

INDIGENOUS FAMILY STRUCTURE

IT'S COMPLICATED

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

Kahkakew Larocque, RCC, has been adopted many times by families in the B.C. communities within which he works — and not in that “they’re just like family” way used to describe close, longtime friends.

“I have several mothers here, and there’s no question, they’re my mothers and their children are my siblings,” he says. “I’m not a tribal member, and I’m not a biological family member, but that relationship will never end.”

The law of kinship says you are related somehow to everyone and everything in the human world, the spiritual world, the animal world, and the natural or plant world. It’s a strongly collective way of

looking at the world that is apparent even in the most casual interactions.

For example, in conversation, the question “Where are you from?” leads to “Who are you from?”

“They’re looking for the family group. Once they find the family, then they’ll know how you are related,” says Larocque. “These could be people you’ve never met or heard of in your life, and they suddenly become your immediate relations.”

Taken one step farther, how you’re related to someone dictates your role and your behaviour. For example, a man wouldn’t speak directly to his wife’s mother, particularly in her home. Instead he speaks to her through her daughter (his wife), even when they are sitting in the same

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room. And quite often, he wouldn't sit in the same room as her as a sign of respect. Nor would he speak critically of her, even to a counsellor.

"In the Cree and Ojibwe cultures, the woman is the keeper of the home, the woman is in charge of raising children, and there's a lot of respect for her."

In another example, siblings of parents are aunts and uncles in colonial culture, but in Indigenous culture, they are second parents.

"They're your second mother or father, and they have as much right as your biological parents to speak to you, interact with you, and even deal with you when you need to be confronted or challenged," he says. "And they are your children's grandparents, not your children's great-aunt and uncle."

"If your dad and my dad were brothers, you are not my first cousin, you are my sister, and your children are my children, they're not my nieces and nephews," he says to clarify further.

With that change in title, there is a change in role and an increase in responsibility.

"When [counsellors] don't have an understanding of this system, it can be very confusing because there are so many people involved. Everybody has lots of relations."

It can also be frustrating keeping track of the relationships and the dynamics of the relationships related to the issues brought into therapy.

"You also can't be really certain and aware of the strengths that those relationships provide to that client," says Larocque.

While asking questions seems a sensible approach for a non-Indigenous counsellor, it can backfire.

"One of the biggest issues or concerns I've always heard and continue to hear from First Nations clients is they're really frustrated that they spend a lot of their time educating therapists about our people, about our ways of being, about our history. It's like the counsellor is getting paid to be educated," says Larocque.

These clients didn't come to treatment to teach someone — they came for a nurturing space in which to talk about where they are at with someone who understands.

Consequently, Kahkakew Larocque is a very busy man.



The extended family is very active and relationships may cross. For example, cousins are considered sisters and brothers. Everyone older than you is an aunt or uncle or a grandmother or grandfather. The idea is that everyone is related ... eventually.

Confidentiality or establishing next of kin gets complicated when the need to inform is necessary. Family trees are always helpful if done in the first few sessions.

Practices that can make the counselling experience more positive include smudging, sweats, prayers, and drumming.

Following the recommendations in the *Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP) Guide* can help in understanding historical and intergenerational grief. The TIP guide is available for download at http://bcewh.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_TIP-Guide.pdf.

COURTESY OF LAURA RHODES, RCC, WHO WORKS WITH NORTHERN ST/AT/IMC OUTREACH HEALTH SERVICES AND VOLUNTEERS WITH THE LILLOOET FRIENDSHIP CENTRE.

VARIATIONS ON TRADITIONS

A treaty member of Alberta's Frog Lake Cree Nation, Larocque grew up off and on a reserve, in foster care, and at residential and day school. As a counsellor, he has worked with more than 75 First Nations communities and agencies, from a detox centre in Edmonton in the 1980s to his own practice in B.C.'s Cariboo region since 1991. He is currently completing a doctorate in clinical psychology.

He prefers to work on the front line as an outpatient therapist.

"I've been through what they're experiencing — I was raised in it — and we can talk about it and I know exactly what they mean," says Larocque.

And yet even with a shared background, Larocque says sometimes what he knows about kinship cannot be applied because the client's experience is different. Sometimes, there is resistance because he comes from a different tribe. Larocque calls it an "Indian Act mentality of us versus them" and aims instead for neutrality.

"My attitude is we're just one Indigenous nation with many families," he says. "I don't really push my approach; I work with similar meanings and use a lot of metaphors."

In other words, he finds common ground and builds on it.

Additionally, colonization may have been experienced in a different way, which creates issues on many levels. For example, Larocque is from the Treaty 6 region of Alberta and Saskatchewan, a region he believes has retained more traditional family culture than communities in B.C. have.

"Other treaty areas are similar but not as authentic, and as you get into British Columbia, you see remnants of it and similarities, but it doesn't adhere as much to the roles that exist within that traditional structure."

Larocque attributes these differences largely to assimilation.

"Elders have told me over the years, by the time the churches and the government got to British Columbia, they had figured out absolutely every way to destroy our traditional systems. The residential schools, the reserve system, the Indian Act, the boarding schools, et cetera."

Another difference: in Larocque's ancestral territory, many of his ancestors escaped the "Indian agents" by going into the bush and to the traplines



PHSA ONLINE TRAINING

San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety (ICS) Training is an online program delivered by the PHSA. Core ICS Mental Health includes the foundation program plus two modules for counsellors working with Indigenous people. www.sanyas.ca

— as he puts it, “They didn’t get everybody.” In southern Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, and most of British Columbia, however, nearly everybody was placed in residential schools.

“And if they didn’t get them in the residential schools, they got them with the day schools on the reserves. And if they didn’t get them then, they got them with the child-welfare ‘Sixties Scoop.’”

His own community was impacted, but not as severely.

“That’s why I believe [Cree] language is still so strong and [Cree] cultural practices are stronger and that’s why that system remains healthier than what I see in other parts.”

Thus, assimilation has deteriorated knowledge of family structure and responsibilities — even the names for the roles have been lost with the loss of language. As a result, Larocque sees a hybrid version of kinship in B.C., especially among younger people.

“People in B.C. who are distant cousins with one another may call each other brother and sister, or they’ll call someone auntie, when, really, it’s their grandmother or their second mom.”

Again, Larocque approaches these variations from a neutral perspective.

“I use a lot of cultural concepts and meanings based on these laws I’ve spoken of,” he says, referring to the four types of Indian laws: the human, spiritual, animal, and natural or plant laws. “I’ll often bring those meanings into therapy, and then I’ll see where they’re at in terms of their knowledge.”

MOVING TOWARDS CHANGE

Returning to a more traditional system wouldn’t be easy to accomplish.

“It’s a tough goal because you’re fighting against the ongoing impact. Our people are very assimilated, and a lot of them live a lifestyle, me included to a certain extent, where we’re used to the benefits of non-Indigenous society,” he says.

At the same time, there is much resentment.

“Colonialism is like this giant sore that just won’t heal, and now our people have found many ways to keep it from healing and just festering because it works for them. It works for them to stay unhealthy,

and it’s a real game.”

Looking ahead, Larocque says we need more Indigenous counsellors. While he is currently on the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) list of approved therapists, there are only a few on that list who are of First Nations ancestry. A long-term goal is an Indigenous mental-health association in Canada.

“A lot of the people I work with in Indian Country don’t understand the requirements and accreditation. To them, they’ve got this degree, but what does it mean? The Indigenous culture and community needs to be more part of the treatment-planning process.”

In the meantime, knowing something about Indigenous family structure may be helpful, but only with an understanding that it has been affected by colonialism. ■

Kahkakew Larocque, RCC, has been practising in the B.C. Interior since 1991. He is committed to his goal of improving the lives of Indigenous people and uses traditional healing approaches along with clinical psychological assessment and therapies. www.indigenouscounselling.com



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