



Exploring Protective Factors for Addictive Behaviour among Urban Aboriginal Canadians

Cheryl Currie, M.Sc.; Daniel McKennitt, B.Sc., Cam Wild, Ph.D.
School of Public Health, University of Alberta

BACKGROUND

Urban Aboriginals constitute one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian population. Research suggests that they also share a disproportionate burden of addictive behaviour with respect to alcohol, drugs, nicotine and problem gambling.

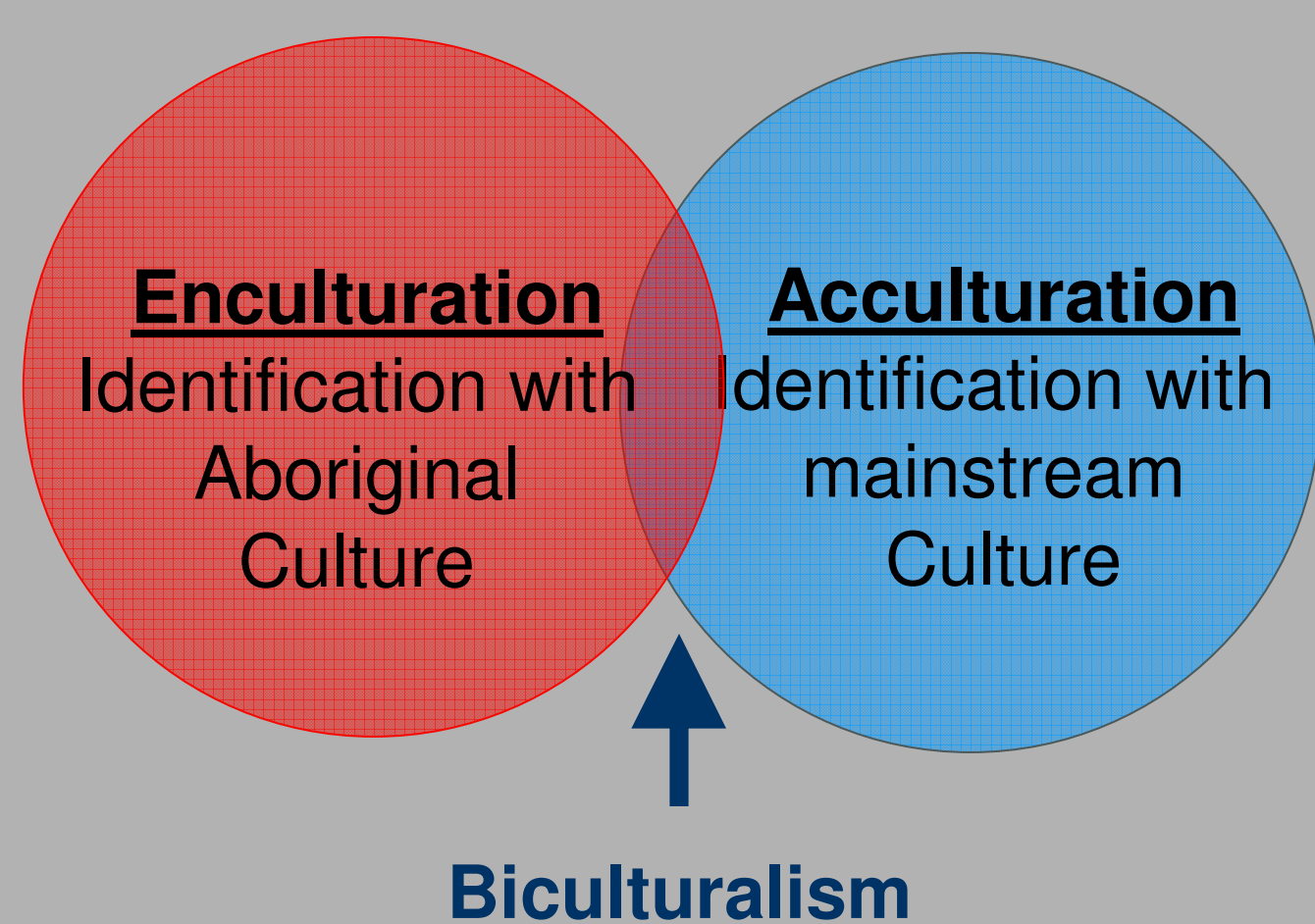
Many Aboriginal people believe their abrupt detachment from traditional culture is at the root of problems with addiction. This includes removal from ancestral lands and institutionalized policies that demeaned Aboriginal culture and disrupted the process of passing on traditional heritage.

Enculturation

Enculturation, defined as the process by which individuals identify with and participate in their traditional ethnic culture, has been established as a protective factor against suicide, alcohol dependence and mental health problems in rural First Nation and Native American communities [1-6].

Presenters to the 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* identified several elements important to the cultural identities of urban Aboriginal Canadians including spirituality, language, cultural values, family and ceremonial life. Yet more than a decade later, the impact of enculturation on the health and wellbeing of Canada's urban Aboriginal population remains unknown.

CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION



Biculturalism

Research also suggests the degree to which minority populations perceive their mainstream and ethnic cultural identities as compatible/integrated (high biculturalism) vs. oppositional and difficult to integrate (low biculturalism) has important implications for health [7].

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to work in partnership with the urban Aboriginal community to identify cultural factors that may protect Aboriginal people from developing problems with one or more addictive behaviours (alcohol, drug, nicotine or gambling) and to examine ways to promote these factors in culturally appropriate ways.

METHODS

We assembled an Aboriginal Advisory Committee made up of key members of the Aboriginal community in Edmonton. Together, we worked to identify specific markers for enculturation including cultural behaviours (e.g., attending cultural events, attending ceremonies) and the degree to which an individual felt connectedness/solidarity with the urban Aboriginal community.

These markers were pilot tested with a sample of Aboriginal post-secondary students ($n = 34$, 73.5% female; M age = 26.6 years, $SD = 8.4$; 59% First Nations, 28% Aboriginal, 21% Métis, and 3% Inuit). Participants were also asked to name typical cultural behaviours that urban Aboriginal people in Edmonton would engage in, and the degree to which they participate in these behaviours. This information is being used to further refine our enculturation measure for a larger study.



FINDINGS

We found low levels of nicotine dependence and moderate to high levels of harmful alcohol use/dependence, harmful drug use/dependence, and problem gambling in this pilot sample of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Alcohol Abuse

Seeking the advice/guidance of Aboriginal Elders on a regular basis and high connectedness/solidarity with the urban Aboriginal community were each associated with **reduced harmful alcohol use** (*Kendall's tau-b's* = -.43, $p = .01$; -.30, $p = .02$, respectively) among students.

Students with alcohol or drug use problems engaged in Aboriginal cultural activities less frequently than participants without these problems. However, engaging in these activities was **equally important** to both participants with and without substance use problems.

This project is supported by:



For more information contact :
cheryl.currie@ualberta.ca
7-30 University Terrace, University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2T4, (ph) 780.492.6753

Problem Gambling

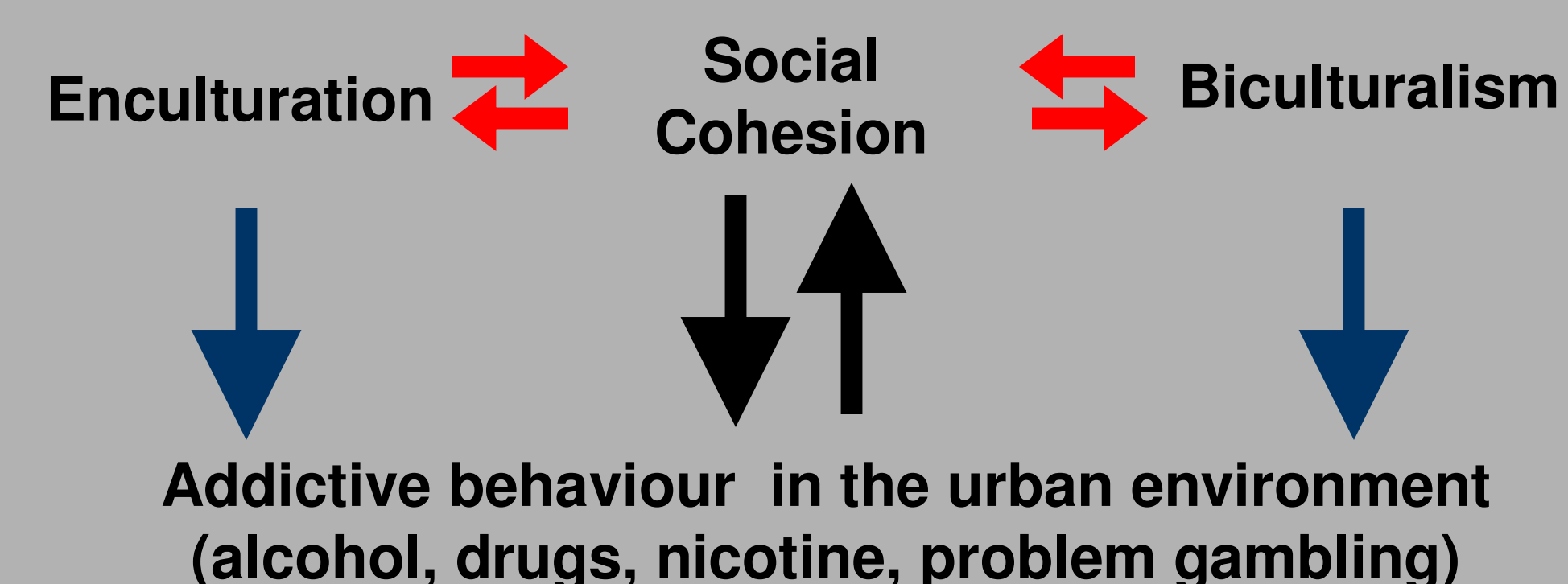
High biculturalism (i.e., having a highly integrated sense of Aboriginal and mainstream cultural identity) was associated with **reduced problem gambling** (*Kendall's tau-b* = -.37, $p = .01$).

Consistent with the literature, high biculturals tended to view the two cultures as compatible and integrated:

- *Being Aboriginal and being Canadian are both part of who I am – I feel no conflict between these two cultures (P5).*
 - *I feel I am an Aboriginal-Canadian. I feel pride for being both (P3).*
- In comparison, low biculturals experienced the negotiation of the two cultures as oppositional and difficult:
- *I'm half Aboriginal and half non-native. I feel like they are two separate worlds and I can't live in either one of them (P13).*
 - *It is difficult. Negative treatment from white society happens almost daily on some level. It reminds that I am an Aboriginal and not a white Canadian. I often feel like I walk 'two paths'; the Native way – my culture vs. Canadian way – dominant culture (P20).*

High bicultural students also reported increased feelings of connectedness/solidarity with the urban Aboriginal community in Edmonton ($t = 1.3$, $df = 21$, $p = .03$).

RESEARCH MODEL



CONCLUSIONS

Our preliminary findings suggest a complex interplay between various addictive behaviours, enculturation, biculturalism, and the degree of social cohesion within the urban Aboriginal community in Edmonton. Further research with larger and more representative samples of urban Aboriginal Canadians are needed to further examine these preliminary findings.

Next Steps

This study will be replicated with a large, representative sample of urban Aboriginal adults in late 2008.

References

- (1) Zimmerman MA, Ramirez-Valles J, Washienko KM, Walter B, Dyer S. The development of a measure of enculturation for Native American youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 1996;24(2):295-310.
- (2) Stone RA, Whitbeck LB, Chen X, Johnson KD, Olson DM. Traditional Practices, Traditional Spirituality, and Alcohol Cessation among American Indians. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 2005;67(2):236-242.
- (3) Spicer P. Culture and restoration of self among former American Indian drinkers. *Social Sci. Med.* 2001;54:227-240.
- (4) Hallett D, Chandler MJ, Lalonde CE. Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide. *Cognitive Development* 2007 07;22(3):392-399.
- (5) Herman-Stahl M, Spencer DL, Duncan JE. The Implications of Cultural Orientation for Substance use among American Indians. *American Indian & Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center* 2003;11(1):46-66.
- (6) Whitbeck LB, Chen X, Hoyt DR & Adams GW (2004). Discrimination, historical loss and enculturation Culturally specific risk and resiliency factors for alcohol abuse among American Indians. *J. Stud. Alcohol*, 65, 409-418.
- (7) Nguyen, AD & Benet-Martinez V. Biculturalism unpacked: Components, individual differences, measurement, and outcomes. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2007;1:101-114.