

The Tupiq Program: Inuit community development in an institutional program

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Inuit men sit quietly in a circle around a lit qulliq (an oil lamp carved from stone.) They are nearing the completion of the Tupiq program after what has been 16 weeks of intensive therapy and instruction. They are two thousand miles away from the shores of Canada's Arctic ocean where for centuries, lamps like this one have meant light, warmth and survival to the Inuit who thrived in perhaps the harshest environment on earth. Inuit healer Meeka Arnakaq speaks in a hushed voice to describe the courage, fortitude and tenacity of Inuit, of how struggle and adaptability is as much a part of the culture as ancient legends, caribou hunting and seal skin tents. She is speaking in metaphors, in one of the world's last remaining Aboriginal languages and the men don't miss a word.

This is a typical scene from the last day of Inuit Healing, one of the components of the Tupiq program, a holistic corrections program specific to the needs of federal Inuit offenders. Since its beginning at Fenbrook Institution in March, 2001, the Tupiq program has attempted to bring the land of the Midnight Sun to the woods of Muskoka and to merge conventional corrections treatment with Inuit culture. The most distinctive feature of the program is the delivery in Inuktitut (the Inuit language) by experienced and skilled Inuit facilitators and Inuit community-based counsellors who work as a team with clinical and adult education specialists.²

Integrating Inuit culture

The name itself, tupiq, which means tent in Inuktitut, is symbolic of the holistic nature of the program. It was chosen by federal Inuit offenders to represent the traditional Inuit seal skin tent, known for its strength and adaptability, its simple but ingenious construction held up by three poles and secured by ropes and rocks for protection against the elements. One can pack up a tupiq, bring it with you when you venture out into the wilderness. It can be trusted and is an important part of every Inuit hunter's prevention plan against risk. The goal of the Tupiq program is as clear and as crucial — to provide intervention with the same features of practicality, resilience and relevance to Inuit offenders and their communities.

While much of the content of the Tupiq program follows universally accepted relapse prevention theory, it integrates Inuit culture by utilizing Inuit delivery staff, Inuit healing therapy and Inuit counsellors from the offenders' home communities. As well, the techniques and activities used in the program incorporate Inuit cultural references whenever possible. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear the sound of an Inuit drum emanating from the program room during an emotion management session, or to encounter polar bear hunting on the floe edge as a metaphor used to examine basic problem solving methodology.

Treatment model

A high intensity treatment program based on a social-learning model, Tupiq provides 255 contact hours per offender in 16 weeks, targeting sexually abusive behaviour within a holistic framework that incorporates cognitive restructuring, social values, emotion management, abuse dynamics and family violence prevention as interrelated factors. The program was designed principally for moderate to moderate-high risk sexual offenders and modelled after the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) National Sex Offender Treatment Strategy. Program content and focus can be adapted to high intensity family violence needs through careful screening of group participants. Offenders attend morning and afternoon sessions, the intensity tempered by a multi-faceted, motivational approach and parallel processes of group therapy, skills education and individual counselling.

Community consultation

There are approximately 120 Inuit offenders incarcerated in CSC facilities across the country. The largest concentration, representing one-third of this population, is accommodated at Fenbrook. In 1999, a needs assessment and consultative process towards the design of an Inuit specific program began in order to meet their correctional and cultural needs.

Over 500 interviews and consultations were held with individuals representing Inuit communities, victim advocates, Inuit women, Inuit offenders, Inuit regional governments and corrections specialists. In particular, a three-day public consultation was held in Iqaluit, Nunavut in March, 2000 which brought together Inuit community representatives and corrections officials to establish guiding principals for the Tupiq program. These can be summarized under three headings:

1. Integrate Inuit culture and language through program content and personnel.
2. Involve Inuit communities in a real and meaningful way.
3. Focus on changing the offender's behaviour and thinking.

Inuit offender profile

Inuit offenders share many common characteristics and backgrounds. The vast majority (over 90%) are violent offenders and, prior to the Tupiq program, the majority were untreated for crimes of sexual offences. The victims of these crimes are, in most cases, acquaintances of the offenders and substance abuse is present in over 90% of the crimes. The Inuit are detained by the National Parole Board at unusually high rates and have a high refusal and drop out rate in core correctional programs. Only 4% have attained a high school diploma and over 90% require academic upgrading to grade 10. Over 96% of the Inuit offender population speak Inuktitut as a first language and 70% of the parents of offenders speak no English at all. Inuit offenders are almost exclusively from one of 55 small Inuit communities scattered across Canada's Arctic regions where the only access is by costly northern airlines. The majority of Inuit offenders serve their sentence without visits from family or friends and often experience difficulty communicating with them by mail or telephone.

Inuit involvement in program design and delivery

From the beginning of the program development, the decision was made to involve Inuit in a meaningful way in both the design and delivery. To that end, efforts were made to recruit individuals who knew Inuit communities, language, cultural values and skills and were respected in their communities. Inuit program co-facilitators not only train in corrections program theory and deliver program content in Inuktitut but they assist in the development of session plans and steer all content towards compatibility with Inuit cultural values and realities. A corollary benefit of the Tupiq program is the development and enrichment of Inuit community resources; it is expected that Tupiq staff will eventually return to Inuit communities where the expertise they have gained will be used in community-based abuse prevention work.

Inuit healing and conventional therapy

Two types of group therapy coming from two very different perspectives are important components of the Tupiq program and assist offenders in gaining insight into the causes and consequences of their criminal behaviour. The Self Management Group is a conventional therapeutic approach co-facilitated in English and Inuktitut by the program's clinical director and an Inuit facilitator. The Self Management Group assists offenders to understand and take responsibility for their offence(s) through a series of presentations including, a full disclosure, autobiography, victim empathy, offence pattern and relapse prevention plan. Individual counselling sessions also support program participants during this component. Another, more Inuit specific, therapeutic approach is the Inuit Healing Group, delivered solely in Inuktitut by two Inuit Healers who travel from the fjords of Pangnirtung, Nunavut, to open and close the program with this unique therapeutic approach. Inuit Healing incorporates music, storytelling, poetry, spirituality and visual art into a therapy process designed to gain insight into abusive behaviour.

Multi-faceted adult education techniques

A parallel process to therapy groups is the Skills Group, a cognitive-behavioural adult education approach incorporating motivational and multi-faceted techniques and delivered bilingually by two Inuit co-facilitators. The Skills Group attempts to meet the learning needs of the Inuk offender-participant through practically based, small group activities, art therapy and individualized assignments. Modules include the development, practice and integration of culturally based, pro-social skills in values, goals, cognitive restructuring, dynamics of abuse, emotion management and family violence prevention. As in other components the purpose is to gain insight into criminal and abusive behaviour and to develop relapse prevention planning in the Inuit community context.

Community links

An integral part of the program's efforts to integrate and involve Inuit community life is the Community links component, which matches each offender-participant with a counsellor from his home community, as selected by the local community justice committee or equivalent group. Inuit delivery staff prepare

and debrief the community links, providing them with program information and supervising their long-distance telephone session with the offender. Increasingly, the scheduled community links assignments become more personal and specific to crime prevention, culminating in the offender presenting his relapse prevention plan to his link. In a number of cases, the link has initiated community development and sought to initiate support services needed for a returning offender's safe reintegration. Following each program, a conference call is held with all community links in order to discuss, brainstorm and revise the component and the community involvement in both the program and the reintegration of offenders.

Evaluation

Currently, the fifth Tupiq program is being delivered at Fenbrook Institution and is in the process of a third-party evaluation, coordinated by CSC's Research Branch. Measurable goals of the program include reducing recidivism, reducing detention rates, increasing safe reintegration to the Inuit community and actively involving Inuit communities in relapse prevention.

As the program has evolved, the commitment to Inuit culture and language remains constant. Inuit communities working with Inuit program staff to enhance cultural content in the Tupiq program become part of an integral process of crime prevention. Like the sealskin tent it is named after, the Tupiq program aims to provide Inuit offenders a practical and relevant means of reducing risk and a safe return home.

“You might think language is not such a big thing. But the Inuktitut words have power to heal and to change a person. You must gain knowledge to become a better person...these Inuktitut words, these healing words, are important to people who have lost their way.”

Mariano Aupilardjuk

Inuit Elder and consultant to the Tupiq program

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