analysis. Furthermore, I incorporated background information on the Pe'Sakastew Centre to highlight the location, physical layout, philosophy, and the nature of Aboriginal-specific programming. The last section addressed the weaknesses and strengths of this research in which I conclude that it broadened our knowledge of the effects of Aboriginal spirituality and culture on federally sentenced Aboriginal males. Before the findings relating to the Pe'Sakastew Centre are presented, the next chapter documents the interviewees childhood experiences, adult lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors, prison experiences, and the impact of Aboriginal spirituality and culture in prison.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIALIZATION AND THE PATH OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

5.1 Overview

Research by Waldram (1997), the Nechi Institute (1994), and LaPrairie (1994), indicate that it is critical to examine various experiences in Aboriginal offenders' lives. The first section deals with the interviewees' early experiences in which the family, school, and community played a critical role in the development of these individuals. Second, the interviewees experiences in adolescence and adulthood reveal that many were on a path of self-destruction. Third, I explore the interviewees experiences while they were incarcerated in the mainstream prison system and the impact that Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming had on them.

5.2 Socialization

To a large extent, an individual's adult life is shaped by the socialization processes that occur in childhood. During this early period the family, school, peer group, community, and other agents of socialization have an enormous impact on the development of an individual's self-perception, attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles. The family is the

first reference group whose values, norms, and practices children adopt and refer to in evaluating their own behavior (Elkin and Handel 1989: 143). Unfortunately, the processes and legacy of colonialism have handicapped many Aboriginal people from effectively socializing their children. Generations of Aboriginal people were "parented" by residential schools or the foster care system which deprived them of both their parenting role models and the methods of teaching the values and practices of their respective cultures (Bopp and Bopp 1997: 10; Royal Commission 1996: 18-19). For many Aboriginal peoples, the traditional cultural resources and effective parenting skills have been replaced with a host of social problems that they struggle with on a daily basis.

5.3 Violence and Substance Abuse

In this study, the twelve interviewees discussed their childhood experiences that revolved around family, school, community, and exposure to Aboriginal spirituality and culture. Several of the interviewees described positive experiences in their families that reflected periods of stability, cohesion, and cooperation. As Robert said, "I had some good times with my family. I remember when I used to live in Edmonton, all my brothers were there. Those were to me the happiest days of my life." Similarly, others revealed

that overall their early experiences with school and their communities were satisfactory.

However, these stable periods were often undermined by more difficult and confusing times. Eight interviewees indicated that as time went on they were separated from their biological parents, sometimes permanently, by death, divorce, placement in foster care, and adoption. The majority did not have the benefit of learning the values and beliefs of their respective cultures which is key to formulating a strong identity (Royal Commission 1996: 49). Only two had learned an Aboriginal language and three were exposed to the sweat lodge and other ceremonies. Seven interviewees indicated that violence, alcohol and/or drugs, racism, and poverty were pervasive influences in their childhoods. These themes were interwoven in their experiences with family, school, peer group, and community. Jimmy, who was raised on a reserve, witnessed substantial incidents of violence and alcoholism by family members.

Very, very violent. Distrustful. It was really dysfunctional. I thought everybody used to drink and get into fights and drink and get drunk and then in the morning I thought everybody used to collect all the beer bottles and take them in and get some more money. We were very poor and I didn't have a T.V. I remember the day my dad first bought a T.V. but I didn't really know. **I didn't know then that that's not normal to live like that.**
(emphasis added)

Similarly, Ken was exposed to a considerable amount of violence, alcoholism and drug abuse by family members.

Oh my family. Well gee, my family are the type of people that would boot your door open to get even with you if you pissed them off. My family they're violent people, they were violent. They're slowly moving away from that. They were very violent people. They would fight. A lot of drinking, lots of drinking boy. That's where I picked up on drinking because I thought it was like a part of life you know. Same with smoking dope. **I always thought it was a part of life.** If somebody mouthed off like to my family they would get into a fight. I thought that was part of life. Instead of talking it out at schools I would fight. (emphasis added)

Les also witnessed violence and alcohol abuse by family members.

Even a lot of times when my father used to drink a lot even though he drank he was always there, even though he recognized that he had a problem with alcohol. I grew up seeing that. I grew up seeing my relatives drinking. I grew up seeing them fighting. For me that kinda slows you down after that eh. But it was my choice. It's not that he hit me or anything. **It's just something that I learned and something that I picked up on.** (emphasis added)

Mo indicated that he was a victim of physical abuse by his alcoholic father and how the abuse escalated after his father's sobriety.

There's not much positive about my life really. I had a father that drank a lot and beat my mother and beat us. A lot of violence. I was really happy when my father quit drinking but he had become more violent. He was even around more. I guess maybe that's why. I don't know what it was.

The emphasized sentences reveal that these interviewees came to believe that the behaviors of family members represented both a normal part of life and something that was to be learned. Subsequent analysis reveals how these and other childhood experiences had a negative impact on several of the interviewees in their adult lives.

5.4 Racism

As members of a racial minority, Aboriginal people often encounter racism and discrimination by members of the dominant society and their institutions. Regarding the school system, Frideres (1998: 155) stated that, "In the long-term, racism results in a serious and permanent distortion of the Aboriginal children's self-image." Five interviewees recalled negative experiences that occurred from the racist attitudes of peers and teachers, both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities, and even family members. Darren, who was raised in a series of foster homes, described the racism he experienced by his white peers in school.

Me being a Native child living in a white home. I went to school these kids were asking me, "What's wrong? Your mom didn't want to keep ya? You weren't good enough for her? Why don't you just go back and be with your piyuut buddies and your wagon burner?" I used to hear all that crap from them. Kids can be so cruel because they never took the time to understand, well maybe there's something going on here than just more than that. So at

first I just took it in and I walked away. And then one day I finally just sat up and someone says something to me today that's it I'm gonna lash out. This was about grade four I guess. So in grade four, a person that said something to me I turned around and I just beat the crap out of them and I mean I beat them. And every time after that I did the same thing. They said something to make me think that being an Indian is less than something I beat them up. So that's how I was trying to function. It started in grade four and that's why I'm in here, through violence.

Robert recalled that he was expelled from school after he reported the racist remarks by his teacher to his mother.

I ran into racism when I was there and I got shipped back to Calgary. I remember that too very clearly in my mind. I remember going to that school and I remember that teacher he was saying, "Indians you should be lucky that we came here. You should be lucky we're here to take care of you now." I was just a kid. I didn't know what Indians were. I didn't know growing up with Indians you know, we don't basically tell each other that we're Indians. We're just there having fun ya know. Doesn't matter what color we are or nothing eh? I remember hearing that eh? I was a very quiet person and I then when I came home that night I was asking my mom, "What's a dirty Indian?" She got mad at me and then I told her what my teacher told me. The next day she got me back over there and then she starts giving them shit and the next day after that I got expelled from school. Teacher said I was doing drugs.

Mo, who is Metis, described the community he was raised in as "very racist". He recalled how he felt unaccepted by both his Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers which often lead to violence and even physical abuse by teachers.

Then I had to go to school, that's when a lot of trouble started. I attended a white school. They

didn't think I belonged there and they didn't think I belonged with the Natives in Red Earth either so I was kinda caught in between. I used to get ganged up on all the time by the white kids and stuff like that. It was pretty violent too. And then you're always at fault so you got beat up by your teachers also. It's hard for people these days to understand that that could actually happen, but it did. And there was nothing you could do or your family could do about it or would do about it. It was an acceptable thing because you were less than a human being.

Similarly, Nolan, whose mother is Ojibway and father is white, indicated that he felt alienated by the Aboriginal community.

We moved to the reserve and my dad became a police officer, worked for the Ontario provincial police. Um, so we moved around a lot 'cause they posted him here, posted him there, posted him here 'cause he was a First Nations constable because his wife was Native so they said he has more access to the community I guess. We moved all over. That was rough too because not only was I a white kid, I was a cop's kid (laughter). So I had to fight a lot, defend myself, defend my sisters. I have two younger sisters and we were always defending each other, my sisters.

Nolan stated further that his father's family would not accept him or his family because of their Aboriginal background.

My dad actually his family, I don't know any of my dad's family. They don't like us because we're Native and they don't like my dad because he married a Native. So I don't know any of my dad's family. My dad says well, he gets more love from my mom's family than he does his own ya know so. I would have liked to have known my grandmother though, my dad's mom, but she doesn't like us because of her own personal opinion.

Ken recalled his experiences with racism that was perpetrated against him by his stepfather.

My step-dad would be on us, he would put us down all the time. He'd call us savages uh, wagon-burners and stuff like that. Stuff that was uncalled for. He would always tell me I'd end up like my uncles you know. You're gonna be a gangster. So as I was growing up I soon adopted that role of a gangster.

As indicated in the narratives, many of the interviewees defended themselves against the racism by becoming violent and aggressive. This early aggressive behavior acted as a defense mechanism against the hurt, frustration, and confusion that racism often elicits. These accounts of violence, substance abuse, and racism that the interviewees were exposed to as children would have a devastating impact and contribute to their later involvement in the criminal justice system.

Four interviewees did not specifically mention whether violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse, or racism were part of their childhood experiences, and they may not have been. Still, for these interviewees, other key events in their childhoods appears to have had a negative and long-lasting effect on them later in life. J.J., who is from a northern community, described an incident when the police came to arrest his brother and how it affected him.

I had one older brother that died eh and he was in

the prison system. But I hated authority right from five years old. I remember they came to get my brother two cops and I opened the door. They got my brother and I kicked that cop in the leg eh. I was crying when they took my brother and I hated cops right that day. But I remember I wanted to be like my brother eh, you know because I loved him so much. I was 15 years old, I think I took the rap for something because I wanted to go to jail like my brother did. Imagine, wanting to do that at five years old. I don't know, that's a tough decision to make at that age but I did.

Morley, who was raised on a reserve, recalled a difficult period in his life in which he spent eleven months in a hospital. He later mentioned that he had trouble functioning in school because he started late, the damage to his memory, and he spoke little English.

When I was a kid too I barely lived. I was in the hospital for close to eleven months. They took a piece of bone back here and they kind of screwed my memory up a little bit. I was in a coma for a long time I guess too eh. Came out of it. That's where my dad made a promise too that if I lived he promised one of the spirits. So I did and ever since he quit. He doesn't drink today...I was in bed for that long. Never seen my own sisters and my brother for that long. And sometimes I think it was kind of hard because I lost part of my life there.

Although the childhood experiences of the interviews are varied, many of their stories contained the themes of violence, substance abuse, racism, and poverty. These negative influences became the norms, values, and practices that they would later adopt in their adolescent and adult lives. Marked by the affects of colonization, their

association with the criminal justice system was imminent.

5.5 Adolescence

For the majority of the interviewees, their adolescent years were turbulent. Four had left home at an early age and their relationships with their families began to deteriorate. The majority had not completed high school and only one had a grade twelve. As teenagers, five interviewees began to abuse alcohol and/or drugs, five began committing crimes, and four became involved in the youth justice system. Two indicated that they became involved in youth gangs. At age fourteen, Jimmy left home and began selling drugs and stealing to support himself.

I left home at a very early age - 14 - and what's a 14 year old kid going to do on the street? I started selling drugs, stealing. That's basically how I left home. I was going to school but children's aid and welfare didn't care that I wasn't living at home as long as I was going to school right? School is where I sold most of my drugs. So it was real easy to step through the system.

He described the breakdown in the relationship with his family due to his alcohol and drug abuse.

Like I said I moved out when I was 14. Due to the fact that I was drinking so much and doing so much drugs that we were constantly fighting. I didn't want to quit doing drugs and I didn't want to quit drinking. I didn't care about anything else. So my whole lifestyle was based towards getting more alcohol, getting more drugs, getting money to do that right? We always, always fought. I remember having these horrific fights. It was just

terrible, terrible fights as a teenager. And I just left. I got fed up and I didn't want to have anything to do with any of them.

At fifteen, Robert began abusing alcohol. Shortly after, he started committing minor crimes and also became involved in a youth gang. He describes the double life he lead as a youth.

About 15 is when I started drinking. My older brother got me drunk. That's when I ran into some boys and we just started off doing petty stuff. Not really full blown crime yet. Just doing petty stuff stealing here and there and whatever. Finally about 16 I got into with a gang. I was living a double life you could say on my reserve. 'Cause in the city I was one of these boys. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. There's only a few people that knew about the way I was down there. But then when I came back to the reserve, when I came back home, I was way different. I was helping the Elders. I was going around being friendly ya know helping out people. But then yet I was turning around exactly the same night and go do something. That was pretty stupid basically at the time. I was in that gang for a long time too, 'til about 21. After a while they got to know me. They got to know how I was because people would come into Calgary and they'd see how I was and they'd see how many people were with me and who was with me especially. And then they knew and then people got to know me out on the reserve and then all of a sudden I became bad. I was one of the bad guys on the reserve. One of the guys not to associate with because I started recruiting the young people on my reserve to come with us. I recruited over half of them and they were just all kids at the time. I'm thankful that they smartened up, none of them's in the pen right now. Just me. I was young at that time too eh? All you think about at that time in life was numbers. You want to be the biggest and the best, the baddest and the best in Calgary eh? It's all your thinking about is just getting these punks do some stuff for you

that's about it eh?

At twelve, Nolan's family moved to an urban centre where he soon found acceptance in a youth gang.

I lived on the reserve until maybe 12, 11 and then we moved to the city and then that's when everything went downhill for me. I wasn't used to city life and we were living right in the north end. It's a rough neighborhood. But the thing was I could really connect with most of those kids there because they were all half breeds just like me and we all clicked up ya know. Early 90s is when I got involved with a gang. Actually since I was young, when I first got there.

His relationship with his family began to breakdown and his mother became afraid of him.

But that's how I lived for years. It got to the point where my dad kicked me out when I was 15. My mom's scared of me. She didn't really like it when I came home to visit 'cause she was scared of me. She didn't know what to expect from me or anything you know. I've never been violent to my mom or my dad. I've always respected them like a lot but she was scared of me because of the way I was. I started to get a name around my neighborhood and stuff too eh, 'cause that's what I was working towards I wanted to be known eh. The police knew me, they beat me up a lot. I got beat up a lot by the police and that made me hate the system even more. And also being called racial terms and stuff. Like I've heard so many racial terms it kind of made me hate the system even more. I wanted to fight the system, do everything opposite of the system.

In their adolescent years, these interviewees lived on the margins of society. At this stage, the beginnings of criminal behavior, alcohol and drug dependency, anti-social attitudes, and negative peer associations are evident. The

following section documents the interviewees descriptions of their adult lifestyles, behaviors, and attitudes.

5.6 Adult Experiences

As the interviewees described the types of lifestyles they led as adults, it became evident that many were on a self-destructive path. Ten indicated that they abused alcohol and/or drugs, four were selling drugs and involved in other illegal activities. The majority had a negative attitude towards themselves, others, and life in general. Several had an extensive and repeated involvement in the criminal justice system and had moved from the youth to the provincial and federal systems. Five were employed and had indicated that their lifestyles revolved around working and partying. As Ernest noted, "Basically that's all I did is work and party after work." For these interviewees, alcohol and drug dependency would be a major factor that would lead to their association with the justice system for impaired driving offences.

Interestingly, those that described their childhoods as least problematic were incarcerated for impaired driving. Those that described their childhoods as problematic were incarcerated for committing more serious and violent offences. They had adopted the most dangerous lifestyles, self-destructive behaviors, and anti-social attitudes as

adults. Moreover, their general attitude towards life was extremely pessimistic and fatalistic. As Mo stated, "My life has been fights, bad relationships, and jail. Mostly my attitude was that I got shit on by the Creator. That was my lot in life and I guess there had to be people like me." Similarly, Jimmy lead a dangerous lifestyle that revolved around prison, illegal activities, and alcohol and drug abuse. By this time, he had totally alienated himself from his family who were scared of him because of his behaviors.

The lifestyle that I had gotten into was recidivism. In and out of jail in and out of jail. Steal for two months or three months at a time. Once I got into my teens then I started going to jail. I got out of youth centres I started going into prisons. I would stay out for about two or three months at a time and then go back, get out and go back, get out and go back. The crimes were escalating and throughout this all I was selling drugs whenever I got out. I didn't tell anybody I sold drugs, it's the only thing I knew how to do. I starting getting bigger connections and I started putting up coke houses. That's where I was the last time I was out. I got out from Stoney and I was out ten days and I had my own coke house running by that time. It was a very, very, very dangerous life with people coming by wanting to off you quite a lot. We always had guns in the house all the time. I started getting into debt and I needed a lot of money and I went and got some money from a bank and that's how I picked up that bit. I look back at it now and there's parts I can barely remember and some parts stand out. But throughout it all it was just like this insanity that I was in and there was no way to get out of it.

He later described his attitude during that period in his

life.

I didn't believe I was going to reach the age of 21 and that affected all my decisions. I didn't care about anything. Why save money when I couldn't be there? I had about four years left. I remember having a beer in each hand and just laughing 'cause I didn't care. So what? Have fun. I thought it was cool to do drugs and to drink, to stay up and drink for four or five days at a time was cool. But the overall thing was that I didn't care. It was all a joke. All my friends had the same attitude. I don't care. You're going to put me in jail? I don't care. I can get high there. My friends get drunk once a week and get high every day in jail. It doesn't stop. That was the overall factor was that I just didn't care about anything. I didn't have a conscience, it never bothered me. That was the basic attitude that I had.

Robert, who was involved in youth gang until he was 21, described the path of self-destruction that he was on. During this time, Robert's family was also scared of him.

It was chaotic. It was really chaotic. Like I told you I tried to quit drinking and then I just couldn't find a way out and I ended up back with those guys. But the reason why I tried to quit drinking was because at that time in my life I seriously thought, like I know now, that I was self-destructive and I didn't care what happened to me. If I had the guts to kill myself back then I would have done it but that was the only thing that was stopping me was because I didn't have the guts. I was too scared to do it myself. So a better way was to get somebody else to do it like doing stuff to them that would make them do it. That's how I ended in up in that treatment centre because somebody put a gun to my head in public twice but then the gun didn't come off. So then you know I didn't care. It didn't bother me. I was drunk at the time and I didn't care at all.

Ken described his dangerous lifestyle that reflected gangs

and illegal activity.

My lifestyle? Oh my lifestyle was, I got in with the Hells Angels, Rebels, I was part of the Black Dragons. I was selling drugs, doing scams. We were breaking into restaurants and I'd take the alcohol and sell it and stuff like that. I lived in clubhouses eh. All the B&Es I did was mostly stores. It was all stores. I used to take them and sell em...I got shot there. I got shot, just grazed me that's all it did eh.

He recalled his attitude at that time.

My attitude? I didn't care if I lived or died. My attitude it was, I'd be walking across the street and if a guy looked at me in the eyes I would be asking like what's his problem, why are you gawking at me? Like I didn't care. I didn't care whatsoever. A lot of people were afraid of me 'cause they knew what I was capable of. Like I didn't even notice it myself. I never really thought about it, about any of this stuff eh. To me it was my lifestyle. I didn't care.

Similarly, Nolan led a dangerous life due to his association with a gang and illegal activities.

I just lived life day by day 'cause I had the Indian Posse to worry about. They did a few drive bys on my house and stuff like that you know. I had like, I was into dealing and stuff and I had a dealer that didn't like me and stuff. So it was day by day I didn't know if tomorrow was coming and stuff but I didn't care. I was high all the time, drunk all the time you know. I was making good money and I just didn't care it was day by day, day by day. It was like that until I got some youth charges but I never did any time until I was 18.

One theme that is prevalent in the narratives relating to the interviewee's adult experiences is death. Six interviewees had experienced the death of close family

members and friends which would have a negative impact on their behaviors. To help them deal with their losses, they often found solace in alcohol and/or drugs and other self-destructive behaviors. Darren, who has a twenty year history of illegal drug activity, revealed how he became even more violent and self-destructive after his brother's death.

I had a brother with me in the foster system. He hung himself. That alone I had no fear. I had no feelings of pity for anybody. I had no feelings even for myself. It didn't matter to me if I hurt you, if I left you bleeding on the floor. If you stabbed me or if I killed you or if you killed me. It didn't matter to me anymore. So that's when my violence really took up a notch. This is what I been working on in here. I was really violent, really violent.

Les described how his father's suicide affected him.

I found my father. He had committed suicide. That had a big impact on me. From there I just kind of shut everybody out. My mother, my uncles you know everybody more or less. I just kinda went on my own thing eh. I started drinking. I started hurting people. I started fighting for no reason sometimes 'cause I carried a lot of pain I didn't know how to deal with it. I was too proud to go tell someone my problem.

He indicated what would happen while he was under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

When I'd take the drugs and the alcohol. Mix the drugs, mix the alcohol with the pills and then sometimes I wouldn't know what I was doing. Next thing you know I would wake up the next day and you know I had beat the shit out of somebody. I would start a fight or else I stuck up for the person.

Ernest, who lost both his parents within one year, turned to

alcohol to help him cope with the anger and frustration.

And stuff happened again when my parents passed away and I lost that again and man. My dad passed away in April here five years ago with cancer and never got to see the grandchildren grow up and then seven months later my mom past away with cancer in one year. So I fell off the wagon and I'm back here again. So I was mad 'cause they never got to see their grandchildren grow up. That's the way it goes. Who said life was fair.

As the narratives revealed, several interviewees described their lifestyles as dangerous and chaotic. These dysfunctional adult lives contained an abundance of problems related to alcohol and/or drug abuse, gang involvement, prison, criminal activity, violence, and other self-destructive behaviors. The attitudes that they had towards themselves and others was particularly negative and troublesome. Moreover, several interviewees had experienced substantial losses that would have an adverse effect on their behaviors and attitudes. Consequently, all of the interviewees would find themselves in conflict with the criminal justice system. The interviewees prison experiences, Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming in prison, the role of Elders, and the healing journey are documented in the following sections.

5.7 Prison Experiences

As a result of the types of lifestyles the interviewees led, the majority had a lengthy history of involvement in the

mainstream correctional system. As the interviewees described their prison experiences, several themes became evident including: the destructive and restrictive nature of prisons; where violence and aggression are the norm; and negative attitudes are reinforced. Several interviewees indicated that being violent and aggressive is key to surviving the dangerous prison environment. Others indicated that the prison system failed miserably in its goals to rehabilitate and prepare offenders for release into society. Mo, who is serving a life sentence, described some of his prison experiences that underscore the violent and dangerous nature of a federal prison.

Edmonton Max was a human slaughterhouse that's what it was. 1983, 1984, 1985 those three years especially but I mean those other years they weren't good either but those years. They used to have crews going on in the courtyard and washing the walls and the sidewalks, washing the blood off of them eh? Finally they even quit that, they just started painting the sidewalks every two weeks. You wouldn't believe it. Even if you were stabbed and you weren't dying you didn't go to the hospital or nothing like that. We basically had our own hospital ward where the guys used to stitch you up and keep you high and feed you and stuff like that. Because the thing there is if you got stabbed and you weren't gonna die and you got the prison locked down because of it, the guys that lost their money and their drugs and their guns and their knives and stuff like that, then you were in danger I tell you. So you didn't want to ever, unless you were dying, go and try and get help. The brothers would be after you.

Jimmy, who has a twelve year history of involvement in the

prison system, characterized the same federal prison as restrictive due to the high levels of violence.

The Edmonton Max when I was in there, um, it's a very restricted environment and most people if you're not working you will be in your cell for about 20 hours a day. They let you out for a couple of hours in the evening on your unit they call it the range you can go out on the range. But it's a very closed environment you can't go anywhere there's one hallway and another hallway and that's basically it. And then for the rest of the evening they let you go to the gym. Um, but there's so much violence there that you can't go anywhere without being searched wherever you go so you have to be physically searched and you have to go through a metal detector.

Several interviewees indicated that survival in prisons is dependent on one's ability to become violent and aggressive.

Robert said:

When I came in I had to play the role inside. Like I had to play the role that I was this tough, solid guy that you didn't want messing around. The first three months I was there that's all basically I did was just scrap, fight. When I got to Bowden the first three months there that's all I did too.

Similarly, Jimmy described the aggressive and manipulative behaviors that he adopted to survive prison life.

When I went into the pens throughout all these years I grew up with these, I guess you would call survival skills right? And in the pen they just became more harder and you really, really had to watch your step, and watch what you say all the time, and watch your back. And you couldn't let nobody get one over on top of you or you look like a fool or you look like some punk and someone will take advantage of that right? You really learned how to tell if people fear you. Like you could tell right away if that guy's afraid of you man you

could go over there and take advantage of it and make that person do anything you wanna do 'cause he's afraid of you. They do that in the penitentiaries and that's how I basically was with all these survival skills that I had and they're very strong right? 'Cause I survived in those pens and I didn't get stabbed and I didn't get killed.

Mo described the process of constructing a con identity as a tool to survive in prison. He revealed how prison impoverishes one's emotional side.

Like, when you live in such an unrealistic world in a pen you make changes to yourself to your personality unconsciously and you become a different person gradually and all of a sudden you think it's you. The way I see things is that you kill one emotion, you kill one feeling inside of yourself and all your other emotions and feelings go too. You eventually kill them all. Like ya know fear. You're scared from the day you get picked up. So you kill that by thinking that you're the worst person around just to survive. Love. You don't dare love 'cause who is there to love? And trust. So you love and trust no one. Caring. You can't care. You care for somebody and right away that life is worth five grams of hash. You don't dare care. So you just become a stone. And you go there like that and you're sitting there and you want better things but I'll tell you it's a heck of a hump to overcome.

Several interviewees described how prisons often function to turn troubled individuals into those whose attitudes are even more negative. Les noted that exposure to the violence and danger in prison can have an adverse effect on individuals.

A lot of the guys can't handle it inside. They have problems with the guards or whatever. Kind of hard on the guys eh. Like when I've been up there I've seen a lot. They'll cut your throat or you get stabbed or some guys are after you because

they're jealous themselves. A lot of things you see inside that you never thought you would see in your life eh. Up there it's worse than in society. It's worse than in here. But you know people figure they can lock you up and that's it. There's nothing happening. That person can get a lot more bitter inside eh.

Ernest explained how the two months he spent in prison failed to help him resolve his alcohol problem.

I was in Edmonton, I was in assessment. I was in there for eight weeks, locked up for 22 hours a day. Out for an hour for a shower, and out for an hour to exercise and there's time for yourself like watching T.V. As far as I'm concerned because a guy has a drinking problem and admitted it, put him in a rehab center for 30-60 days, send him back to work, check up on him, put him on probation, whatever for a year two years, you know attend some AA out on the streets. But this way it makes a guy more frustrated I think in my books, I could be wrong, I don't know. You're locked up, fine. I don't know, it costs taxpayers money to keep me in here for this, that's not right. It's not solving the problem for one thing, it's just making it worse.

Similarly, Nolan revealed that even the time he spent in a provincial prison had a negative effect on him.

That was such a waste of time 'cause I just went through a process. I had to sit in a dorm for four months and then they kicked me out on a TA. I didn't do no programs or anything. I was actually worse than when I went in because I learned stuff in there. I met people you know like connections and stuff. I came out with this attitude, worse attitude than when I went in.

He later described the gang dynamics in prison and how this can impede the rehabilitation process.

And another thing I don't like about the

institutions is there's a discrimination against gang members. You got gang members so what they'll do is they'll throw you all into one range with gang members which isn't so good because then you got all these gang members who are enemies with you. You got to click up with the guys that you know. You have to click up with them or else you're gonna get done in, plain and simple. Then when you click up with them the staff see you clicked up with these guys and they put on the paperwork, "Isn't serious about changing blah, blah, blah." You're serious about changing, you stay away from everybody and you got an I.P. come up and he'll stick you in the back or something and they're hauling you out in a black bag you know. It's not so good the issue of gang members.

It became evident from the interview narratives that prisons usually had a very negative effect on individuals. Essentially, prisons are violent places where anti-social attitudes, aggressive and manipulative behaviors, and criminal role models dominate. Achieving rehabilitation in these harsh environments is necessarily futile. However, Canadian prisons have recently incorporated Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming which appears to be a positive step towards rehabilitating Aboriginal offenders.

5.8 Aboriginal Spiritual/Cultural Programming

Although many of the interviewees had participated extensively in a broad range of institutional programs, it soon became clear that they attached significant importance to Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs. For the majority, prison represented the first opportunity to explore

various components of Aboriginal spirituality and culture. This finding is consistent with Waldram's (1997) research in the mainstream prison system. As J.J. said, "My cultural side of my life I never knew it. My first sweat was in jail put it that way and my first sweetgrass smudge was in prison."

While in prison, seven of the twelve interviewees had participated in Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs. All seven participants had a positive attitude towards Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs and had benefitted in some way by their participation. Several interviewees indicated that the sweat lodge ceremony provided a sense of peace and tranquility that helped them cope with the tensions and stresses in prison. This finding is also consistent with Waldram's (1997) research. Robert indicated that the sweat lodge helped him deal with prison life.

I was going into the sweats every week. I was helping out with the Elders. That did help me. It really did help me. All the bullshit that goes around inside the joints there it kind of builds up after a while and that was the best way I could handle myself was going to those sweats especially. We used to have them once a week. In that weeks time it used to just build up so much in me I'd want to say just screw everything I worked for and just go do whatever and just forget it. But then once I go to the sweats it was I had to settle down ya know.

Similarly, Les said:

You know after finding it you feel that sense of peace eh when you sit in the circle, when you sit in the sweat lodge, when you listen to an Elder talking, when you sit at a pow-wow, or a round dance. Anything that has to do with the Native culture and the Native ways you feel peace. It's healing. That really helps a person, kinda stabilizes a person's mind when they're inside. There's not a whole lot you can do inside.

Other interviewees identified certain Aboriginal-specific programs that helped them overcome some of the problems they faced in their lives. Randy, who was incarcerated for impaired driving, indicated that it was the Elder's Sacred Circle program that helped him with his alcohol problem.

The Sacred Circle program. Ya, that's with the Elder and his wife. This is their program. It has helped me... Lots about relationships. A better understanding to life on the outside world eh. That we don't need alcohol and drugs in our lives eh. That's the main point eh. That alcohol wasn't meant for us. They told us that over and over eh. You know the good thing is, I got a picture of our class and you know 90 percent of the guys are still out. There's only a few left that are waiting. Too much before their time to get out. But I have a feeling that once they're out they will stay out.

Mo indicated that the Elder's Healing Circle helped him. He described the Elder's goals of healing the emotional scars from childhood.

There's only really one and that's the Elder's healing circle. With the groups and individual counselling also. It's something else. Me and the Elder really got that program going in the institutions...it's mostly becoming a child and growing up in front of the Elders. Because of

alcoholism, dysfunctional families, dysfunctional adult life, mentally I can be 50 years old and I can be 10 or 12 years old emotionally. So you have to go the Elders and the Oskapios that kind of take you back in time and have you heal all them wounds. Not just bandage them but take off the bandages and help them heal. Then you start to progress to your actual age, the step that you should be in. It's incredible like the power it had. I did it steady for almost four years nearly everyday.

Similarly, Les indicated the positive influence of Aboriginal spirituality and culture and the role of Elders in helping him overcome the trauma from his youth.

When I first walked into Stoney Mountain that's the thing that I picked up on right away eh. A lot of the times when I used to sit in the Sacred Circles in Stoney Mountain and you hear the drumming like that, you listen to the Elders talk I found a sense of like I belonged here eh. I found my roots. I guess to me that helped me a lot because I started having one-on-one counselling with the Elders. They gave me the right direction here and going into sweat lodges. 'Cause I carried a lot of frustration inside, a lot of anger, a lot of hurt. I guess that's from my youth...But after talking to the Elders I kinda had to let go from that. Kinda more or less search for myself and I started respecting myself. A lot of people I didn't respect because I didn't respect myself eh. You can't respect somebody else if you can't respect yourself that's what it comes down to you know. And dealing with the Aboriginal programs you kinda take it step by step. It gives you a chance to see everything.

As previously mentioned, seven out of twelve interviewees had participated in Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming while in prison. The one theme that is pervasive among their experiences is the important role of

Elders who are the primary facilitators in the delivery of Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs in prisons. The interview narratives indicate a high level of respect for the Elders, their knowledge and wisdom, and the approach they incorporate when dealing with offenders. In fact, many of the interviewees had developed a close relationship with the Elders while they were incarcerated. As Robert said:

Since I've been in at Bowden I had a good spiritual advisor over there. She was an Elder and she was doing the sweats. And then the other Elders there too I was able to talk to them. But basically whenever I came by I seen them I talked to them. Sat in their office. It really helped me out though, my spirituality. 'Cause when I first came in I didn't care much about myself you could say.

He developed a positive relationship with the Elder while in prison.

I found the Elder to be a really nice lady. One of the nicest people I ever met in my life. She was one of the only people that ever took time to sit down and talk to me. She really helped me out too ya know. It wasn't like she was babying me or anything but she was being strict with me but yet real nice. That was the first time I could say I realized what an Elder was really saying to me. I've grown up with different Elders and I used to just say "ya ya ya I know already." But when I used to talk with her it was way different ya know. I used to really understand her. Ya she was a good lady. She was supposed to come and visit me too actually.

Mo also formed a strong and long-lasting bond with several Elders.

I worked hand in hand with the Elders all the time.

And they still come and visit me here. They bring me medicine. We've become real close. But these last Elders I've worked for are closest to me. One adopted me as his brother. He's coming to see me tomorrow. The other Elders want me go to the mountains with them and be their Oskapios. They even come here and work with me.

Les revealed his respect for the Elders who stress that the spiritual and cultural path is a difficult one.

That's why you know if this Aboriginal programming wasn't in place there would be a lot more hate inside. See that's the thing the Elders talk about a lot eh. Slowly a lot of people aren't coming back because they find they continue it on the outside. They know there's only one way you can walk. You can't go do this and then go do that. There's only one way eh. The Elders say if you're gonna do that leave the spirituality alone because you're the only one that's gonna pay for it in the end. It's good listening to Elders eh because a lot of them talk from experience. They hung around and they seen a lot. Some of them have even been in our shoes.

Similarly, Randy indicated his respect for the Elders and their work in prison.

I've spent a lot of time with the Elders. I'll stay in touch with them even after. Well, the other programs work, but they kinda don't put as much into it as the Elders. They're not there 'cause they gotta be there and give this program. It comes from the heart. They're there for us not for the money. You meet some people in programming that they're only there 'cause they have to be there 'cause that's their job. The Elders, they're there for the inmates not for the money. They're consistent.

Other interviewees also had a positive perception of the Elders and their unique approach to working with offenders.

As Nolan said:

Very, very positive Elder. He teaches a lot. I really like him because uh, he doesn't want to know anything about, he just wants to know what you're going to do and I like that. Everybody else they're like uh oh, they look at your past. Oh boy you know. They don't really care for where you're at now and what your plans are and what you want to do. I liked the Elder. He didn't care what your past was. He didn't care what brought me into jail. He just wanted to know where you're at right now. That's really good.

Regarding the different approaches, J.J. noted that the institution dealt with his unsuccessful unescorted temporary absence (UTA) in the form of punishment.

I took another UTA, unsuccessfully. I drank on my way back. I ran into a situation where my sister was pretty ill and I seen her and I couldn't handle the head space and I didn't have nobody to turn to like I'm on my way back to Cache. That to me is an excuse though. I shouldn't have drank I know but I did. That's the bottom line I drank. I went back late, 7 1/2 hours late but I went back. My transfer to here was in effect already. The Pe' Sakastew Centre was approved to come here after my UTA was finished. So I get back and I go to the hole, next day I'm out no problem. I know I lost my UTA's, I didn't know I lost this transfer. The next day my CMO approached me and told me your transfer to Pe' Sakastew is canceled because of this UTA. I said, "Well, that's fine with me I'll just go back." They took away my work release too so I went down to almost nothing there.

He later described the Elder's reaction to the UTA.

I never seen him for months after I come back I snuck away. I guess he was asking to see me and that and I wouldn't eh. I was ashamed and he seen me here. He says I been wanting to tell you he says you don't have to be ashamed about what happened. He says it happens, life's like that.

If you fall get up again and walk eh. I still care for you he said. I didn't feel bad towards you in any way. Anyway, that made me feel guilty because I was feeling bad about it. I figured maybe he'd felt like I let him down or something like because maybe I was one of his strengths there too. But no he took it in stride eh. That's the man that he is and he's a very powerful man. I'm fortunate to have him when I'm released.

As the narratives clearly indicate, these interviewees have benefitted by the work of Elders in the delivery of Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs in prison. Most importantly, the Elders reflect traditional Aboriginal laws and cultural values of caring, sharing, and kindness that the interviewees recognize and appreciate. The narratives reveal that several of the interviewees were drawn to the Elders and had a respectful and healthy relationship with them. The Elders also played a vital role in helping the interviewees deal with prison life and/or with various problems that lead to their incarceration. Consequently, the Elder's strong commitment and unique approach are essential ingredients in the healing and rehabilitation of Aboriginal offenders.

5.9 The Healing Journey

Importantly, as the previous section revealed, the majority of the interviewees began the journey to healing while they were in the mainstream prison system. The motivating factors behind their decisions to make improvements in their lives were complex and diverse. Some

came to the realization that without these positive changes, prison would be an inevitable part of their futures. Jimmy, described how the decision to quit doing drugs occurred while he was in segregation.

I went to the hole in every one of these institutions I was in just because of my past behaviors. So I'm sitting down in the hole and I figure they're going to detain me, you gotta do something. This is it. You're lucky to be alive here. You shoulda been dead back there a long time ago. And I started thinking about my family and you know where am I gonna be here. To come to the decision to quit doing drugs was pretty complicated. It had a lot of different things to do with being in jail. Being there ten years later, you're gonna be there ya know. You know for a fact you're gonna be in jail if you keep on doing this.

Shortly after, Jimmy began the difficult process of replacing the anti-social skills of swearing, lying, and aggressiveness with honesty, forgiveness, sharing, and kindness. He participated in numerous programs and spent a difficult year trying to build credibility within the institution through voluntary urinalysis testing. Finally, he achieved his medium and later minimum security status.

After all those programs, they put me up for medium security and I got it. So I went to medium security and I did more programs and working with help from the Native Elder and going to sweat lodges and realizing more things as I went along. Things that I never knew that I was doing wrong...to go through this change took a long time and I left a lot of my friends back there in those penitentiaries. They're still there. Everyday they fight all the time. They don't know me

anymore I've changed so much. It's been a long trip. It's been a real hard trip. One of the hardest things I ever did in my life. I wanted to help them you know. I wanted to tell them you know do this, do that you know you gotta chance. But I couldn't, I was too busy trying to save myself.

Mo indicated that in the process of transferring from maximum to medium security he lost his con identity. He then began working with the Elders who helped him develop a more positive identity.

When I was in the Max I was the president of the inmate committee, president of this, president of that. I was a very respected person not because of good things but because I was a mean person. So then I started seeing myself and I transferred down to the medium security and I lost my identity. See I was no longer that person from the Max you see. People were no longer afraid of me, people didn't know me. Just all of a sudden I was more like a normal human being. But I found that I missed that false identity. I thought that person was me but it wasn't? So I knew then that I had to do something. So I started working with Elders. I was principle Oskapios and co-facilitator for the Elders healing circle there too. I kept on learning more and more about who I really was.

Other interviewees indicated that their families and children were the key factors that inspired them to change. Nolan indicated that it was his wife and daughter that motivated him to change. He discussed how he began changing his lifestyle which meant, among other things, disassociating himself from the gang he belonged to.

See the thing is with them it's life membership so I can't really say to them I'm out you know 'cause I don't know what'll happen. So what I'll do is

I'll change my lifestyle and then eventually like, already like I've been changing my lifestyle since I've been in and before I came in. Things have went well like I have no problems nothing. I'm doing my own thing. Things been going really good and actually I'm already at the point where I won't let them mess up the rest of my life you know. They sent me a few letters and stuff like guys that I know, guys are asking where I am and stuff. I just don't write back. I don't care to associate with them. They're my past like I'm leaving. I did all that stuff when I was a kid but now I'm an adult. I got responsibilities now a lot of things.

Whatever the reason, instituting positive changes in prison was a difficult process for the interviewees. As Nolan said:

In the pens you've got 400 inmates on average in an institution and maybe about 5 percent of those guys are serious about changing. It's hard to find those guys and then if you do they're usually labelled by the other inmates and if you're talking to them all the other inmates say, "What are doing talking to him? Don't you know what he is?" You know and it's really hard. Ya I was involved in a few confrontations in Grande Cache. It was over stupid stuff. A lot of times I just had to walk away you know. So many times I wanted to fight you know, they're calling me on and it was like, ooh you know what I could do to you. I feel like that but it's not for me like I got a wife and daughter out there. I feel like that but I'm not going to do it eh, because I know the consequences.

Although the process of changing attitudes and behaviors in prison was difficult, these interviewees started to develop pro-social and self-management skills, and positive relationships. Once the interviewees made the decision to make improvements in their lives, they turned to the Elders and to their spirituality and culture for assistance. The

evidence appears to indicate that a growing awareness and connection to Aboriginal spirituality and culture played a contributing role in those initial steps towards healing and rehabilitation. However, the narratives reveal that there were additional factors which also assisted the interviewees including: participation in non-Aboriginal programs; support and encouragement from staff; and contact with family. This finding is consistent with that of the Nechi Institute (1994) study. As Jimmy said:

I waited nine months before I could get here in the medium security institution I came from. That was the first break I got and that was three months ago. First break they gave me. My case manager backed me up. He went to bat for me. He told them, "Here give this guy a chance. He's not going to screw up over there ya know." I was really lucky to get here. Considering where I've been three years ago like it was a really hopeless situation sitting in the hole in the Max and to come here it's a really, really big change. Throughout it all it's because I wanted to do that. I wanted to quit doing drugs. I had to earn my way here but they did give me some breaks.

5.10 Summary

Although the life experiences of the twelve interviewees were diverse, several common themes are evident in their stories so far. As children many were separated from their biological parents; others were exposed to violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse, and racism; while for others, key events would effect them later in life. In adolescence and

adulthood, many interviewees were leading dysfunctional lives that revolved around violence, chemical dependency, gang involvement, criminal activity, and prison. The attitudes that several interviewees had towards themselves, others, and life in general was negative. Consequently, the interviewees' self-destructive lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors would eventually lead to their incarceration in the mainstream prison system.

The interviewees' prison experiences indicated that the destructive nature of many prisons is hardly conducive to restoring one's emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical side. On the other hand, several interviewees reported that the provision of spirituality and culture helped them deal with the conflicts in prison and with various problems that led to their incarceration. Moreover, many interviewees indicated that it was the spirituality and culture and the work of Elders that guided them on the path to healing and rehabilitation. Consequently, the strong desire to maintain their connection to Aboriginal spirituality and culture has lead the majority of the interviewees to the Pe'Sakastew Centre which is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

The PE' SAKASTEW CENTRE: GETTING IN AND GETTING OUT

6.1 Overview

Several interviewees revealed in the previous chapter how Aboriginal spirituality and culture had a positive impact on them while they were incarcerated the mainstream prison system. This chapter will document: the reasons behind the interviewees transfer to the Pe'Sakastew Centre; their perceptions of the Centre compared to mainstream prisons; perceptions of staff; perceptions of Aboriginal spirituality and culture and its impact on attitudes and behaviors; and finally, perceptions of their impending release into society.

6.2 Transferring to the Pe'Sakastew Centre

The Pe'Sakastew Centre actively recruits Aboriginal men from the mainstream prison system who have accepted responsibility for their past behaviors and are dedicated to making improvements in their lives. Several interviewees had indicated that achieving their minimum security status and serving the remaining portion of their sentence at the Centre became a goal that they actively pursued. The reason for transferring to the Centre were a little diverse. For four of the interviewees who were serving lengthy sentences, the

Centre represented an opportunity to focus on integrating back into society. As Mo said:

I knew that there was, had to be different levels of release for myself because I did so much time...So in order for me to get used to the human race again I had to come down this way, or else can you imagine that person coming out of the Max and going into the street?

These interviewees were taking advantage of TAs and have access to the community for short periods of time.

Eight interviewees transferred to the Centre specifically for the spiritual and cultural components. While several had been introduced to Aboriginal spirituality and culture in prison and wanted to maintain their commitment to it through the Centre, others hoped that the Centre would fulfill a desire to learn more about it. As Scott said, "For the Native aspect, eh? That's why I wanted to serve the rest of my time here. Before, the other centres I was at they didn't have no Native culture." One interviewee indicated that he transferred to the Centre because he wanted to remain close to his home community.

Several interviewees also indicated that they wanted to deal with specific issues and problems at the Centre including: childhood trauma, identity crisis, grief recovery, alcohol and drug addictions, and violent behavior. For the two interviewees who were members of youth gangs, they hoped

that the Centre would help resolve the identity crisis that stemmed from childhood. As Nolan said:

I was really interested because it's strictly, um, it's Aboriginal-based and everything. My CMO knew about everything. It was part of my case plan. They felt for me to identify myself like my identity I guess because I was really struggling with on the reserve I was the half white you know, I was the white kid on the reserve and in the cities I was an Indian kid. So I had an identity crisis there and it was always the big thing. I think it led to my gang involvement and stuff 'cause they accepted me no matter what you know. It didn't matter they accepted me. So that's what I liked. So they felt that was a big issue for me and I agree with them actually. So I thought well I'll give this place a try and I love it here. I really like it here ya.

6.3 Perceptions of the Centre

The majority of the interviewees had a positive perception of the Centre and appeared content to be there instead of prison. Five common themes weaved throughout the interview narratives relating to the Centre including: the environment was open, safe, and healthy; the men have a responsibility to help themselves; the strong presence of Aboriginal people; the approach of the Centre; and the ability to release con mentality.

First, the majority of the interviewees noted that there was more freedom at the Centre compared to the restrictive environment of mainstream prisons. Moreover, the Centre offered a safe, healthy, and chemical free environment as

opposed to the violence, danger, and availability of alcohol and drugs in prison. Ernest compared aspects of prison to the Centre.

I'm glad that they informed me about this place and that I came here. I was one of the lucky ones basically. There's a lot of guys who have been in Drum and Bowden and all that. It's tough in there 'cause you don't know what to do and I'm a small guy so actually, I was scared coming here. I didn't know what to expect really. Get shanked or be played up for anything. There's more violence in the joint than there is on the street sometimes. More drugs in the joint. Here there's no such thing as drugs or alcohol in here 'cause nobody wants it here. They're here for one purpose only is to heal so they don't come back again. So that's a good thing about it here. And then we don't get searched or padded down, stripped searched like in the joint and that's a good thing too. You get treated like a human being here actually. It's like you're one of the family and okay great if the guy's willing right? It's good.

Similarly, Jimmy viewed the Centre as a safe place compared to prison.

There's no danger here. They don't got people walking around with shanks, knives and pipes. You don't have your best friend standing behind having to watch your back all the time. It's okay to walk around with your hand in your pockets. If you see someone coming with their hand in their pocket you go over there because that guy might have a knife in his pocket. You don't have to do that. You don't have to. It feels really good to be able to relax. The only time I felt safe in those pens was after lock up at night when you're in your cell by yourself. Nobody else in there and the door is locked ya know? I can relax. Now I can walk around here. I can smile. I can do whatever I want here. I don't have to worry about it.

In a profound statement, Mo indicated that the Centre offered

an environment that is conducive to balancing the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of oneself.

The freedom is a big thing. It's kind of like a culmination of seven things. Each morning and each night I try to pray as much and try to pray to the big dipper. There's seven stars and there's also seven steps in life. So you start and you pray for life and finally in here you can be alive. You can be a human being. It gives you that freedom to be a human being. And you thank the Creator for your health. This is a healthy environment for you spiritually, emotionally, mentally. Physically your not gonna die, no one's gonna stab you or beat you up here. Basically we've got the four strengths right there that you can work on to improve yourself and your lot in life. And then you thank the Creator for your food, ya know we eat good here. It's not going to a dining room and getting into it as fast as you can and watching your back so that you're not being stabbed or people aren't gathering behind you to grab you or stab you or something like that. You can actually sit down and know that you're okay and relax and eat so your digestive becomes better and everything like that. I pray for my happiness, here you can actually be happy. You can smile and no one's going to look at you kind of suspiciously or get paranoid because of that smile. You can just walk around and say hello to everybody. There you had to look down. Then I pray for the peace that I have. I don't have to carry a knife or anything here and I don't feel threatened or anything. I pray for the freedoms that I do have. The freedom to have a sweat lodge here. I can go sit out there anytime I want except for between 10:30pm and 5:30am. I can go and sit in the tipi. I can take my pipe up there. I can take my sweetgrass, anything I want up there. I can walk around. I thank the Creator for prayer so I can talk to my grandfather. Just the freedom to go out there in an open space and pray is amazing. We've got hawks, eagles, and deer here.

The second aspect of the Centre that was viewed

positively by several interviewees was that as Owicisiyiwak, they had a responsibility to care for themselves. At the Centre, Owicisiyiwak learn various life skills including cleaning, cooking, laundry, and shopping, whereas in prison these things were done for them. Furthermore, they are expected to participate in activities and programs that address the problems that led to their incarceration. They felt that being responsible for oneself is an asset for integrating into society. As Les said:

This place being different, you got your own place like living in duplexes. You cook for yourself. You learn how to cook for yourself. You learn how to take care of your house. That's being responsible because out there getting to the street you might have to do that especially if you live alone you're gonna have to do that you know. You gotta learn how to take of yourself. Like getting away from jail and coming here, in jail everything was done for you.

Similarly, Ken said:

So this place for me is like getting back into society. It's breaking me from the jailhouse attitude. And these houses they're like, they're not cells, they're houses you know, they're duplexes. You got to cook your own meals, you got a little stove, oven, fridge everything like that eh. You got all that stuff. Get you used to being on the street. It's preparing me for getting out on the street that's for sure.

Jimmy indicated that at the Centre, Owicisiyiwak are responsible for participating in programs that meet their respective needs.

Here you have a responsibility to if you want to take a program you gotta go about and do it. Like you gotta put in a request for it. You have to go out and do it instead of a case manager looking after you. Owicisiyiwak are people who, the word means 'someone who helps themselves.' And basically that's what you do here is you're helping yourself in doing things that you want to do that are good for you in a pro-social way.

Third, several interviewees had a positive perception of the Aboriginal approach used at the Centre for rehabilitating offenders. They believed that an Aboriginal approach is important because it promotes healing and rehabilitation rather than a system based on punishment. As J.J. said:

Prison's basically all negative and like I said a healing lodge like this take this route instead of the prison system. Instead of punishing show why you act not just lock you up and you know you did your thing get out. You're going back to what you just did. This way you're gonna be shown why you did what you did. You know that can help you come away from that. That way teach a person why they did something wrong and help them to look at it. Don't just throw away the key when time's up. That's wrong. This is right. I can see this working and people growing.

Similarly, Ernest said:

Oh this is a great place like I said. If you're here to heal yourself and wanna learn the Native culture this is the place to be but you have to be willing to learn and expect to do things too. Not just come here to take the easy way out. They'll notice that and they will ship you back. But this is the place to be eh, the way to do it is to learn. There should be more of these opened up for all Natives who want it instead of being locked up like animals. By locking a human being up in jail in a 6 by 8 cell you're just making him more frustrated, more angry at the system. It's not

punishment, it's cruelty period.

Les indicated that the Centre fosters healing and an identity for Aboriginal people which will enhance their ability to deal with life outside of prison.

But like just being here like having this place is better for the Aboriginal people because their identity is here, their healing is here. It gives them a more better chance to carry that out with them instead of them learning about it in jail and then getting out and having to deal with that pressure. That's what really sends a lot of people back. They're scared eh, they're scared of the real life out there. They're so used to being treated the way they're treated inside you know. For them to go back to jail would be nothing because they just left. Living that for years it's the same damn thing then they got another date to look forward to, but for what? To go back? It's a cycle and that cycle's gotta be broke eh.

The fourth aspect of the Centre that was viewed positively is being among other Aboriginal people either staff or Owicisiyiwak. Several interviewees indicated that interacting with other Aboriginal people is beneficial because they have common backgrounds. This facilitates participation in group settings where individuals can express intimate thoughts and feelings. As Darren said:

What's so good about this place from what I see from inside is that there are all Natives in here. We have similar backgrounds. There's no white people sitting in there and it's a lot easier for me to speak out in a group that understands. Where a white person sitting in a group tends to make me close off from talking. They don't know where we're coming from.

Similarly, Mo said:

Because a person is so used to being put down by the Caucasian community, working Native programs you have Native people teaching it. Most of us have gone through the same problems so you really don't feel bad about saying hey, well my dad was a drunk and hey we starved as children. I don't mind mentioning what my school was like 'cause I don't want any Caucasian guys say "aw you're just making it up. You're crazy." It's your choice how you feel and stuff inside.

The fifth positive aspect of the Centre that some interviewees discussed was that gradually they are able to release the con mentality. This is the case especially for those interviewees who were incarcerated for long periods of time. As Les said:

Like for myself being in this long I picked up a lot of things inside like within the institution where there's certain codes that more or less we follow amongst ourselves right. That don't really mean nothing once you hit the street eh. That's what I mean by mentality that you gotta leave it behind and coming here it'll slowly get you away from that eh. Sure there's a bit of that in here but once you leave it may only exist in my mind. It's not out there.

As Ken noted:

Like for me it was good to come here because I would have got out I would still have that jail mentality where I'm losing quite a bit of that jail mentality. I used to swear a lot and then I came here. I used to swear a lot and I didn't realize how much I swore, how much of a negative attitude I had. It was just slowing coming to my attention. They would drop little hints eh. They wouldn't come right out and say well hey. They would just ask me how come you're always angry? That's all they would say.

Similarly, Scott observed:

I still see a lot of guys that come here they're still trying to change their attitude from the pen or whatever eh. You gotta maintain a certain attitude when you're in the pen no matter what if you want to survive. If you want to walk out of there there's a certain attitude you've got to keep. Mind your own business. Like in the pen you never look at another guy in the eyes or anything or this gun will go off or you get shanked or something just for looking at him. I was taught that the Native way to do things when you greet somebody you shake their hands and you look at them in the eyes or whatever. Here they're getting more into the Native part of it. They're starting to add. Like I noticed it too like the boys are starting to come around slowly eh. It wasn't like when I first came here. Everybody's starting to get along with everybody and everything's starting to click.

Essentially, the interviewees discussed five aspects of the Centre that would enhance their ability to integrate into society. The Centre provides a healthy environment that promotes healing and/or rehabilitation where individuals are able to work towards self-improvement. The presence of Aboriginal people at the Centre fosters a sense of cohesion, support, and understanding of individual experiences. Rather than a punishment-based system, an Aboriginal approach teaches individuals why they behaved a certain way. Finally, individuals can gradually release the con mentality that is a crutch many obtain from prison. Although a strong majority perceived the Centre in a positive light, the perspectives of several others was both positive and negative. However,

these concerns lie mainly within the realm of staff which will be dealt with in the next section.

6.4 Perceptions of Staff

The interviewees' perceptions of staff at the Centre were mainly a blend of negative and positive. On the negative side, the source of friction appeared to come from those staff members who were employed for a considerable period of time in the mainstream prison system. According to the interviewees, these staff members acquire a certain attitude from prison that they often bring with them to the Centre. This is similar to the jailhouse attitude that offenders often acquire after long periods of incarceration.

As Les said:

When you have someone coming in they try to have that mentality from prison. Maybe some of them came out of those institutions and they're used to talking to people like that eh, incarcerated people. We're trying to leave that in the past and trying to put that behind us and learn from that eh. But if it's gonna be thrown in our face everyday then that kinda makes a person say well what the hell am I doing here? Why didn't they just leave me alone? Why didn't they just leave me in there eh? I'm not saying it always happens here but a couple of odd times in here you'll hear the odd remark from a certain guard or whatever.

Ernest indicated that some staff members tend to view Owicisiyiwak as criminals who should be locked up and punished.

They'll be a lot of work to be done here yet and

there is a few staff who can't see it that way. That's the only problem we're having right now. I think they're prejudiced against Indians for one thing. Um, you broke the law, you shouldn't have this much freedom, you should be locked up like an animal. They only see it one way, they don't see it the other way.

Other interviewees indicated that conflict occurs when they practice what they learn in programming such as speaking your mind, but some staff will interpret this as aggressive behavior. As Morley said:

They have a mind of their own and they have a different attitude. We try to say something what we learn from here like how to speak for yourself. When you try to do something like that here they write you down and they say, "you got an attitude problem." So they phone our caseworker and that caseworker calls you. That's not right. They have an attitude problem.

Similarly, Randy said:

See these people got the jail attitude eh. So you gotta work with people that got the jail attitude, well, they're gonna get the jail attitude in return. But just not in an angry manner eh. Like the other day I told them I said hey look, my attitude is from all your programs. I said you people are the ones that made me the way I am now and I like me now.

On the positive side, many interviewees noted that the relationship with the majority of staff is based on cooperation and respect. Jimmy indicated the positive relationship with staff at the Centre compared to the prison bureaucracy.

It's a working relationship. Compared to other

penitentiaries where if you want something done like look at your paysheet, you put in a request and two weeks later you'll get your paysheet. Here I can go and talk to the person and I can get my paysheet within a half an hour, in a reasonable amount of time. We know who is in charge of each area and can meet with that person on a one-on-one basis and really get some things done. One of the things that surprised me was being able to do this like in a responsible way. Being reasonable, being responsible and being respectful towards each other. We're all working here. For the most part, it's a good relationship.

Similarly, Nolan indicated that Owicisiyiwak have input in meetings with staff which is a step towards developing a more balanced relationship.

It's good the meeting aspect too like we have a lot of say with the staff you know, they listen to us. We can't boss them around or anything but they listen like we have their ear like we can express our views on something. It influences a lot of their decisions which is good. Not like in the pens where a decision is a decision and then they'll clean up their mistakes after ya know.

The interviewees also had an extremely positive perception of the executive director (otherwise known as the warden) of the Centre. Along with some of her staff, she has also taken steps to develop a more balanced relationship with the Owicisiyiwak that is based on mutual respect and trust. As Morley indicated:

The director herself, the warden is very, very, very positive. I see her eyes. I see her smile. I see her associate with the inmates and I see her helping. She cares. She cares with the Native people here and she really wants to help anyway she can. I haven't seen no warden like that, acting

like a snob like other wardens do. They don't care to talk to you.

Similarly, Nolan said:

The mandate here for the staff is a healing process. The warden tries to stress that with her staff all the time. She's a very good warden. All the institutions I been in I've never met the warden, I've never seen the warden. Here she sits down with us. We have meetings in that tipi up there and she'll come sit with us and talk with us. We had a meeting in there once and she broke down. She was actually crying for us eh, she actually cares for all of us 'cause we're her brothers. She works really hard for us, very hard and that's really helping too 'cause that's somebody trying for you you know. A lot of the guys here what we do is we got to give back too you know. Not only take, we got to give back so that's what everybody's doing here. Like we think well what does she want? She wants us to change our lives. All right then let's do it. That's what we're all doing. So that's another thing I like here too.

Similarly, Mo said:

I think very highly of the warden. She's in a rough position in a rough time and I just hope that she perseveres through this tough time. I hope that we all do. The agreement was that we build this place together: staff, Owicisiyiwak. It's been hard on all of us. Very hard. That's the thing eh. She's a spiritual woman and she's a smart woman and I think she has a lot of courage. And in turn, there's some of us that are spiritual. We're hard workers and together maybe we can build this place.

6.5 Aboriginal Spiritual/Cultural Programming

At the Pe'Sakastew Centre, eleven out of twelve interviewees participated in one or more aspects of spirituality and culture including sweat lodge ceremonies,

fasting, talking circles, counselling, and other Aboriginal-specific programs. It is important to note that several interviewees also participated in various non-Aboriginal programs including substance abuse programs, education programs, and psychological counselling. The majority of the interviewees had a positive attitude towards the spiritual and cultural components that are the main focus of the Centre. As Jimmy said:

The culture is really stressed here and I like that. The sweats are really available and you can go to sweats twice on Wednesdays and once on Sundays. I like that. I like being able to talk to the Elder, being able to go up to him and saying can I talk to you for a while? You can go one-on-one with your workers and you can do a lot of things around here. Like tanning hides I've learned how to tan hides that's part of our culture. Putting up the tipi and doing stuff like that. I really enjoy learning stuff like that.

Generally, specific aspects of spirituality and culture that were identified as beneficial varied for each interviewee. However, the interview narratives appeared to indicate that the spiritual components such as the sweat lodge ceremonies and fasting were perceived as important along with the counselling sessions with the Elders. Mo, who is extensively involved in spirituality and culture, described some of his experiences in a four-day fast.

I also fasted here. I guess in the written sense I guess that would be like a program also eh. 'Cause when you fast you learn so much about

yourself. When you come down the hill you can see things so clear like almost too clear. 'Cause there's lot of things we just don't want to see really, especially with other people, situations. It's like coming down from the top of a mountain where everything is pure...But something really wonderful happened there too on my first day. I often wondered is anybody really paying attention? 'Cause I'm getting pretty old now too. Is anybody paying attention? Will anybody help me figure out what I am to be in a spiritual sense? The first day the Elders brought me up a piece of red pipestone carved into a pipe. I think that's one of the most wonderful things that happened.

Nolan identified the sweat lodge ceremony as important. He described how the spirituality fills a void in his life and that he is working towards balancing the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of himself.

All I know is I gotta change my lifestyle like the drinking. Then I was thinking well why do I drink? It was to fill a void inside and I was like okay well why is that? Where is that void? Why is it there? Then that's where the spirituality comes in 'cause it fills it. I have questions, I can get them answered...I'm trying to weigh myself out too like physically, mentally like I read a lot, I read all the time, and spiritually, this place offers that. The Elders teach a lot. I've learned a lot about myself. I learned about my culture.

Similarly, Scott said:

Ya the sweats and the sharing of the circle. And when I'm on my own I try to practice the four elements you know like your emotions, mentally, physically, and spiritually. I try to combine them altogether like if I'm a little too angry one day or something I'll evaluate myself. I'll check myself and say what's happening here man? Why are you mad? You're sitting here and nobody got you mad or anything but you're ticked off about something. So I always check myself out all the

time actually. I always figured like ya know if you're going to get into your Native culture it's not an easy road to go down or to get to. I'm just on the sidelines. I'm not even really on the road yet. It's not an easy road to get back onto if you were to practice everything that the Elders teach you and how you're supposed to act as an Indian. It's alright. I like it.

Consistent with the findings in the previous chapter, the Elders at the Centre play a critical role in the healing and/or rehabilitation of the Owicisiyiwak. Importantly, in a non-confrontational manner the Elders impart teachings through the various spiritual/cultural components. The Elders use their knowledge to provide Owicisiyiwak with an understanding of oneself, events, experiences, and problems. Scott described the non-confrontational approach of the Elders.

Well, the Elders tell you things here and there and you pick up on them eh. He doesn't just say well this is what you do and you do it. He tells you and if you're listening to the Elder you'll pick up all these little hints he's telling you and everything. Practice them, do whatever you want to do with them. Take them in or put them aside. It's totally up to you. That's one thing about the Native culture, it's really free. You can take it or you can just put it aside and I prefer to take it.

Ernest described how the Elders helped him deal with his alcohol problem in a more constructive manner.

The Native way pointed out my problem with alcohol. I don't know how to explain it but it's something that when the Elder said I guess it finally clicked into my issue and my problem with drinking. They

Elder showed me how to deal with my stress, frustration and not to drink. You're just hurting yourself, it's not hurting me, it's hurting your boy, your wife. Right off the bat the first few weeks that I was going to the thing. It started clicking right now. That's where I was getting my answers mostly from the Native ways.

Similarly, Jimmy noted how the Elders offered advice on how to deal with his problems.

I've got a lot of advice from the Elders on how to go about looking at your problems in a different way. You have options. I never knew that. I never knew anything about it. Ya know choices, goals and how to go about setting them. It's different from what I used to be like where I figured the only way to get it is be violent and you'll get what you want.

Darren indicated that the Elders helped him understand aspects of culture and experiences in his life.

It's good for me to talk to the Elders. The Elders are a really big help. Because of my white foster home experience I didn't really understand what it was like to be a Native. What it truly meant, to understand it, to grasp it, to hold it. Before I could just grasp the concept but now I can take the whole concept and move it around and be able to look at it and say okay so this is what it is which has really been an eye-opener for me too because there's experiences that I've had that only the Elders are able to interpret. This is where the Elders are really helpful because it's not everybody that I'm able to talk to about different aspects of culture. Like there's bad and there's good in everything. I've encountered the bad out there and I didn't understand why me, why did it happen to me? How come I was able to do this and that with it? How come it didn't affect me more than it did? So all these questions you know and I just couldn't grasp it. Now a lot of the things I talk to the Elders, they understand, they can give me feedback. Okay, you're not crazy. Yes,

this did happen to you and this is probably why it happened to you. When I couldn't get those answers before.

Several interviewees became connected to the spiritual and cultural aspects at the Centre and were working towards personal health and well-being. These interviewees stressed the importance of Elders in providing the teachings and guidance in areas where they were experiencing difficulty such as alcoholism or violence. Moreover, the Elders foster a better understanding of oneself and one's strengths, thereby nurturing a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Once again, the evidence appears to indicate that Aboriginal spirituality and culture is a valuable tool in the healing and/or rehabilitation process. The next section will provide supporting evidence of the various changes in attitudes and behaviors of several interviewees.

6.6 Changes in Attitudes

The majority of the interviewees reported various changes in their attitudes towards themselves and others. Eight interviewees indicated that Aboriginal spirituality and culture contributed to the development of a more positive attitude in general, a more positive self-perception, and a greater understanding of others. Morley noted that the spirituality promotes a more positive attitude towards oneself.

The spiritual ways says that it does help me 'cause at the same time when you think about yourself and your lifestyle and the past, the problems you have you think about the spiritual ways of your culture. And when you're in here it really helps a lot and you focus on yourself your more apt to have that positive thinking about yourself. Your goal is about yourself uh, I want this and that and that's what I'm trying to do for myself anyway.

Similarly, Mo indicated that the healing process leads to a more positive self-perception and recognition of one's strengths.

Like I said before I just thought I was one of those characters that the Creator made for other people to dump on. That was my lot in life. But after you're all healed up you realize there's strengths and things like that and you can say I can be whoever I want to be. I'm just as good as anybody else.

Darren also indicated that the spirituality and culture helped him recognize and acknowledge his strengths and abilities.

Oh ya. It gives me a better of understanding of who I am, my abilities. Before I used to question my abilities, my gifts. I don't question them anymore, I just appreciate them. I'm thankful that I have them.

Several interviewees noted that their attitude towards other people have improved and they described themselves as being more understanding and tolerant of others. As Robert said:

I'm more of an open guy ya know now. I'm not down and out the way I was before. I can talk to people more openly now too. I'm not so uptight and paranoid like ya know what does this person want? But here now it feels a lot different. I can talk

to these people not like before. It has really changed my attitude towards people my Native programming. It made me understanding. Of course I say understanding because before I was not really understanding. Things had to go my way or no way. Just like I told you before, it made me change my understanding of other people.

Similarly, Nolan indicated that the spirituality and culture helped to change his attitude towards himself and others.

Ya, my outlook on myself, on everybody else around me. I've had to change a lot of my attitudes. Like attitudes towards the system, attitudes towards even white people. Even though I'm half white I hated white people.

6.7 Changes in Behaviors

Eight interviewees indicated that Aboriginal spirituality and culture helped them to make various behavioral improvements. Several interviewees described themselves as being more happy, content, and better equipped to deal with problems in a proactive rather than a reactive manner. The majority of the interviewees also indicated that smudging and prayer are important elements in their daily routines. Mo described how his healing journey has helped him to become a more happier person.

Well I get up and I pray and I'm thankful for what I have. I even thank the Creator for my problems so that they make me stronger. I try to look at things in a good way. I try not to take anything personally. I try to understand where the person's coming from. I've just sort of become a real happy person. I'm not saying I'm happy all the time. But where it used to be I can be angry like that, I can be happy like that now. It don't take that

much to make me happy. Laugh, joke, I'm always joking around. I'm a real prankster eh? Pretty mischievous eh? I used to be that way when I was young and I lost it. Now it's coming back. It's like a second childhood in a way.

Similarly, Nolan indicated that he is happier now compared to the past.

Ya, I'm happier now. I don't walk around with this big chip on my shoulder. The nurse when I went in for my medical interview or whatever that's what she said. She goes you look really happy she says you know. My appearance tells me that I'm happy instead of like some people you see them they walk around really grouchy and everyday too. Wow I wonder what his problem is. And then I think well that's how I used to be. I was always grouchy, had an attitude, somebody talked to me I'd snap at them. Like I'm not the same guy I was even two years ago.

Robert indicated that he is considerably different from how he used to be three years ago.

You know if you would've seen me before two years, three years down the road, you would have seen somebody way different, way different. I wasn't this friendly all the time you know. I never used to smile that was for sure. I'd always have to be doing something ya know. Couldn't sit back and relax and enjoy the stars. Not like now. I used to always though make time to watch the sun rise with my daughter. Other than when I was around my daughter, I was really different. I was mean, I was angry, sad.

Les indicated that he is able to deal with his problems in an effective manner.

My attitude has changed. My intentions. Doing things the right way you know. Try to anyways and not think negative or dwell on little problems or anything like that. The way I look at it if

someone's got a problem with me that's their problem. You know it's different if it's my problem. I know how to deal with my problems as they come you know. Not put them off and let them get rough then all of a sudden just slap somebody for looking at me funny. That's the kind of guy I was you know. Just letting it all build up and in a bad mood and somebody's joking around and I couldn't take it eh. I could only take so much you know.

Jimmy indicated that Aboriginal spirituality and culture encouraged him to remain free of drugs and alcohol.

To a certain degree but by the time I got here I was already on my way to a positive change. Ya it has helped to give me more encouragement to stay off drugs and to stay off alcohol...I realized that all my life I'd been doing a pretty criminal life eh. To do these things you gotta be secretive and you gotta hide everything. If you're going to sell drugs if you did get an ounce of pot and cut it all up and you don't want nobody to see you doing this. And I realized about three weeks ago that I'm not doing anything wrong anymore. I don't have to hide anything from anybody anymore. I can trust people now and I can start opening up now and I'm trying. I am, I'm really trying hard.

Many interviewees described positive changes in attitudes and behaviors. Several have developed a more positive self-perception and are slowly changing anti-social attitudes and compulsive behaviors. Others indicated that prayer is a part of their daily routine and they feel happier rather than sad or angry. For the interviewees whose self-destructive behaviors and attitudes were depicted in the previous chapter, the changes appear to be quite profound. Essentially, the evidence suggests that Aboriginal

spirituality and culture has made a significant contribution in producing more positive attitudes and behaviors. However, the narratives indicate that Aboriginal spirituality and culture is supplemented by three key factors including: the overall environment of the Pe'Sakastew Centre; cooperative and supportive staff at the Centre; and participation in non-Aboriginal programs. The combination of Aboriginal spirituality and culture and these characteristics of the Centre appears to represent a powerful force in preparing the Owicisiyiwak for release into society. The last section highlights the interviewees' attitudes towards release.

6.8 Attitudes Towards Release

In this study, the interviewees discussed their release plans. The themes that emerged in the narratives revealed that the interviewees' attitudes towards release included: feeling confident about returning to society; determination to maintain their connection with the Elders and spirituality and culture; and apprehension about returning to their previous lifestyles. Several interviewees felt confident about returning to their communities and plan to re-establish or seek employment. Some of them described how they are making constructive release plans which is different from their previous releases. Jimmy feels confident about his release in which he will seek employment.

I do know a person who owns an art store in Winnipeg and that's where I'm planning to go to hopefully get a job. If not I'll sell a bunch of artwork. I feel I have a really good chance now of getting out of here. My chances have really improved from what I used to be like, whereas before I didn't want to quit doing drugs. I would plan what I was going to do on my first day out and how I was going to go get some more drugs. Well now I've got to go look for a job here I can't be getting high ya know? Ya, I feel like I could go into a community and be responsible.

Similarly, Ken indicated how he plans on upgrading his education so he will be able to support himself through non-criminal means.

Oh most definitely like I'm already. See when I went out for my first day parole I never made any plans. My second day parole the only plan I had was I'd know in six months where I'll be when I get there. Well now it's like, I'm thinking well okay, I got my application for ABC. I'm going to take this baking course. Where am I gonna live? Okay where am I gonna get this money from? I'm getting all these things ready for me when I get out. Okay I need my birth certificate, well okay I sent it out. I got all my certificates, my social insurance number at my grandmothers you know so that's waiting for me. I gotta get this stuff ready. I'm getting ready for when I'm getting out now. It's like I never did get ready. This place has given me lots of time to think about what I wanna do, where I wanna go, how I wanna live uh. There's several options for me where I can make a living, an honest living, not through drugs or dealing or anything like that. Where it's found respectable in society. A way of living.

Several interviewees indicated that they felt good about their release because they had the opportunity to maintain their relationship with the Elder and with Aboriginal

spirituality and culture. J.J. felt that he needed more spiritual healing and he plans on working with an Elder on release.

Like me I have a place to go. I have a job to go to. I have an Elder. I set myself up for release eh. I'm going home and he lives same area I do but he's out of the prison system. He's been doing it for years. He's going to do it now for the people coming out of the prison system. Sweats out there and help them in the community now. So I'm set. Not too many people are that fortunate to be set up that way.

Similarly, Mo planned on connecting with the Elders on release to continue his quest for spiritual healing.

Spiritual healing is away from core programs, away from prisons, and away from this place also. The Elders they want to introduce me to the real Elders around here. I don't know if you've heard of these two Elders. I was their Oskapios in the past and they want me back to work with them up in the mountains. That's where the spiritual healing will come.

A few interviewees were more tentative about their approaching release. Robert, who was scared of returning to his previous lifestyle, wanted to remain at the Centre until his mandatory release to get the help he feels he needs.

I don't want to take my day parole. I want to sign my day parole off but they don't want me to sign my day parole off. I want to stay 'til my mandatory 'cause I don't think I'll get the help I need in these few months. They don't believe me. It seems to me that they think I'm just trying to stay in jail. But there's nothing in jail, it's just that I don't want to come back to jail that's all. If I go back to my community, I feel I'll just go back to my old lifestyle. I don't want to do that.

Similarly, Randy said:

When I'm out of this place I think I'll start my own company out of Edmonton. I gotta move away from Edmonton. I don't want to fall back in the same rut. Once you fall back in the same rut well you might as well just expect to come back to jail or whatever or else kill someone and stuff like that eh. 'Cause if you're gonna drink and drive or keep on drinking and driving, well you might as well expect jail 'cause it comes with it.

Les highlighted how difficult the healing journey is but he felt optimistic about his impending release.

There are things I had to do for myself to better myself so I can get out there so I don't have to come back in here. It took a long time. It's something that just didn't happen overnight. On this journey I have I always have hope. You see a lot of people change and a lot of people who been through what I been through probably worse. Now I have that chance using all the tools from the different programs and using the experience that I have behind me. I'm ready for that.

6.9 Summary

This chapter documented the interviewees' perceptions of the Pe'Sakastew Centre, perceptions of the Centre's staff, the impact of Aboriginal spirituality and culture on attitudes and behaviors, and perceptions of their impending release. The interviewees discussed five important aspects of the Centre that would enhance their ability to integrate into society including: the provision of a safe and chemical free environment; the increased responsibility of meeting one's needs; the presence of Aboriginal people; the approach

of the Centre; and the ability to release the con mentality. Although some interviewees had both a negative and positive perception of the Centre's staff, many felt that the majority of staff are sincere in their efforts to foster a more balanced relationship with the Owicisiyiwak.

The majority of interviewees indicated that the spiritual/cultural components and the work of Elders are important in addressing various problems that led to their incarceration. Furthermore, several interviewees indicated that the spirituality and culture made a significant contribution in generating positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors. However, Aboriginal spirituality and culture is supplemented by three key factors including: the environment of the Centre; supportive staff; and non-Aboriginal programs. Finally, the interviewees' attitudes towards their release ranged from feeling confident about their release plans, dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual healing, and fearful of returning to their previous lifestyles.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to document the effects of Aboriginal spirituality and culture on federally sentenced Aboriginal males in a healing facility. The study examined how the interviewees perceived the nature and consequences of their participation in spiritual and cultural programming. Several specific issues were also addressed including: the role of spirituality and culture in the healing/rehabilitation process; the existence of other contributing factors; and the differences between the healing facility and mainstream prisons.

In Chapter five, I documented notable facets of the interviewees' lives. The discussion here focused on their experiences in childhood, adulthood, prison, and Aboriginal-specific programming in the mainstream prison system. Many of the interviewees had difficult childhoods that were marred by problems relating to parental separation, violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse, racism, poverty, and other negative events. Consequently, they had adopted some of these negative behaviors in adolescence and adulthood.

As adults, many interviewees had developed alcohol

and/or drug problems which lead to repeated conflict with the justice system for impaired driving offences. Other interviewees revealed that their adult lifestyles were self-destructive and had revolved around chemical dependency, violence, gangs, illegal activities, and prison. Moreover, the attitudes they had towards themselves and others was quite negative. For some, these anti-social attitudes and compulsive behaviors were intensified by the deaths of family members. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these interviewees were incarcerated for committing fairly serious types of offences.

The interviewees had a negative perception of the mainstream prison system. For them, prisons are tumultuous places in which violence and aggression are the norm, and adherence to the prison sub-culture is a prerequisite for survival. Still, many interviewees reported positive experiences regarding their participation in Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming. The benefits of their participation related to an enhanced ability to cope with the prison environment, to heal the wounds from childhood, and to deal with problems relating to violence and alcohol/drug addiction. Several interviewees had developed a close relationship with the Elders who are respected for their knowledge, integrity, and the cultural values they project to

the participants. Many of these interviewees began the difficult task of addressing the various issues and problems that lead to their incarceration. I concluded that Aboriginal spirituality and cultural programming in prison play an important role in helping those who are determined to make positive changes in their lives.

In Chapter six, I documented the interviewees' perceptions of the Pe'Sakastew Centre, the Centre's staff, their perceptions of Aboriginal spirituality and culture, the impact it had on their attitudes and behaviors, and their attitudes towards their forthcoming release. The majority of the interviewees had a positive attitude towards the Pe'Sakastew Centre and had discussed five important aspects that would facilitate the process of integrating into society. First, interviewees noted that compared to mainstream prisons, the Centre offers a safe and healthy environment that is conducive for making self-improvements. Second, some valued the opportunity to learn various life skills which will assist their release. Third, others appreciated being among other Aboriginal people because individual feelings and experiences are validated. Fourth, several interviewees approved of the Aboriginal traditional approach that the Centre has incorporated to deal with offenders. Finally, some interviewees noted that the Centre

operates in a fashion that reduces the applicability of the con mentality that many obtain from substantial periods of incarceration.

Although several interviewees perceived some staff as antagonistic, they felt that the majority of staff were cooperative and committed to promoting healthy relationships. The spiritual and cultural programming at the Centre was highly valued, and the majority of interviewees had described positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors as a result of their participation. The spiritual and cultural components, and the Elder's teachings promoted a greater understanding of themselves, problems, and past experiences. Many interviewees reported a more positive attitude in general, towards others, and a better understanding of themselves and recognition of their own strengths. Several interviewees also reported changes in behavior in which they described themselves as being happier and having the skills to deal with various problems in a proactive manner. Several interviewees felt confident about their impending release; some are dedicated to maintaining their connection with the Elders and their spirituality and culture in the community; while others are somewhat uncertain about the possibility of returning to their old lifestyles.

Although Aboriginal spirituality and culture played a

contributing role in producing these positive changes in attitudes and behaviors, three supplemental factors were acknowledged including the positive environment of the Pe'Sakastew Centre, supportive staff, and participation in non-Aboriginal programming. I concluded that Aboriginal spirituality and culture, in conjunction with these additional dimensions, represent a powerful force in the healing/rehabilitation process of Aboriginal men.

In Chapter two of this study, three distinct but inter-related theoretical perspectives were presented to explain the problem of Aboriginal overrepresentation in Canada's criminal justice system. The internal colonial model described the devastating impact that colonialism had on the social and cultural structures of Aboriginal societies in North America. In this study, the majority of the interviewees' early socialization was undermined by the negative effects of colonialism including alcohol/drug abuse, violence, racism, and lack of exposure to their spirituality and culture. Consequently, the interviewees did not learn the languages, values, and traditions of their respective cultures which are important in building self-discipline and a strong Aboriginal identity.

Weakened by the absence of cultural identity, the interviewees struggled against the anti-social attitudes and

behaviors that were prevalent in their formative years. In adolescence and adulthood, they were susceptible to the negative influences of gangs, alcohol and drugs, and illegal activities. Essentially, the interviewees' lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors were troublesome to themselves and others, and many were on a path of self-destruction. I concluded that the interviewees' dysfunctional lifestyles were generated by the destructive effects of colonialism which would lead to their incarceration in the mainstream prison system.

The structural model was used to explain that Aboriginal people's socio-economic marginality has led to disproportionately high crime and incarceration rates. Many of the social and economic problems facing Aboriginal peoples, as discussed in Chapter two are also evident in this study. In adolescence and adulthood, many interviewees lived on the margins of society. The majority were undereducated and had not achieved a high school diploma. Although some interviewees were employed at the time of their incarceration, several others were supporting themselves through various criminal means. The majority of the interviewees indicated the prevalence of an alcohol and/or drug problem. Several reported that their self-destructive behaviors became even more pronounced after the loss of

family members. I conclude that the marginal social and economic conditions under which the interviewees lived contributed to their incarceration in the mainstream prison system.

The cultural model was used to explain that cultural differences between Aboriginal peoples and the dominant Canadian society can have an adverse impact at various stages of criminal justice processing. In this study there was no clear indication of whether this phenomena occurred. For example, some interviewees indicated that they had refused to participate in non-Aboriginal treatment programs, but it is unknown whether this harmed their chances for parole. However, the majority of interviewees had participated in Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programming either in prison or while at the Pe'Sakastew Centre, and they began to understand the value and importance of Aboriginal traditional approaches and the Elders' teachings. Certainly, Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs represent a progressive step towards alleviating the alienation Aboriginal offenders often experience in the Canadian justice system. As Les said:

I guess a lot of the guys they don't really feel comfortable with the programs that white people are offering. Sure there's a good thing but when you really do think about it it's common sense. Within that spirituality of these Aboriginal programs it really gives a person more insight upon their beliefs, what they believe. Most of us were

brought up with Roman Catholic and we were brought up with white man ways and that eh. But for so long we kept getting into trouble and it wasn't working for us because it didn't belong to us you know.

Overall, I conclude that these three theoretical models provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem of Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

In Chapter three, I stated that the CSC has moved forward in recognizing the benefits of Aboriginal spirituality and culture by supporting the development of three healing facilities in western Canada. However, if recidivism is the criterion for evaluating the success or failure of a particular program, then it is premature to judge how these individuals will deal with the challenges of living crime free in society. Clearly, the Pe'Sakastew Centre is a more humane institution where those dedicated to self-improvement can work effectively towards restoring the four core elements, the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical. The role of Aboriginal spirituality and culture in empowering individuals to achieve a healthier state of being should not be underestimated. These individuals are certainly better equipped with the tools to integrate into society than being released from the mainstream prison system without them. For many of the interviewees, the healing and/or rehabilitation journey has just begun, but their words

reveal a strong determination to make a positive contribution to their families and communities upon release.

The CSC has recognized the contribution of Aboriginal traditional approaches in addressing the needs of Aboriginal offenders. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this correctional reform can reduce Aboriginal overrepresentation and the myriad of problems that Aboriginal people experience in the criminal justice system. The Pe'Sakastew Centre and other healing facilities are situated at the last stage of justice processing and only a limited number of applicants are accepted. Many Aboriginal offenders will not benefit from this correctional reform because they are entangled in a system that further deteriorates the relationships with their spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical side, with their families, and communities. Further commitment from the CSC is needed to alleviate this process of deterioration. Strengthening the relationships between Aboriginal offenders, families, and communities can only increase the foundation from which individuals grow stronger.

IMPLICATIONS

My study had several implications for the Aboriginal offender population, the Canadian correctional system, and for the research community. This study can bring an enhanced

understanding to the Aboriginal offender population about Aboriginal traditional approaches in a healing facility. It is important to generate hope to Aboriginal offenders that there are facilities that offer an Aboriginal traditional approach and an environment that is conducive for restoring an individual's health and well-being.

This study can help foster a better understanding of healing facilities and Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs to corrections officials and society in general. People who work with Aboriginal offenders and the general public should have basic information about the positive contribution that healing facilities and Aboriginal traditional approaches make to society. This may counteract some of the rare incidents like escapes that are sensationalized in the media and newspapers.

Finally, this study could represent a starting point from which additional research is conducted in a healing facility setting. A research follow-up at two and five year intervals with these twelve interviewees would provide some measure of success of Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs. Furthermore, more systematic research possibly using control groups would be useful in assessing the probability of re-offending upon release for the Aboriginal offenders participating in spiritual and cultural programming

compared to the non-participants.

These twelve men have taught me a great deal about the healing journey that we as Aboriginal people travel. These are stories of hope and renewal that can make a positive contribution to a wider audience. I hope these stories travel great distances to inspire others as they have inspired me.

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APPENDIX I: CONSENT FORM

I am inviting you to take part in a research project by Connie Braun, a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan. The information from the interview will be used in a Masters Thesis, and may also be used in a journal article or conference presentation. The title of this study is *Colonization, Destruction, and Renewal: Stories From Aboriginal Men at the Pe'Sakastew Centre*. The purpose of this study is to understand how Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming affects the participants in a healing facility. Little research has been done in this area. This study may help those individuals who participate in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programming and those who do not, in deciding whether this program may be of benefit to them. Although there are no guarantees, this research project may also help policy advisors and corrections officials understand the positive contribution that Aboriginal spirituality and culture makes to those involved.

This research will involve interviews which will last about two hours. Steps will be taken to ensure that your name and responses are kept strictly confidential. The interview tapes will be transcribed word for word and the tapes and written transcripts will be securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years. During the interview you can withdraw and choose not to participate in this study. Withdrawal will not affect your status at the Centre. If you have any questions or concerns once the interview is finished, you may discuss these with the Elder or other correctional staff who are familiar with the study. An executive summary of the results will be made available to the participants. Also, a copy of the thesis will be sent to the Centre once the research is complete.

I _____ understand the above mentioned consent form and have decided to participate in the research project.

Name _____
Signature _____
Date _____

Name of researcher: Connie Braun
Signature _____
Phone (306)382-7595
Supervisor: Prof. L. Samuelson
Phone (306)966-6935

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Date: Do you consider yourself
Name:
Age: [] Status
Educ. level at adm: [] non-Status
Employed at adm: [] Metis
Cultural background: [] Inuit

1. REASONS FOR TRANSFER TO THE PE'SAKASTEW CENTRE

- Why did you want to serve the remaining part of your sentence at the Centre?
- How long were you in the prison system before you came to the Centre?
- Did you participate in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs while in prison? If so, how long?
- What other programs did you participate in?

2. PERSONAL HISTORY/BACKGROUND

- When you were growing up, what were some of your experiences with family? With community? With school?
- What kind of exposure did you have to your spirituality and culture?

3. ADULT ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

- What was your lifestyle like before entering the prison system?
- What kind of attitudes did you have?
- What was your relationship like with your family?

4. PE'SAKASTEW CENTRE PROGRAMMING

- How long have you been at the Centre?
- What programs do you participate in at the Centre?
- Which programs do you feel are helping you overcome your problems? How?
- Do you think that there are some programs that are not helping? Why?
- Is the Centre different from prison? How so?
- Is the Centre what you thought it would be? How so?

- Has participating in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs changed your attitude about yourself? If so, how?
- Has participating in Aboriginal spiritual/cultural programs changed how you act in your daily routine? If so, how?
- Has your relationship with your family changed?
- Can you describe what learning about your culture has done for you?
- Do you think that the employees are supportive of Aboriginal programming?
- Once you leave the Centre, do you feel you will be ready to return to your community?

