



Research Snippet

An Examination of the Circles of Change Program

KEY WORDS: *Aboriginal women; Correctional programming*

Impetus

Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) implemented and delivered the Circles of Change program¹ between 2001 and 2008 to address the culture and gender-specific needs of Aboriginal women offenders. In total, 113 women participated in the program.

This program is a moderate intensity program addressing the criminogenic needs of Aboriginal women offenders. It promotes holistic healing through the traditional medicine wheel and Aboriginal teachings, combined with the process of change including relapse prevention. The program aims to help participants gain an understanding of: Canadian Aboriginal history and teachings, their personal goals, personal impact of relationships and social injustices, communication style, emotions, and the impact of family and the life circumstances which lead to criminal behaviour. Through the development of cognitive skills and coping strategies, it is anticipated that women can achieve a crime-free lifestyle.

What we did

The research included participation of staff and participants from the six federal institutions for women offenders. Facilitators' and participants' session notes, participant satisfaction surveys, and participant pre- and post-program questionnaires² were collected in an effort to gain information concerning feelings, thoughts and intentions regarding the program's operation, processes, and outcomes³. Due to low completion rates, and data collection and quality issues, only 28 cases were used in quantitative analyses.

What we found

Of the women who completed a satisfaction survey ($n=21$), most reported being very satisfied with the program, indicating that the program was very good and they had

positive group interactions and facilitator experiences. Importantly, some of the women also noted that participants became disengaged as a result of a disruptive learning environment. Women indicated that they liked the Aboriginal aspects of the program; suggesting that this focus should be increased. Importantly, some women noted emotional difficulties dealing with the topics of abuse and residential schools.

Generally, facilitators considered session material highly relevant for participant goal achievement; however, many reported less repetition of material across sessions would reduce problems with covering all session material. The facilitators also noted issues regarding staff support. Some highlighted the need for more Elder support within and outside of program hours. Some facilitators also noted training on the management of small groups would be an asset.

A comparison of participants' pre- and post-program questionnaire scores ($n=28$) yielded a significant decrease in negative attachment style, interpersonal problems, and proactive criminal thinking. Post-program self-esteem scores were significantly higher than pre-program. No significant changes were found in the following areas: stage of change, self-understanding of interpersonal problems, problem avoidance, and reactive criminal thinking.

What it means

Overall, the program was viewed as a positive experience that enabled participants to progress in their healing journey. Future programming addressing the needs of Aboriginal offenders may benefit from greater cultural content and support of the community. Further, developers should aim to increase effective use of programming time through reduced repetition of programming content. Small group management training would be beneficial in facilitating appropriate styles of group participation among the women. These results should be applied to on-going program development for Aboriginal women offenders.

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For more information

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¹ Manitoba Corrections developed Circles of Change. It is delivered over 19 modules over 5 weeks. Each session is 2.5 hours with a 15 minute break.

² The questionnaires included the following scales: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, University of Rhode Island Change Assessment, Self-Understanding of Interpersonal Problems, Psychological Inventory on Criminal Thinking Styles, and Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding.

³ Interviews were also conducted with a program facilitator and 5 participants at Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge.

