Substance Use, Mental Health Challenges and Systemic Disadvantages: A Northern Cree Perspective

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Northern Cree communities have been faced with varied issues that have led to a “suicide pandemic” (Mushkegowuk Council 2014). This paper explores how the social context and systemic disadvantages of life in a remote northern Cree community contributed to mental health challenges, suicide attempts and persistent substance abuse for a Cree man from the western James Bay in northern Canada. Historical factors such as the colonial history of the James Bay, the consequences of residential schooling and child welfare practices, as well as experiences of racism and social exclusion led to an extended period of chronic substance use, homelessness and struggles with mental health. The four-year research process utilized narrative methods which are compatible with oral traditions of northern Cree people and provide for a culturally sensitive approach to research. The presentation focuses on interconnections between the social context, traumatic stress, struggles with mental health, pathways into and out of institutionalisation, homelessness and chronic use of substances. First, the narrative study explores some of the systemic causes from an Indigenous perspective. Second, the in-depth data reveal some of the factors that work and do not work in facilitating transitions out of chronic substance use and homelessness for an Indigenous person struggling with mental health effects of trauma. Third, the study enables non-Indigenous people to have a better understanding of how systemic disadvantages contribute to individuals falling into substance use. Finally, the findings show how the formal service system did not work, why new perspectives and service responses are needed, and what changes are required to facilitate recovery from trauma and severe addiction for Indigenous people.

References