

Developing a cross-cultural awareness of FASD research: Aboriginal Peoples' cultural behaviours labelled as FASD

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Context of this paper

No research has been done on Aboriginal Peoples' cultural behaviours. These behaviours may occur for reasons other than culture, but this paper is based on insights and observations and offered to begin a cross-cultural awareness of differences in Aboriginal Peoples' communities' standards, values, beliefs, norms, and mores.

I am Aboriginal (Métis) and have worked and lived over 35 adult years in various Aboriginal communities across the country as a registered nurse, later as a nurse practitioner, and in other roles. While living and working on reserves, in urban, rural, and remote communities with Aboriginal Peoples, opportunities to observe and live as a member of each community provides a perspective that is not visible within a snapshot of a research interview or by staying in a hotel in the nearest main centre.

Participation as a community member in the local life in these settings allows me to speak from knowledge and experience. I walked both sides first while working as a nurse and then by living as a community member.

- [Introduction](#)
- [Survival societies](#)
- [Abstract concepts](#)
- [Languages and use of communication](#)
- [Addictions](#)
- [Perseverance](#)
- [Isolation, few friends, trying to look OK](#)
- [Being bullied, teased, fighting, school, failure and dropout, running, away/avoidance, low self-esteem](#)
- [Hyperactivity, failure to concentrate, impulsivity](#)
- [Memory](#)
- [Setting the stage for cross-cultural thinking](#)
- [Concept of time](#)
- [Money](#)
- [Trouble with the law](#)
- [Sharing/ownership](#)
- [Binge drinking](#)
- [Sensory system overload](#)
- [Inappropriate actions such as laughing in court](#)
- [Anxious and fearful](#)
- [Don't learn from past mistakes](#)
- [Prior planning, predicting, organizing, prioritizing, sequencing, setting goals, contracts](#)
- [Decision making](#)
- [Summary](#)

Introduction

FASD-behaviour labels have been applied to many Aboriginal Peoples' behaviours and teachings. For the purposes of this paper, categories are not distinguished; the name on the FASD label is immaterial if they are cultural behaviours.

Cultural behaviours exist within a context of Aboriginal life and survival with most Aboriginal Peoples living in poverty.

For a FASD diagnosis in Aboriginal Peoples, research must occur within a culturally appropriate climate, by culturally-knowledgeable researchers, with tools that can distinguish culture from conditions and diseases, in a context that includes a multidiscipline wholistic framework, and with comparative groups of Aboriginal people so that those with distinct effects of FASD are seen with a peer group.

This presentation of seeing behaviours from a different perspective is not exhaustive. There are many other teachings and patterns that have not been included. These examples are meant to pique reflection and awareness of how cultural patterns may differ and how that difference is often misconstrued as flawed.

[Back to Menu](#)

Setting the stage for cross-cultural thinking

Imagine research constructed to view your current everyday behaviours for the purpose of identifying you in a medical context as being flawed.

Shift your thought to how you would live if you moved to one of today's remote isolated communities (e.g. Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, where my home is). In this setting, your current everyday behaviours would make little sense. In Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug hunting, fishing, trapping, and harvesting wild plants means life. Trees, fish, animals and plants have little use for, and do not accept, plastic cards, dollar bills or coins. Money is not the exchange method; sharing and working together is. Fine clothes and daily showers may mean freezing and overflowing the septic system into your house. Food comes from the land and demands skill, knowledge and physical exertion to acquire, clean, preserve, and store it. Drinking water is in the lake since high levels of chlorine make treated water unpalatable, and digging a hole through three-foot deep ice in winter is required.

A similar scene could be portrayed if you had to survive on the street in downtown Toronto where a bank card without banked money is useless and warmth means scavenging papers off the street to repel the wind and cold. However in urban settings, survival may also include transition from a small community of one culture to large multicultural communities with many rules, being fired from a job, being unable to meet strict criteria for employment insurance and not qualifying for welfare benefits because a casual 2-day job last month meant Ontario Works was pulled. Minimal wages mean working two to three jobs to pay the rent, stay warm, keep your kids from starving, and constant juggling to meet medical, dental, prescription, and transportation needs in addition to basic human needs. Avoiding Children's Aid Societies' apprehension of your children for placement in a white foster home happens when social workers judge your ability to parent by criteria that apply to middle class living standards and not how you love and care for your kids within your means.

[Back to Menu](#)

Survival societies

The justice system uses jail as a punishment. For some Aboriginal Peoples jail is a slow death. For others it is a warm place to stay, a bed, three meals a day, exposure to friends and relatives, a job, a way to learn a trade, and it is often better than life in foster homes or on the street.

Survival demands attention to the basics of life: food, shelter, warmth, clothing, and that means reduced priority for other things such as keeping appointments or attending court.

In remote and rural Aboriginal communities homelessness does not exist. Survival of the community means ensuring survival of its members. A person without a home bunks into a relative's home and stays, contributing in whatever way he can. When it seems prudent to move, he goes to another relative's or friend's home. Sometimes this means there are 18-21 people crowded into a mouldy, inadequately repaired, small two or three bedroom home with no basement.

There is a spiritual belief that the Creator/Great Spirit will assist. This spiritual connection is not religion. It is the essence of who we are; it encompasses all the talents we share with our families and friends, the teachings we get as children to find balance, to be governed by heart, mind, spirit and body (as emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical beings). We are to live in balance and harmony with all creation. For many reasons not limited to multiple foster homes, family disruption, addictions, and marginalization, some Aboriginal Peoples have lost their spiritual connections. Only restoration of these will lead to healing.

The following will outline behaviour that has been labelled FASD behaviour but which is common in Aboriginal cultures with/without alcohol use. These behaviours mean survival – life in whatever way life evolves.

[Back to Menu](#)

Concept of time

- Time measured by hours and minutes is absent in survival communities. Allotting scarce resources to purchasing of watches and clocks is not wise. Many schools do not use rotary clocks; therefore children read only digital ones. Concepts of time may relate to a TV show, a meal, or some activity. In outlying areas, time is told by dark and light (i.e. you can't hunt moose when you cannot see), season (you don't hunt geese when they've migrated south), and by priority (when you are hungry you search for food until you find it); breaking to attend an appointment means death. When you're hungry you eat, when you're tired you sleep. It does not matter what the hour or minute is.
- Getting food from the store becomes important when you have the money and when you get your cheque.
- Our late arrival is often ridiculed as "Indian time". We are taught that things happen when the time is right. This runs contrary to middle class clock-governed societies whose values relate to hours and minutes. If we try to assimilate and respect someone else, we frequently lack amenities such as clocks, watches, phones, and habits to notify anyone of changes in plans when phones are not available. We lack resources to take public transit and lack familiarity with amenities such as public transit; therefore we probably walk if we know where we're headed.

[Back to Menu](#)

Abstract concepts

- Mathematics, science, and other common activities of mainstream education have no practical survival use. Linkages can be helpful (e.g. science can be made obvious by showing the chemical reaction that occurs with dropping vanilla onto the baking powder in a cake bowl. The result is a flat heavy cake since the effervescence of the powder is activated by the vanilla and dispersed before the cake rises.)
- We learn by doing rather than solely by watching. We watch, do a portion, and step back for someone with greater skill to do what we do not know how to do. We are taught that we really don't know something until we can do it. Therefore abstract approaches in mainstream education lead to dropouts and school failures due to inattention to the impractical.
- Many IQ tests are based on white middle class standards, concepts, and values that do not apply to survival societies. Therefore the results of these tests are questionable with cross cultural use.

- Mathematics of distance is measured differently by the environment in which you live. For example, measuring the distance across the lake in kilometres is complicated and not useful. It is more appropriate to measure it by how much gas it takes and whether you carry extra gas for the return trip or how many days you must paddle to get there in a canoe and how much food and equipment you need to take to make camp along the way.
- Travelling highway 403 from Hamilton to Toronto takes about an hour at 100 kph and the distance can be tallied by odometers but all that can be altered by one accident or your mode of transportation and how many stops are made. Your perception of the distance doesn't change, but how you manage delays does and you may not be on time for appointments or work.
- Contrast travelling the winter roads of Ontario. It only happens when weather is cold and for 3-8 weeks a year. It takes 14 hours to go about 350 km because you travel over stumps, rocks, and ice. Large trucks with fuel, dry goods, heavy equipment, or lumber take longer. They must restrict their speed to 15 kph if they hope to stay on top of the ice. Speed causes large waves to form under the ice that will result in a large crack opening in front of the truck. If you are behind a truck you must wait until the next wide passing section. There are no bathrooms, grocery stores or gas stations in the middle of the ice.

[Back to Menu](#)

Money

- If you do not have money you do not learn how to use it or have value associated with it. People who live in poverty have bills greater than their meagre income and money is gone as soon as it arrives – on food, rent, gas for heat, electricity, water and sewer. There is often no money for phones, cable, computers, clothing, transportation and recreation.
- Choices of how to spend money is largely controlled by the market. In urban settings such as Thunder Bay, 4 litres of milk costs less than \$5.00 but in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug that jug costs \$15.00. Here too, a bag of chips and a pop may be more affordable food than one apple and a pint of milk – if you can get fresh produce at all. Choices are often learned by observation of actions as much as by words. That impacts what we see people doing to “fit in”, to be acceptable in a new or different situation. We learn, ‘when in Rome do as the Romans do’.
- Money is necessary if it is your system of exchange but not in the same manner as in small communities. Often the loan of money means a gift. We give what the person requires when he asks since that is respect. It is not up to us to judge how he uses that money or to determine the value of his choice. We do not specify how a gift is used.
- If we don't have money to share, we will give goods as a way to help. We have no expectation that these will be returned; we expect that when someone else is in need, the person who received this time may be in a position to extend the kindness to someone else and will.

[Back to Menu](#)

Languages and use of communication

- Much of the issue of language can relate directly to linguistic differences and the first language a person learns and lives. When people are stressed or threatened the language of comprehension often reverts to the first language despite apparent fluency and understanding of the second language. In Ontario there are many first languages of the First Peoples (e.g. Ojibway, Cree, Oji-Cree, Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida and many others). Use of English/French may be evident but comprehension of spoken words is often very different than the ability to say the words (E.g. My origins are Cree but I can sing in Ojibway. I can see the words, pronounce them correctly, and repeat them, but I do not know what I am singing or saying).
- Understanding the nature of the question is part of communication. Often individuals answer questions literally, because they have no different concept. You may be told what they think you want to hear. This compounds problems in the courts where lawyers prosecute and defend and questions are asked in a manner to secure the answers desired. Obsequiousness is to be expected. Learning this rule from society ensures its use here.
- One of our sacred teachings is honesty. There is no point in lying since the Creator already knows what you did or didn't do. We are taught to be responsible for our actions and to be accountable for our actions.

- What has been labelled as FASD behaviour may relate to role modeling by others who display dishonesty. Labelling honesty as FASD mocks those who admit/accept their responsibility for their own actions.
- Another teaching is humility in which we accept our responsibility but do not brag. We know that the Creator has given us a gift to share and we do that with willingness. In a new society, if someone praises us for specific actions we see it as using our gifts and acknowledgement teaches acceptance.
- In our communications we nod or acknowledge by sounds “un hun” or words like “yes” to indicate we are listening. Nods and sounds do not apply agreement. Our nod or “yes” can be interpreted by others to be commitment and agreement. In our society, we know the person agrees when they act in congruence with what they said.
- We may agree and commit with good intention, but when the day arrives other priorities such as the arrival of food or having to find a home following eviction takes precedence to appointments and court appearances. When you ask later why we didn’t appear, we will be unable to tell you. When our days are spent in survival; the days all look and feel the same. Our stress level of living every day life is similar to post traumatic stress syndrome and our memory of distinctly different events is not tied to calendars or clocks and missed appointments. It is tied to how we stored what happened.
- Use and comprehension of English is often disparate. The best teaching I received was from a man who taught me not to be too full of myself with how well I communicated with others who spoke a different language. He spoke English words to me and we were communicating, I thought. I handed him a urine specimen bottle with an opening the size of a dime, asking him to “pee in the bottle”. About 30 minutes later he handed me the specimen bottle filled with feces. He believed he had done what I requested. So if the person doesn’t appear to get the message, it may mean he didn’t get the message in a different language; the words were beyond his English comprehension.
- Many Aboriginal Peoples have not completed high school and many have not completed grade school. This affects their ability to read, understand, speak, comprehend and respond. We also have different ways of teaching and do not see that attending a classroom is the only way or even the best way to learn. The land and survival teach us many things not found in books. Our elders, our children, animals and the plants teach us. We have only to open our eyes, ears, and spirits to learn.
- Expectations are frequently different. The justice system has expectations, but many Aboriginal Peoples come knowing that for years our expectations of respect have not been met. We have learned that when we do as requested an additional different demand is placed upon us – similar to playing fetch with a dog.

We may be expected to repeat an action or be sent in a totally different direction because the person in power controls us. Our efforts appear to be not good enough, the expectations of what we must do keep changing. Therefore it is often wiser to cut our losses after the first return. Otherwise we spend valuable energy and resources in futile efforts to meet changing demands.

- We are slow to respond. It may/may not mean a language difference. It doesn’t mean we can’t process. It means we are thinking about our words. We are taught that words are powerful; they create our world. We must show respect to what we say and ensure that what we say is really what we can do. We know that actions teach more than words and we do not give our words easily because action is to follow.
- FASD-affected people have been identified as “10 second people in a one second world.” This difference may be cultural. Silence is part of our speech. We do not feel a need to fill the space with words. Silence allows us the time to reflect on what you have said. It shows respect to you and your words. It is the time in which learning and ownership of a teaching occurs. It also allows us the opportunity to process the confusion of cross-cultural expectations, to sort options and determine what we will do.
- “I don’t know” means we don’t wish to embarrass ourselves or you. We may not agree with you and it may not be appropriate to tell you that to your face; it may evoke anger. It is more appropriate to say, “I don’t know.” We try not to give our words if we do not intend to act on them. If you pull those words from us, we excuse ourselves because it was not our intent; we gave what you wanted to hear so you would stop pushing. We want to keep life harmonious. Obsequiousness results.

[Back to Menu](#)

Sharing/ownership

- In survival societies people share whatever they have – food, warmth, clothing, shelter, water, etc. A person is never left with nothing while others have plenty. If someone is stranded in the bush and knows of or finds a cabin he is expected to use it to stay alive. There is no concept of trespassing on someone's property in the aim to survive. However, greed is not acceptable. We take what we need and use all that we take. We do not hoard based on a fear of scarcity. If an animal, plant, bird or fish gives its life to a hunter-gatherer, it is believed that we have been given a gift of that life. We share it with all, including those who are ill, old or unable to hunt for themselves. That is our way.
- Ownership is not a traditional concept of our communities. However we have learned over the past 100 years to protect what we have to ensure our families can survive. If someone is not home when we go to borrow something, we will still borrow it, knowing that person will understand. If it is not returned, it is generally perceived as still being needed by the borrower. It is disrespectful to have to ask for it and often we let it go rather than be the cause of disharmony in our communities.
- We know what is put into the circle of life returns. If you give anger, anger returns; if you are greedy, sometimes its return is rapid; other times it takes years but the person who takes and keeps when it is not needed will receive the lesson that he requires without help or hindrance from us.
- Knocking on doors is not a common practice in small Aboriginal communities. Relatives come into a house; they bring their friends and more often live there when 18-21 people share living space. Therefore the habit of knocking on the door is a white middle class behaviour that speaks of exclusion. In survival societies we leave our burdens at the door and call as we enter. That is the norm and children learn by watching.

[Back to Menu](#)

Addictions

- We share what we have and when it is shared we do not refuse the hospitality, we accept. That includes substances. If someone is on a path to recovery but is surrounded by those who use, staying on that path is almost impossible. In most Aboriginal communities there are too few supports and too few dollars to secure success when recovering.
- In our survival, we have moments of hopelessness when everything works against us. That is often when we choose things like gambling (not necessarily with money), alcohol, drugs, etc. as a distraction or to mask the pain we experience, whether that pain is emotional, mental, physical, or spiritual.
- When we reach a point in our lives when we have the desire and ability to begin a healing journey, from whatever that pain is, we will seek help out of addictions and into harmony. We are not always successful with our first halting steps. Sometimes we fall, feel inadequate and resort to the habit that buried our pain. It now serves to mask our failure. Sometimes, some of us do not resume that healing journey but many of us fall and get up again and fall and stand repeatedly until we learn the steps of recovery. We need support and encouragement, not words to shame us or tell us we will never succeed. We need people who show they believe in us by acting it.
- In some Aboriginal Peoples' cultures there is a belief that each of us has four parts: spirit/spiritual, body/physical, heart/emotional and mind/mental. By healing the spiritual self, the other parts of self begin to follow suit. This is not always a smooth transition. While the spiritual and emotional parts may begin, the mental and physical parts must be part of the journey for wholistic healing. These parts of self are interconnected. They are constantly interacting. A person who has good health has a balance among all four parts. A sense of harmony is reached but no one stays in harmony otherwise the four parts would be motionless. If one is motionless, one is not growing and if one is not growing, one is not living.

[Back to Menu](#)

Binge drinking

- Historically food was shared. Once a feast/meal is complete people are encouraged to take extra food home for later that day. If the food is being kept for future use, it must be preserved in some manner and stored. If you cannot store it, you eat it. This pattern of survival led to what others perceived as feast and famine.
- Feast and famine history may also contribute to drinking until the alcohol is gone, particularly if you have nowhere to store it and have no home.

- Sharing is our way and substance sharing becomes a party; you do not drink alone. If food and drink is shared people party until it's gone.
- Involvement with the law and confinement following confiscation of the liquor may be another reason to drink until it is gone; the police won't be able to take what you bought.

[Back to Menu](#)

Trouble with the law

- Historically, our communities have experienced major problems with the law. Laws were created especially to ban our gatherings, our spiritual practices, our healers, to steal our kids and threaten us with withdrawal of supports if we did not abide by the rules.

We have learned that rules change if the person with power changes them. There is little difference from the kid who says, "If you're not going to play by my rules, I'm going to take my ball and go home." Each new government is like an individual kid who changes the rules.

- Natural law governs our societies. Regardless of how hard you try you cannot get rivers to run uphill, make the sun set in the east or have birds of prey dig in the earth to eat grubs. Natural law has precedence over man-made laws; natural law is seen as the Creator's way to help us. We respect it and know that if we go against that law death will befall us.
- It is hard to respect or know which law you must follow. One law can be superseded by another law but neither of them makes sense to our worldview. Laws fail to address cultural differences. Aboriginal Peoples are treated under law as being flawed and therefore deserving of punishment. Meanwhile similar acts may be overlooked or ignored when enacted by someone of influence (e.g. bullying by high-handed tactics of authorities; racial profiling; dumping of Aboriginal Peoples by police such as the "moonlight tours" in Saskatoon; Aboriginal Peoples are jailed for theft but industry and government steal traditional lands by ignoring rulings or altering laws for their own purpose).
- Being in trouble with law enforcement officials is not difficult when we are homeless or accustomed to living much of our daily life outdoors. This visibility, on the street at night or during the day, makes us easy targets. We're stopped by police when our behaviour does not signal a reason to be there or because we happen to be on the street after a crime is committed. Our colour may add to that visibility increasing the chances we will be stopped for minor violations of laws simply to remove us before a more serious crime is committed.
- As a result of stereotyping, Aboriginal People who are having difficulty walking down the street can be mistakenly presumed to be drunk when in reality they are diabetics in need of medications for diabetic coma or insulin shock.

[Back to Menu](#)

Perseverance

- Perseverance is identified as inability to change gears and persistence to a task.
- Most people have experienced songs that replay mentally until you are sick of it; it's a brain cootie that burrows and refuses to leave. We find ourselves singing that song aloud or hearing it from within, regardless of how hard we try to stop it. That is an example of perseverance in thought.
- Perseverance can mean life. It is inappropriate when tracking a moose to stop and look for rabbits because someone says this is where rabbits live. It is important to stay focused on your task or you will die by starvation. If you don't have a moose in sight and haven't seen any tracks you might set snares for rabbits, but it is unlikely you would shoot them and risk losing any large animal that is in hearing range.
- It is culturally appropriate and goes with our teachings to stay with a task until it is completed. If we are making a meal, we don't abandon it on the fire/stove to travel some distance to get wood or to go to an appointment. Eating is essential to surviving. We eat first and then travel. We get wood before we begin to cook. Everything has its priority and logical order.

- If we haven't completed a task, we are taught to stick with it, to put our time and energy into completing that task to the best of our ability. We do not keep changing activities. My aunt taught me simply, if you chase too many rabbits you don't catch any.

[Back to Menu](#)

Sensory system overload

- Sensory system overload is similar to culture shock. We have seen too much, heard too much, been touched too much, bombarded by odours, tasted too many strange things; we can't cope with one thing more or we react.
- By now, if you have read this document from its beginning, you may feel overwhelmed, jolted by all the differences, by memories of situations that reflect my words. Are my words your priorities for today? Are your priorities the same as mine?
- When you ask me to accommodate your needs, and try to make your needs be the same as mine, we come from two different spots. In order for me to connect, I must see why they are important within my world. Differences in needs determine different actions: survival versus comfortable living of the affluent.
- Resistance, fatigue, irritability, argumentativeness and rage are all signs of sensory overload and they can be signs that the dominant culture is pressing too hard. There is no time to learn at one's own pace, to participate as one can, to see the world as something other than a threat. For example, a ball in the face in the schoolyard does not necessarily mean I was targeted. What we need is time to learn and acceptance from dominant society that it too has much to learn about our worldview. Punishment is less effective than walking a mile in our moccasins.

[Back to Menu](#)

Isolation, few friends, trying to look OK

- In communities that have become aggressive to stave off starvation, where punishment occurs because of association, or where scarcity is a way of life, we see young people being isolated, shunned by their peers and left to fend for themselves. This is an indication of the disharmony of our society.
- Sometimes friends and associates will not admit to knowing someone else because the questioner's motive is not evident or is incongruous with our way of interacting. No one deliberately sets up someone else.
- Aboriginal Peoples are often marginalized; seen as beggars and drunks. There is every possibility the person is begging for a family because he was fired and has no food. In survival communities we see the asking as an opportunity to share and it is a gift to be able to share with another.
- It is not beneficial when moving in middle class societies to be poor, to look poor, or appear uneducated. These bring ridicule and shaming. We do our best to look "all together" so we are acceptable, so we will not be humiliated further.

[Back to Menu](#)

Inappropriate actions such as laughing in court

- Laughter in our cultures is not only acceptable, it is taught and encouraged as a means of communication, of sharing, of healing, of reducing tension, of dealing with highly stressful situations, of tackling life's difficulties. We teach children by examples of laughing at ourselves, to not take ourselves or our jobs so seriously, to have time for others and to use our life experiences as ways to lighten someone else's load. It is the reason we have survived; it is part of our resilience. It makes us stronger, better able to cope.
- While laughing may not be interpreted as appropriate in white middle class courtrooms, it is our way. It shows our humanness and in most circumstances builds harmony.
- Other ways of healing can include crying, screaming, singing, talking, sharing, helping others, being with Mother Earth and all our relations, etc.

[Back to Menu](#)

Being bullied, teased, fighting, school failure and dropout, running away/avoidance, low self-esteem

- All of these behaviours tell more about the bully than of the recipient. Being Aboriginal and being different is not often celebrated by mainstream society. The exception is when Aboriginal Peoples become tourist attractions or a source of pride for special qualities or uniqueness. We often feel we are owned and are being paraded to promote someone else. The phrase “our Aboriginals” is commonly used, but we don’t belong to anyone. It is those who are “perfect” for the designated role who are recognized. Those who do not excel are shunned for being inadequate. A steady diet of this removes self-esteem completely.
- Education is not directed at practical use. Most information that is shared in schools or universities is read from a book; the teacher implies by actions that he does not know it, he just read it. When we sit in a desk we are treated as an empty vessel that requires filling and the person in charge of the classroom determines what goes into that vessel. That is contrary to our knowledge in which the learner is a teacher and vice versa, simultaneously.
- Knowledge in our communities comes from living. Our Elders teach ‘on the land, by the land for life lessons’ and how to survive, not by reading a book or sitting behind a desk. They also teach that the desk is a barrier. It puts distance and authority between two people resulting in inequality. That is why our Elders have a position of high regard; they have learned by living. They do not need a book to know what to do. We are capable of independence; we learn when we have the opportunity to use our hands, hearts, minds, and spirit in the process.
- Abandonment is a big issue in our lives. Children who were taken to residential schools experienced abandonment by their parents and communities. Then not only were they kept in the schools they were punished for seemingly senseless things which added to the feelings of abandonment. The parents experienced hopelessness and abandonment too when churches and government refused to provide basics despite the fact that the parents had permitted their children to be taken. These feelings have become part of our being since our earlier methods of teaching emotional lessons were lost to those in school. Grandparents lost their roles as teachers of the family. Those whose parents and grandparents were affected by residential schools still attempt to deal with abandonment.
- Resistance is our gift to the world. Aboriginal Peoples have shown we can survive through resisting.

[Back to Menu](#)

Anxious and fearful

- Anxiety and fear is cited as FASD behaviour. Fear is common to most people. Aboriginal Peoples live it daily when we do not know when rules will change or when we are stopped repeatedly by law enforcement officers simply for walking on the street. We have no way of anticipating when we will be arrested or when we will find food or some kind person who will help us with a few coins. As much as we can we try not to portray behaviours that will draw attention but survival is more important than visibility.
- Many FASD-affected people have no fear. The lack of fear is more indicative of a problem than being scared in a threatening situation. Lack of fear comes when threatening situations are not perceived as threats and therefore actions persist. However, bravery must be distinguished from no fear. We believe that we have what we need in a situation or it would not have been given to us; therefore we can be courageous when required for our clan, community, and nation.

[Back to Menu](#)

Hyperactivity, failure to concentrate, impulsivity

- All of these behaviours occur in situations of sensory deprivation such as inadequate heat, clothes and nutrition. When children are cold and hungry they run, are disruptive and do not concentrate. Classes in First Aid and survival teach that maintaining movement means survival. Our children do not need to be taught that; they know.
- Having inadequate money to buy appropriate seasonal clothing leads to using body energy to stay warm.
- Through assimilation policies that persist today our emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual needs are ignored. It is hard to bare your emotions, and spirit in the face of repeated denial, to have our basic needs of life ignored or placed low on the priority list. To repeatedly tell people in the only ways that you can: words and actions, that you are hungry, thirsty, cold and homeless and to see your situation remain unaltered by those who have money leads to disruption and resistance. We are being taught by mainstream society’s and governments’ actions.

Don't learn from past mistakes

- Aboriginal Peoples do not make mistakes; it is not in our vocabulary. We may repeat actions and end up at the same spot or a similar spot more than once but that is not a mistake. It is a lesson and we will repeat that lesson as often as we need to gain the experience of that lesson. Each time we learn something more or different. We learn what works best for us and through this develop our own way of doing something. This is how skills are developed and expertise grows with knowing from doing. Once we have gained the knowledge of the best way for us to do something, we are considered to have developed our skills and then we hone them.
- We do not run our communities so much by rules set by someone else as we do by learning to live in harmony. Community leaders do not make decisions alone; the community is involved. That way many are allowed to speak to various aspects of the decision but the final decision is based on consensus; we all own it.

Rules give coercive power to the person making them; those who will be affected by the rules are often not given ample opportunity to participate in the process so that the rules can become just.

Laws in large societies are created to deal with disharmony in a fair manner, so that all people are treated similarly for similar actions. However we know in our communities that different circumstances exist. That is why in communities where our traditions are prominent, Elders, clans and leaders determine together, on an individual basis, what needs to be done when a person harms another.

Mainstream laws have been imposed upon us and are abusive in the present form since they demand we act contrary to our worldview. The enactment of these laws in our communities ensures that all are victimized by the system (e.g. jailing a man for domestic violence leaves a woman alone to haul wood, carry water, cook, clean and do child care while the man of the house is punished by being removed from the community. He learns more negative behaviour while in jail.)

- In mainstream society application of the rules falls to those who enforce them. They determine how those rules are interpreted and who will be punished. If the rule is applied inconsistently or arbitrarily targets individuals the message is the rule is not the rule.

[Back to Menu](#)

Prior planning, predicting, organizing, prioritizing, sequencing, setting goals, contracts

- Planning ahead relates to having excess of something that you can store or hoard for a future date. If you have nothing to save, planning ahead is not a skill that is developed. Predicting what will happen is not in our control. It is altered by natural law (e.g. recent weather changes do not allow any of us to presume the seasons will continue in the same manner as the past).
- Similar rules and similar life experiences are required to see an incident the same way as another person. The contrast between affluent and survival societies is very apparent where life is very different; threats are different as are responses and frequently what is a threat in affluence (e.g. becoming bankrupt) is inconsequential for survival societies. The planning, predicting, organizing, initiation and follow through occur but it is not in a realm that is evident to those who have different beliefs and experiences.
- Written contracts are a foreign concept. Survival takes precedence and we expect others to know that. We have experience with contracts: through the actions on Treaties, Métis script and promises made to Inuit. These were the first contracts and these tell us what contracts mean. When these contracts are not honoured a contract is seen to be one-sided only and abusive by nature – why would one agree to sign such a document?
- Setting goals means that you have the basics of life managed. According to Maslow, who developed the hierarchy of needs, goal setting only begins once the more basic needs for survival have been met. While struggling to stay alive is the priority, food, water, warmth, shelter and clean air are the priorities – regardless of urban, rural or remote settings.

[Back to Menu](#)

Memory

- Memory requires linkages to how that memory is stored so that it can be recalled. The difference in how a situation is seen and/or interpreted affects whether and how that memory is stored. It may be stored as valid or ignored based on prior experience.
- The interpretation of memory may be different depending on the culture of the person (e.g. Haida or Cree) and the priorities of life that day (e.g. affluence or poverty). Post traumatic stress syndrome research shows some memory is lost when stress levels are very high while devastating memories recur.
- Memory is also linked to learning. We repeat actions until we have learned what works best for us. The best methods (as outlined earlier under 'addictions'), include the growth that happens to the four parts of self (mind, body, heart and spirit) with learning. There is no set direction for growth. Western society's sense of success and failure are recognized as contributing to growth.

When you fail you learn what things do not work in this situation. When you succeed you learn what does work, this time. It is constantly changing and no two situations are identical. The more you act in living your life, the more you learn. Failures are only known in hindsight, after the learning has occurred. Hopefully growth ensues quickly so success can follow.

Each person measures their own success (e.g. the strangely-acting person who lives on the street is picked up by police and placed in a warm place with a bed, food and water).

[Back to Menu](#)

Decision making

- Making a decision to run away, to avoid a situation, may be the best choice in the circumstances, depending upon the support there is. What is dangerous to a middle class person is not the same danger to a person living in a survival mode. Those who have learned self-reliance have a different perception and knowledge of what they can manage.
- Lessons are learned from danger, but that too is how we master that situation and we do not see that negatively.
- The impulsivity which comes with fight or flight is an adrenalin response, based on prior experience and interpretation of danger.
- We learn fear from those around us. If we are taught that it was a lesson and that it might be scary but that we can manage and grow from the experience we do not grow into fear, we grow into independence.

[Back to Menu](#)

Summary

In summary, many of the behaviours included by FASD experts come from a position of cultural disparity.

It is evident that the medical community including those who work with FASD affected persons has part of the picture but to date many pieces of the FASD picture are missing. Medicine has shown all of society that what is perceived to be best medical knowledge today changes tomorrow when another piece of the puzzle is revealed.

If researchers wish to truly define FASD and/or brain damage to enable judicial systems to reduce the incarceration and punishment of those with brain damage, researchers must work with experts outside the medical fields.

To gain an understanding that broadens the picture, researchers need to review the nature of neurotoxins. There are many in daily life such as medically-prescribed drugs; environmental contaminants including PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), dioxins, and heavy metals that are common in Aboriginal and marginalized communities; and vulnerable times (fetal and childhood) in our lives. Research has already shown that the only way to reduce the body load of such chemicals as PCBs and dioxin is through pregnancy and breastfeeding. Mothers download their load to their babies – mothers pollute their infants.

We need information as to what the accumulative effect is when multiple contaminants, including alcohol and tobacco are included in pregnancy in the presence of common chemical contaminants. Men accumulate these toxins in their bodies but have no way to reduce them. We do not know what the effect is on sperm and the ability of sperm to transmit these toxins at conception.

Researchers must look more holistically at life, with Aboriginal communities defining cultural behaviour and contributing to observations and knowledge in defining FASD in Aboriginal Peoples. We each offer part of the puzzle that is only complete when we consider that all parts are valuable and that many views are needed to secure the puzzle pieces.